

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping Children with Behavioral,
Social, and Autism Spectrum Challenges

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Week 1: Introduction

Eli, a 19-year-old, shares his story:

When I was growing up, no one understood me. During school, I tried to do what was expected of me, but I couldn't concentrate on the teacher's lessons. My brain was overwhelmed by the flood of sensory perceptions. I was distracted by the many sights, smells, and sounds surrounding me. Once, I ran into a closet in the back of the classroom to escape the sensory overload. The teacher came and reprimanded me for leaving my seat and not doing my work and didn't ask whether something was bothering me. He assumed that I was trying to misbehave.

I grew up feeling like something was wrong with me. I felt like a failure for not performing what was expected of me.

As a therapist, I encountered many students who felt like Eli. One of my early experiences was working with a group of high school boys on the autism spectrum. One sweet, quiet boy told me, "There is so much pressure in my school. My teachers keep pressuring me. I always feel pressured." I looked at him compassionately and began to wonder: The schooling and therapy are being imposed on him by the *outside* world. Perhaps in his *internal* world, he is not up to it.

The more I worked with these children, the more I realized that there was often a disconnect: on the one hand, there were the beautiful

teaching methods we therapists were using to help these children; on the other hand, they were not internalizing what was being taught.

After I received my master's degree in ABA and my BCBA certification, I read the book *Uniquely Normal: Tapping the Reservoir of Normalcy to Treat Autism* by Robert (Rob) J. Bernstein. I was captivated. I identified with so much of what he wrote and how he described the challenges of trying to make behavior changes without connecting to the children and understanding them from their point of view. I began implementing some of the strategies he describes in his book, and they all seemed to be on-target. I then contacted Rob Bernstein to learn his groundbreaking approach.

Eli continues his story:

After my high school years, I was introduced to Rob Bernstein. He was the first one to really understand me. He understood that my brain has its own way of working and that things that come easily to others can be very challenging for me. He validated me for really trying my best and wanting to do well and acknowledged that my unique challenges made school very difficult for me.

This is one of the many stories shared with Rob by the over 1,000 in-

dividuals with autism he has worked with over the past four decades.

Rob Bernstein is one of the foremost experts on autism. He has developed a cognitive-based approach for treating autism, starting with a program he spearheaded at HASC summer program in Parksville, NY, in the 1980s. As he worked with children

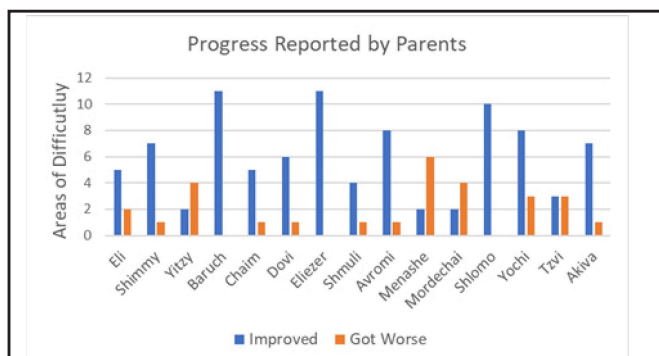
As he worked with children on the autism spectrum, he came to realize that understanding what's underlying their struggles is critical to connecting with them

on the autism spectrum, he came to realize that understanding what's underlying their struggles is critical to connecting with them. By understanding both their uniqueness and their challenges, he was able to create a connection with his clients, which helped them succeed and integrate into society.

He learned from his many clients that real change comes from within when the individual feels understood and appreciated. Once his clients felt understood and developed a connection with him, they were willing to overcome the hurdles in their lives and make meaningful changes.

I trained under Rob for over two years to learn his approach and incorporate it into my practice. Working with Rob, we developed a method of charting the students' progress, based on "before" and "six months later" questionnaires given to the parents. Parents were asked to rate their child's struggles in 13 key areas such as making friends, difficulty in school, expressing needs, engaging in back-and-forth conversation, getting along with siblings, and listening to parents.

Here is a snapshot of the progress for 15 of the boys I worked with whose parents completed the "before" and "after" survey. (The names on the chart are not the subjects' real names.)



The blue bar on the graph shows how many areas the parents reported progress in. One can detect at a glance that in most cases, parents reported significant progress at the follow-up interview. Even those parents who didn't give a better rating in the follow-up questionnaire still reported overall progress.

In this series of articles, I will share my clinical experience using Rob Bernstein's cognitive approach. Both parents and educators can find in these articles many helpful strategies and principles that can be used with children across the autism spectrum as well as children that have other behavioral and social challenges. ●

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 monosovn@gmail.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."