

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

NOCHUM MONOSOV, MS ED, BCBA



Baruch's Story: Behavioral Challenges, part 2

Last week, Baruch shared that he is frequently punished at home and school for misbehaviors and how this bothers him. Baruch continues his story:

This week, a new man came to my class to work with me. Whenever I don't behave, my teacher tells him to take me out of class. The new man offered me a prize for not getting into trouble. But it's too hard for me to follow all his rules to earn the prize. Today, my teacher gave me another assignment for talking in class, and I told him I'm not doing it. This new man forced me into a room and said I can't leave until I finish the assignment. I tried to open the door and run out, but he stood by the door and blocked me. I felt hopeless and trapped. Then I decided I'll go along and do the assignment just to get out of the room, but once I'm free, I'm going to get him back for treating me like this. I'm so upset at this new man. I don't want more people being mean to me.

Baruch's story is quite typical for oppositional children. Instead of cooperating and complying when punished, they get more frustrated and start behaving even worse. The new therapist working with Baruch was having difficulty since he didn't get Baruch to *want* to behave. He was trying to reward or punish Baruch

into behaving without getting Baruch onboard with the process.

The Bernstein cognitive approach is to figure out how to get the child to *want* to behave and buy into the process. The first step in this approach is to develop a trusting relationship with Baruch.

Baruch has trouble trusting adults since he views them as threatening. He doesn't see adults as trying to help him and improve his life; rather, he thinks they are trying to boss him around for their own purposes. I would need to convince Baruch that I am on his team and I really want to help him.

I would also tune into Baruch's world and help him develop his interests and talents in order to build his confidence. This would go a long way in helping him overcome his challenges.

When I first met Baruch, I noticed him drawing comic figures. His drawings were impressive, and I told him how amazed I was with his artwork. We got into a conversation about his drawings and his interests in comic figures. I realized this would be a great way to start a relationship and connect with Baruch. Baruch was very eager to show me more of his drawings and tell me all about his favorite com-

ics. I was quite fascinated with his talents and interests, and we had a great first session.

During the next session, I encouraged Baruch to develop his talent even more and create a comic strip. Baruch was very enthusiastic about the idea. When I said, "Let's go to a craft store and look for some

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supplies to help you get started on the comic strip," Baruch was sold.

On the way, Baruch was jumping out of his seat and moving around in the car. I told him that he needed to buckle his seat belt for safety.

Baruch protested, "No one makes me wear a seat belt."

I told Baruch, "This is a safety problem. I will need to pull over to the side of the road."

Instead of getting into a power struggle with Baruch and forcing him to cooperate, I calmly informed him that in my car, I can't drive unless he is buckled safely. Baruch understood this and quickly put on his seat belt. I wasn't going to force Baruch into doing something he didn't want to do, but at the same time, he couldn't force me into doing something I didn't want to do.

This is the second step in the Bernstein approach: using naturally occurring situations when the child is enjoying themselves and engaged as teaching moments. I was trying to teach Baruch to respect me and not force me to do things. When I calmly and firmly challenged him and explained that this is something I *can't* do, (i.e., drive my car without following safety rules), he cooperated.

As therapy progressed, I worked with Baruch on developing his interests and found naturally occurring teaching moments in our sessions to teach him to respect me and my feelings.

One day, while driving Baruch home, we passed an ice cream store.

Baruch said to me, "You need to buy me ice cream."

I said, "I don't want to."

Baruch said, "You have to; otherwise, I'm not meeting you anymore."

I asked him, "I'm not allowed to say no?"

Baruch responded, "You have to say yes." Then he added, "You don't like me, since you aren't getting me ice cream."

Instead of getting upset at Baruch, I continued the conversation, challenging him in a humorous way to get him to see on his own that this was ridiculous and that my needs and feelings are also important. Rob Bernstein explains that when children make illogical statements, it is helpful to act like you are taking them se-

riously to show them how illogical what they are saying is.

I said to Baruch, as if I was taking him seriously, "Do I need to buy you everything you want to show you that I like you?"

"No, just get me the ice cream."

"And if next time you decide I need to buy you ice cream again to prove I like you, will I have to again?"

As Baruch continued arguing with me, I was able to win the case and help him understand that it doesn't make sense for him to demand of me to give him whatever he wants. Using this approach, I was able to get Baruch to reflect on his unreasonable demands without getting into a power struggle and ruining our relationship.

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This process isn't always as straightforward as I described. Many times, one might get into a power struggle with the child, but that is natural and expected. By keeping the focus on the cognitive development of the child, one can repair the relationship and keep on looking for the next opportunity that can be used as a teaching moment.

Baruch started making progress in how he was treating me. He stopped calling me "Monosov" and said "Rabbi Monosov" instead. He also learned to be appreciative of the things I did for him and became less demanding. His parents also reported small improvements at home.

Today, I asked my father if I could buy a new CD that came out. My father said he just got me something last week. I am starting to realize that arguing with my father would just upset him and not help me. So instead, I said to him, "I really want to get this CD, but I understand that you just bought me something." Then, to my surprise, my father told me I can buy it because he was impressed by how respectful and thoughtful I was. It's hard for me to always act this way, but I'm starting to see that it works better for me not to argue and get people upset.

Baruch was still having a hard time in school. His teacher was still contacting his parents quite often about his classroom disturbances. Next week, we will discuss getting Baruch onboard with improving his behaviors at school. Showing these children that we understand them and keeping a good relationship with them is critical for them to buy into the process and want to change. ●

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."