

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

NOCHUM MONOSOV, MS ED, BCBA



Baruch's Story: Behavioral Challenges, part 1

I'm the kid that is always being sent out of class. Yesterday during English class, my principal sent me home. He said I need to learn how to respect the teacher and the school rules. There were so many other boys disturbing the class, but the principal decided to give me an assignment. I told him, "It's not fair to pick on me. And I'm not doing the assignment, whether you like it or not." He called my parents to take me home early from school.

My parents got very upset at me. They said I should finally learn my lesson and start being more respectful at home too, and listen to Totty and Mommy. Why does everyone treat me like this? Other kids in my class don't get punished as much as me. My parents also punish me more than my siblings.

Baruch is in fourth grade. His teacher describes him as a boy who doesn't have any concept of respecting authority. "He is constantly arguing with me and refusing to cooperate with the rules. When I punish him, he just gets more disrespectful. I wonder if his parents are firm with him at home, because he seems to think he can just do whatever he wants."

Baruch's parents are at the end of their rope. "Baruch is a smart boy and always finds ways to argue and disobey the rules in our house," they relate. "We are very concerned about how he is acting in school,

and as he gets older, he might get into more serious trouble. We have been trying for several years to follow different approaches, but nothing seems to work. When we punish him, he doesn't get the message and just starts acting worse; and when we ignore his misbehavior, he doesn't listen to us and gets away with whatever he wants. We tried incentives and rewards with Baruch, but he always takes advantage of these contests by trying to get out of us the maximum reward for the least effort."

Children with behavioral challenges often have difficulty understanding why others get to boss them around and force them to listen. They feel that this is a very unequal system. They have trouble understanding the benefits of cooperating with others and that following rules is critical for one's success in their environment. In addition, they often engage in negative behaviors to get their needs met, since they don't know how to get their needs met through appropriate communication and socializing.

As a therapist, I find that working with boys like Baruch is a very challenging experience. A crucial component of the therapeutic process is for the child to trust the therapist and want to work with them. Baruch challenged me on this. He refused to call me "Rabbi" and would often

behave disrespectfully or refuse to cooperate with me. I was hesitant to confront Baruch and punish him for these things since I knew this would upset him and ruin our relationship. However, I realized that Baruch needed to learn how to respect others, and letting him treat me this way wasn't helping him.

Rob Bernstein taught me some very important concepts for helping

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these boys. First, when a boy acts disrespectful toward me, I need to act as an outside observer and think, *Wow, it is really interesting that he is acting this way. I wonder what is going on in his mind and inner world that is leading him to treat me like this.* Rather than take it personally,

I remove myself from the picture and try to understand the child's challenging behaviors with curiosity and interest. With this mindset, I can more easily focus on what the child needs for their development rather than protect my ego.

The second concept is that these are great teaching opportunities. Rather than seeing oppositional behaviors as a serious problem that I need to quickly stop, I learned to view them as great teaching moments to help the child learn something that can benefit them for the rest of their life. This helps me not get frustrated at myself for not stopping the behaviors from occurring in the first place.

For Baruch to change, he needs to understand how his behaviors affect other people. As per the Bernstein cognitive approach, the most important thing for Baruch is to *want* to treat people respectfully. This approach is somewhat revolutionary, since many people feel that these children need compliance training—they must be trained to listen to authority by forcing them to comply with demands that adults place on them. In my experience, compliance training causes children to resist therapy. Forcing a child to behave leads to a power struggle. The child feels threatened and just ups the ante by engaging in worse behaviors.

In compliance training, the educator is encouraged to not give in under any circumstances until

the child learns to cooperate. This may work in getting the child to stop their behaviors; however, the benefit may be very limited. Rather than learning the importance of respecting others and how treating others properly is needed for the child's success in life, the child re-

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sents being forced. When they find themselves in situations where they aren't forced to comply, the child will still misbehave and perhaps act even worse.

Instead of forcing a child to behave using threats or punishments, one needs to find the right balance of confronting disrespectful behavior and using it as a teaching opportunity while still maintaining a positive relationship with the child. This process can at times be more of

an art than an exact science and involve much trial and error.

In the next article, I will describe some of the components needed for teaching oppositional children respect and positive behaviors, along with some helpful strategies. I found this process greatly rewarding for my personal growth and effectiveness as a therapist. It is my hope that readers will share this positive outlook when working with such children and value the leadership qualities that these children have. ●

Stories in this series are based on real accounts, but many 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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