

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

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Dovi's Story: Parent-Child Relationship and Family Dynamics, part I

Dovi's mother speaks:

Dovi is more than a handful. I can't relax when he is around. When he comes home from school, I can already feel my heart racing. Within two minutes of coming home, he has already kicked his younger brother and spilled his cup of juice on the floor since he didn't like how I handed it to him. It's a hopeless battle trying to get Dovi to do any homework, eat a normal supper, stop harassing his siblings, and allow me to get a little break. He needs constant attention from me and everyone else in the family. I wish he would know how to occupy himself with something. I feel drained at the end of the day after trying to keep some semblance of normalcy in the house. Dovi is also difficult in school. Yesterday, I was on the phone with his rebbi for over an hour. His rebbi told me that Dovi isn't learning much in class and has trouble respecting authority. I am worried about what will become of Dovi. The rebbi thinks I'm too easygoing with Dovi, and that's causing him to misbehave in school. The truth is, I'm not sure that I am parenting Dovi properly. Maybe it's my fault that Dovi has all these problems, since I should be stricter with him.

Raising a child on the autism spectrum or with other social and behavioral challenges can be extremely stressful, as this story illustrates. Home life can be very difficult, as the child may disrupt normal routines and place a

lot of strain on their parents and siblings. Parents may be fearful about their child's future and about the effects on their other children. They may doubt their parenting abilities, especially when teachers or neighbors give them "well-meaning" parenting tips.

Dovi's mother reached out to me for help in getting Dovi's behaviors under control. "I attended many parenting classes, and I read many parenting books, and it didn't change much with Dovi," she shared.

I explained to Dovi's mother, "Trying to change Dovi's behaviors without understanding the underlying dynamics may be the reason he isn't improving."

"What do you mean?" she responded defensively. "I understand Dovi's challenges. He has trouble seeing other people's perspectives and regulating his emotions. I'm not just trying to get him to behave without understanding his challenges."

Dovi's mother is correct. She understands Dovi and his triggers very well. However, she is under a lot of stress when dealing with Dovi. This makes her likely to try to immediately improve Dovi's behaviors, rather than reflect on

the underlying dynamics of her relationship with Dovi and Dovi's self-image. Trying to change Dovi in the moment often backfires, as he feels criticized and gets defensive.

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be due to the nonstop stresses they present. Fear and self-doubt make us more likely to react in the moment rather than with understanding and longer-term thinking. Judgmental comments from neighbors and complaints from teachers add to the pressure of finding a quick fix, rather than slowly building and helping our child develop.

I told Dovi's mother, "For another, less-challenging child, you can be a great parent 80 percent of the time, but with Dovi, 20 percent of the time may be the most you can currently do."

She expressed relief. "It's good to know that I am doing the best I can as a parent in this situation. Other people offer all kinds of advice, but they don't know what it's like to have such a child."

My goal is to help Dovi's mother slowly develop greater tolerance and acceptance of Dovi and his behaviors. This will enable her to respond more effectively to his challenging behaviors and improve her relationship with him. Dovi needs this connection and acceptance to face his challenges and consider changing.

A few weeks after our initial conversation, Dovi's mother related, "Recently, I told Dovi, 'A lot of times, I get upset at you when you do the wrong thing, but I know that you are trying your best and it's hard for you. I am going to try to understand you more.' Dovi then said to me, 'I really don't like acting this way, but I can't stop myself.' This was the first time Dovi acknowledged that he doesn't like how he is acting."

I told Dovi's mother, "I'm impressed that you let go of trying to quickly change Dovi's behaviors and you figured out how to connect with Dovi and support him. This will ultimately give Dovi the

ability to accept himself and learn to face his challenges."

She continued, "After this conversation with Dovi, he seemed calmer and happier the next day and was more respectful to me."

But a week later, Dovi's mother had a different type of report to share: "All this positive stuff isn't working. He's still a terror at home. He fights with his siblings nonstop, and he even attacks me. He got mad and threw a toy truck at his brother yesterday. This needs to stop! I just can't ignore this."

I understood what Dovi's mother was going through. I wished there were a way to quickly stop these behaviors. However, when Dovi gets punished, he thinks everyone is against him and doesn't acknowledge that he needs to change. He may temporarily stop misbehaving, but he will act even worse after getting punished, since he doesn't feel good about himself.

I discussed with Dovi's mother that Dovi can't think about changing his behaviors when he feels criticized and that everyone is frustrated with him. He will just tune out of any attempt to get him to behave. Once Dovi feels accepted and understood, he will be willing to accept guidance for overcoming his struggles. Dovi's mother needed much reassurance that accepting Dovi and his behaviors is the best way forward,

since Dovi keeps doing things that are very hard to deal with.

Dovi's mother is correct that just being positive with Dovi isn't enough and some behaviors may be too much to ignore, especially when Dovi is hurting his siblings. Next week we will discuss how Dovi's mother can respond to Dovi's difficult behaviors in a way that will teach him the skills he is lacking while maintaining a positive relationship with him. ●

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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