

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

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Chaim's Story: Making Friends

I feel like a stranger in my class. During recess, all my classmates figure out what to play with each other. I can't figure out how to join the other boys. I just stay inside during recess, and I color and play with LEGO. I used to play with another boy, but he always argues with me and doesn't play the way I like, and he eventually stopped playing with me. I feel lonely playing by myself, and I wish I had at least one friend.

Chaim, a third grader, has trouble playing with friends since they often don't do what he likes, and he finds the give-and-take of a relationship difficult. Playing alone is much easier for him, since he doesn't need to give in to a peer's ideas and can always get his way.

This is common for people on the autism spectrum. They have trouble considering other people's needs and tend to overly focus on themselves. However, they almost always want friends, although their social challenges hold them back from creating friendships.

To help Chaim, the first step is to tune into his world and start a relationship with him according to his terms. By tuning into Chaim's world and allowing him to dictate how the relationship will work, Chaim will feel safe and ready to engage with me. Children

on the spectrum usually want to connect with others, and when others approach them in a way they can relate to and feel safe with, they open up and respond.

The next step in Rob Bernstein's approach is, once the child is connecting and engaged, you gently interrupt the flow of the interaction to get the child to notice you and your interests. This will teach the child to consider other people, an important step in making friends.

I entered Chaim's house for the first session. He didn't come over to meet me. He wouldn't even turn his head to look at me.

He was playing on the floor with LEGO. I sat down next to him and said, "Wow this is a really cool LEGO set you are playing with."

Chaim responded, still without looking at me, "Yes, I built it myself."

I saw that the LEGO robot had some interesting functions, so I asked Chaim, "Can you show me what it can do?"

Now Chaim looked at me and showed me. "It has two weapon launchers and a secret compartment for a LEGO mini-figure."

After a few minutes of Chaim showing me his different LEGO creations, I said, "I brought a

bunch of games to play with you and a magic trick to show you."

I was hoping that Chaim would express at least some interest in me and in what I had to offer. But Chaim ignored me.

Instead of pushing my agenda, I continued to follow Chaim's lead in the interaction.

After a few more minutes of discussing LEGO, Chaim said, "Let's do something you brought."

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Once Chaim felt safe and comfortable with our interaction, he was ready to allow me into his world and play with a game I brought.

I showed Chaim a card trick, and he was totally tuned into me, intently watching my presentation.

After completing the trick, I asked Chaim, "How do you think I figured out which card you chose?"

Rob Bernstein showed me this card trick, which challenges the child to figure out that another person can see things from a different point of view.

Chaim, as expected, had trouble figuring out the trick, but he was still willing to let me challenge him by offering him various hints and repeating the trick a few times in slow motion. This was a good sign for Chaim's cognitive abilities, since he was able to stay focused and keep trying to figure out the trick without giving up. Eventually, Chaim figured out my trick.

I told Chaim, "I'm really impressed that you figured it out."

Chaim smiled.

Chaim then wanted to play a game of Spit with me using the cards.

I told him, "I don't know the rules of the game."

This was another opportunity for Chaim to have to think about me and explain the rules in a way I would understand.

At the end of the session, Chaim's excited expression showed how much he'd enjoyed the interaction.

Following the success of the first session, I conducted the next sessions with Chaim in a similar manner. I followed Chaim's lead for most of the session, allowing him to choose the activities and go along with his play ideas. However, I continued to find opportunities

interspersed throughout the session to challenge him to consider me and my feelings.

If Chaim insisted on being first in the game, I said, "Hey, I also want a chance to go first." By acting out how a typical peer would act, and at times exaggerating my emotions and needs in a friendly and comical way, Chaim started considering my needs as well. For example, if he ignored me when I walked into his house, I said in a friendly and exaggerated voice, "You don't want to say hi to me?!" This usually got him to notice me, smile, and say hi.

As Chaim progressed in thinking about me during our interactions, I asked him about bringing over a friend to join the sessions. Chaim refused, since he didn't want a peer to reduce any of the attention he was getting from me. I then showed Chaim a picture of an exciting project I wanted to make with him. It was a birdhouse. Chaim was ecstatic, but I told him I could only do it with him if he invited a friend over to join him for the project. After a lot of negotiations, Chaim agreed to invite Eliezer.

Having Eliezer join the sessions was a great opportunity for me to teach Chaim how to notice and consider his friend. When Chaim insisted on choosing the activity, I said, "What about Eliezer? Can he ever get a turn to

choose the activity?" With time, Chaim began to consider Eliezer and think about his feelings. This helped their friendship grow.

Today, I did something I never did before. I called Eliezer on the phone and invited him to come play at my house. He had a great idea—to make a huge pile of leaves in my backyard and then jump all over the leaves. I had a blast with him!

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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