

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

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Shloimy's Story: Overcoming Rigidity

I saw a few boys playing with the water hose in the school yard, and I went over and told them that the school rule is that you aren't allowed to. They told me I'm a baby for caring about the rules. I then told my rebbi that they were playing with the water hose, and my rebbi told me I shouldn't get involved in what other boys are doing, since this will make them not like me. I don't understand why my rebbi doesn't try to stop them when they break the rules.

Shloimy, a second grader, was rigid and had trouble understanding that people often don't follow rules 100 percent. He tended to overreact when someone broke a rule, and it was a source of discomfort for him. Whenever he told his *rebbi* that boys were breaking a rule, he assumed that his *rebbi* would also want to enforce the rule, and he couldn't understand why he wasn't doing anything about it.

He also had difficulty with social relations and didn't consider the social ramifications of trying to get others to follow the rules. His classmates got annoyed at him and viewed him as a snitch, and was teased or bullied by other boys.

When I started working with Shloimy, I noticed that he was rigid in many other areas as well. He was very rigid about his opinions and wouldn't accept what anyone

else had to say; he assumed there was only one way to look at things. When I played a card game with Shloimy, he had his own rules for how to play and wouldn't consider changing them or trying anything different. It didn't help when I showed him the instructions that came with the game.

At the end of each session, I would drive Shloimy home, and he'd insist on only taking a certain route. Once, I mistakenly took a different route, and he started crying and saying that we weren't going to get to his house.

Shloimy needed to maintain his rigidity since it gave him a sense of control and safety. There are those who believe that forcing children like Shloimy to bend and give in to other ways of doing things will help him develop flexibility and tolerance for other ways of doing things.

However, with Shloimy, this had the opposite effect. When challenged and pushed to give in and be less rigid, he would become more stubborn and less open to giving in. Being rigid with Shloimy obviously wasn't going to help him overcome his rigidity.

Shloimy needed a more supportive and encouraging approach to overcoming his rigidity. Since Shloimy loved card games, I used card games as the medium for teaching flexibility. Shloimy liked

to mix the cards and would carefully lay out the cards in four separate piles. He would get upset if anyone mixed them differently. I complimented Shloimy on how carefully he mixed the cards and how his method ensured that they were mixed best. Once Shloimy felt appreciated and not threatened, he was open to hearing about other

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mixing methods. I showed him how I shuffled a deck of cards, and he expressed some interest in learning how to shuffle.

With time, Shloimy was just enjoying the card games, and how the cards got mixed became less important. He let me mix the cards and even tried to shuffle them himself! He was no longer insisting on always mixing his way.

Then, I began to introduce other kinds of games into the sessions. Initially, Shloimy insisted on playing only the few games he knew. With time, he was willing to experiment with different games, since I wasn't forcing him. I encouraged him to try some other games by telling him how much fun they are. Shloimy responded much better to this gentle approach.

We then went on to having fun experimenting with new rules and variations of playing some of these games. If Shloimy was insistent on following a certain rule, I would challenge him and jokingly say, "That's my worst rule! Can we play without that rule?" I wanted Shloimy to consider my feelings when playing a game, since this would help him get along with friends who would be less tolerant of his rigidity. Using humor allowed me to challenge his rigidity without him feeling threatened and shutting down.

Despite Shloimy's progress with playing games, he still refused to allow me to drive him home another way. I tried discussing with him other routes—there were interesting things we could see if we drove down other streets. But Shloimy wouldn't budge and just got upset if I tried talking to him about taking another route home. Seeing that I wasn't getting anywhere, I stopped trying to convince him.

One day, after many sessions of driving the same way, Shloimy surprised me by asking me to try another route home. I was shocked that Shloimy on his own wanted to take this step toward trying out new things and move out of his rigid behavior pattern. It seemed that when I tried pushing and cajoling Shloimy to try a new route home, he would shut down and become more insistent on doing things his way, but leaving him alone and not pressuring him enabled Shloimy to decide on his own to give it a try.

Shloimy taught me an important lesson: Sometimes, despite our best intentions to get the child to do what we think is important, they might need their own time and space to develop. If we run into a roadblock with the child and they are refusing to change, we might need to just back off and allow them to figure things out for themselves.

I joined a group of boys for a game of Uno during recess. They wanted to play with the rule of having to say "Uno" when you are left with one card. I hate that rule, but I decided it's better to go along and play with the boys than to get into a whole argument. I ended up having tons of fun, and this rule made the game more exciting!

It is important to be flexible when working with boys like Shloimy. Gently challenging them and

encouraging them to be more flexible and expand their comfort zone is necessary, but when they become stubborn or closed off to being challenged, backing off may be the best way to go. Being flexible with them and giving them their own space and comfort zone to develop will ultimately allow them to experiment with new ideas and ways of doing things, while getting stuck in a power struggle with them is likely to prevent them from overcoming their challenges. ●

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."

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