

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

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Yitzy's Story: A New Sense of Purpose

School is so hard. Why do I have to go to school? Today, my rebbi told me that I can't go out of class anymore for long breaks. He said I can learn more and I shouldn't give up. I don't know what everyone wants from me. I hate class. It's the worst place in the world to be. I can't understand the shiur, so I just sit with nothing to do for so long. I can't learn like the rest of my class, and I wish everyone would just leave me alone about learning. I know I can't do it anyway. Whenever someone tries to teach me, my mind just doesn't follow. There is no point in trying anymore since I can never succeed.

Yitzy is a seventh grader with many challenges. He was previously in a specialized class due to his difficulties with language and processing. He goes out of class every day for a private learning session with a *chavrusa*. I observe Yitzy with his *chavrusa*. Yitzy shows little interest in what his *chavrusa* is teaching him; he just sits there looking very uninterested. When his *chavrusa* asks him a question, he either gives a one-word answer or doesn't respond. Yitzy seems to lack motivation for anything and exhibits very little confidence. He won't

even risk trying something challenging, since he expects to fail.

Rob Bernstein explains that to help children develop confidence and self-esteem, it is more important to help them build their talents and skills than to teach them to overcome their deficits. The first step for Yitzy is to develop his natural talents and interests. Once he feels successful and believes in himself, he will feel more empowered to overcome his challenges.

I wanted to find something that would spark excitement and liveliness in Yitzy. I discovered that Yitzy is fascinated with electronic circuitry and small battery-powered creations, so I bought a Solar Robot kit to build with Yitzy. Yitzy was elated when he saw the 13 different possible robots he could assemble from the kit and that there was a small solar panel that powers the robots.

With his newfound motivation and excitement about the project, Yitzy started to use more language and express himself more. Just tapping into Yitzy's talents and interests was transformative. He was engaged, motivated, and

already overcoming some of his language deficits.

Yitzy was now ready for step 2 in Rob Bernstein's approach: using the highly motivating activity as a learning and growth opportunity. I started embedding some language and cognitive challenges into the activities. Yitzy needed to expand his language to discuss

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the various challenges that came up naturally in the project and learn to problem-solve. By using his natural motivation to learn the skills needed for the project, Yitzy was willing to tackle new challenges that he previously would have refused to consider.

To help a child internalize their successes, Rob Bernstein provides a simple strategy: ask the child, “How do you feel about what you just did?” Having the child reflect and think about their accomplishment is an important step in developing confidence.

With time, Yitzzy’s confidence started to improve. He was trying out new games and activities, and when he encountered a difficulty, he didn’t give up so fast. I would tell Yitzzy, “Look how well you played the chess game. I’m sure you can figure this out as well!”

Yitzzy’s biggest challenge was still Gemara. He wouldn’t even consider Gemara, as he was convinced it was too difficult for him. Using the typical behavioral strategies of rewards and consequences wasn’t working. Yitzzy refused to even discuss trying Gemara.

According to the Bernstein cognitive approach, having the child buy into the process and want to change is crucial, just as when someone quits smoking, there needs to be an internal decision to want to stop. Punishing the individual for smoking, or rewarding them to stop, would at most result in a temporary change. For Yitzzy to start learning Gemara, he would need to be convinced that Gemara is for him; it’s something he can do and enjoy!

I prepared a Gemara lesson for Yitzzy with the goal of making it

relevant to him. I looked for a discussion in the Gemara that Yitzzy could relate to, understand, and find interest in. Yitzzy was willing to have the Gemara discussion with me since it was a different kind of Gemara experience—we were having a discussion about something meaningful to his life rather than trying to read and understand a difficult Gemara text. This opened up the possibility for Yitzzy that Gemara can be something for him, rather than an academic pursuit that he isn’t capable of.

After his initial Gemara breakthrough, Yitzzy was open to trying more Gemara. I looked for ways to reduce the difficult aspects of Gemara learning and engage Yitzzy with what he was good at. Yitzzy started progressing with his Gemara learning.

Today, I asked a question on the Gemara that my rebbi liked, and at the end of recess my classmates gathered around my desk to discuss my part in the Purim play! I feel like I’m an important part of the class! School isn’t so bad anymore. I am able to contribute to my class, and there are things that I can also learn and understand.

Yitzzy’s parents told me that his whole demeanor has changed. He is no longer dragging himself around without any motivation or

excitement for anything. Now he is finding a new sense of purpose. He no longer dreads school. There are many things that he looks forward to in his day.

Once Yitzzy discovered his natural talents and strengths, his confidence and motivation started to grow. This was a catalyst for much of the progress he made. Helping children tap into and appreciate their unique qualities and personalities is fundamental to their development and success. ●

Stories in this series are based on real accounts, but details have been altered to protect the subjects’ privacy.



Nochum Monosov, MS ED, BCBA, has provided educational and behavioral therapies for children and adolescents in Lakewood since 2010. Nochum trained extensively under Rob Bernstein, a foremost expert on autism, and uses Rob’s cognitive approach in combination with ABA therapy to treat clients. He can be reached at 732-749-0733 or nochum@realchangeaba.com or via his website www.realchangeaba.com.



Rob Bernstein has developed his cognitive-based approach for more than 30 years and is the author of the award-winning *Uniquely Normal: Tapping the Reservoir of Normalcy to Treat Autism* and *Uniquely Normal Manual: Using the Bernstein Cognitive Method for Autism*. He also runs the podcast “Uniquely Normal: A Rob Bernstein Podcast.” Rob’s mantra is “Let the child lead, and when they do, be ready to follow.”

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