

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

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Baruch's Story: Behavioral Challenges, part 3

Last week, we discussed Baruch's progress during therapy sessions and how his internal improvement of seeing others' perspectives manifested itself in Baruch talking more respectfully to his father. However, Baruch is still disturbing in class.

I don't like that I keep getting into trouble at school. I wish sitting in class wasn't so hard for me. Today, it was getting really hard to sit and listen for so long, so I started folding paper airplanes at my desk. When the teacher turned around to face the board, I quickly tried a test flight for one of my planes and it almost hit the teacher. The teacher turned around, got mad, and sent me to the principal's office. I tried explaining that it was a mistake, but the teacher said it didn't matter and that I have to go to the principal. I don't know why the teacher makes such a big deal out of these things. Why does he care so much?

The teacher calls Baruch's parents to discuss his misbehavior during class. He acknowledges that Baruch isn't as *chutzpah'dig* as in the past, but he still disturbs class daily. Also, Baruch thinks he can do whatever he wants and always tries to argue his way out of getting punished. The teacher says that this can't continue for too much longer, since it is

causing other boys to misbehave as well.

Baruch's parents are very concerned and aren't sure what to do. When they tried a very strict behavioral program for Baruch, it backfired and Baruch became very oppositional. Rewards and prize contests haven't helped either. Now, when they leave Baruch alone, he isn't as oppositional and disrespectful at school. However, he still disturbs class with too many pranks, and the teacher wants him out of his class.

I explain to Baruch's parents the Rob Bernstein Cognitive Method; that the key is for Baruch to get on board and *want* to behave in class. This will involve speaking to Baruch to try to figure out what is holding him back and help him develop the understanding that it's to his benefit to follow the rules.

During my next session, I ask Baruch, "What is going on in class? Is there something that is making class hard for you?"

Baruch tells me, "Yes, it's really hard to sit for so long in class and the teacher makes such a big deal about every little thing I do."

"Is there something that could help make class easier for you?" I ask.

Baruch answers, "I don't know."

I would like Baruch to come up with his own solution and take ownership of the process. Since he isn't responding, I give him a little help.

"Would it help if you were allowed to take breaks during class when you feel you need it?"

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"Yes," Baruch says. "I want to be able to take a break whenever I want."

Once Baruch feels that I'm on his side and trying to help him, I can move on to the next step of Rob Bernstein's cognitive approach and help him understand the importance of behaving in class. Rob Bernstein points out that teachers often assume that children just need to be told the rules—such as "throw

out your garbage”—and if they then throw out the garbage, they must be doing it for the correct reasons (i.e., hygiene, cleanliness etc.). However, for children like Baruch, this isn't sufficient. If the teacher would ask Baruch, "Why did you throw out the garbage?" he would say, "Because you told me to." This isn't the correct answer. The goal is for the child to throw out his garbage on his own even when he isn't told, since it's in his best interest to maintain a clean environment. Similarly, I want Baruch to understand the importance of following school rules and that it's for his benefit.

I tell Baruch, "Can the teacher allow every boy in the class to take breaks whenever they want?"

Baruch acknowledges that it doesn't make sense but says, "At least the teacher should let us eat in class."

"What do you think would happen if everyone was allowed to eat in class?" I ask.

"There would be a big mess," Baruch answers.

"That's a good answer. What else?"

"There wouldn't be so much learning."

Since Baruch realizes that I'm on his team, he is willing to have this conversation about understanding the teacher's point of view and the importance of following rules in class.

I then follow up with Baruch's teacher. Usually, teachers are ready to make accommodations to help a student once they understand the student's needs and see that the student isn't just trying to manipulate and take advantage.

I explain to Baruch's teacher that it is hard for him to sit in class and getting some additional breaks may help him. I also describe my conversation with Baruch and tell him that Baruch said he is willing to behave better if he can get more breaks during class.

The teacher then challenges me: "If we need Baruch to agree to

behave, what will happen if Baruch decides one day he doesn't want to behave?"

"Since Baruch told us that being allowed breaks will help him behave, the ball is now in his court," I explain. "We can challenge him and say, 'Look, Baruch, we gave you what you said would help you. Why are you still not behaving?' At that point, Baruch will need to take ownership and reflect on his difficulty with keeping his side of the deal."

Baruch's teacher agrees to try out this approach. He speaks to Baruch before starting class the next day and works out a system for Baruch to ask for breaks. Baruch respects the new system and doesn't try to take advantage of it.

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A few days later, Baruch is sent out of class again for disturbing. After class, the teacher has a better way to challenge Baruch for disturbing. He says, "Baruch, you told me that if we start the new system of breaks, you will behave better." This time, Baruch doesn't argue back.

That night, the teacher reports to me what occurred with Baruch. "You said exactly what Baruch needed to hear," I tell the teacher. "Now Baruch is taking some responsibility for his behavior. Instead of getting upset at you for punishing him, he understands that he didn't follow through with his side of the deal."

In the next few sessions with Baruch, I discuss with him his behaviors in class. He is slowly begin-

ning to understand the importance of following rules and reflecting on his difficulty behaving. He is willing to discuss strategies that will help him stay regulated during class and reduce his disturbances.

I wasn't sent out of class even once this whole week! At the end of the week, my teacher wrote a note for my parents saying how well I behaved the whole week in class. My parents were very proud of me and they gave me a nice prize!

This scenario teaches us many important concepts in helping oppositional and defiant children learn to behave. Instead of focusing on just stopping specific behaviors, it is more important to help them develop cognitively and change inside. Once Baruch started understanding the importance of following rules and *wanting* to improve his behaviors, he started making significant improvements. ●

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



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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."