

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

NOCHUM MONOSOV, MS ED, BCBA



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

Last week, Dovi's mother described her challenges with Dovi, how disruptive he is to home routines, and his aggression toward his siblings. She continues her story.

Once I started working on my relationship with Dovi and stopped trying to fix him every time he did something wrong, Dovi's behavior toward me improved. He doesn't yell at me as much as he used to. But I'm still having a very hard time at home with him. He torments his younger brother Shmuli nonstop. He keeps on looking for ways to tell him how babyish he is, and he hits him all the time. I'm really concerned for Shmuli. I don't want him to suffer emotionally from the abuse he gets. Many times, I see the pained look in Shmuli's eyes. When I calmly tell Dovi to stop, he ignores me. When I punish him, he might stop for a short time, but then he goes back to getting upset and chutzpan'dig with me, and he really acts up after that and hurts Shmuli even more. I don't see any way out of this.

Dovi's mother is doing her best to improve her relationship with Dovi. This is a crucial first step to help Dovi. Dovi needs to feel good about himself in order to face his challenges and try to change. However, not everything Dovi does can be ignored, especially if another sibling is suffering.

What can Dovi's mother do to stop Dovi from hurting his brother

Shmuli without reigniting a power struggle?

In a recent session, I told Dovi's mother, "You can't control Dovi's behavior, which means you can't force him to stop hurting Shmuli. But you can teach Dovi how his actions are affecting his brother, and you can do damage control to minimize the emotional hurt for Shmuli."

Dovi's mother responded, "This is a relief, because it really doesn't work to try to force Dovi to stop hurting Shmuli. I can't watch Dovi all day like a hawk and keep him away from Shmuli, but what kind of parent am I if I just let him hurt his brother?"

This is a normal struggle for parents. We feel an enormous responsibility for our children's success, so we get overly involved in trying to get them to do the right things. However, it is important at times to let go and let our children learn to take responsibility for themselves and learn from their own failures.

I explained this to Dovi's mother and said, "Sometimes you need to look the other way and let Dovi and Shmuli figure it out for themselves. But here is what you can do: When Dovi is ready to talk, like after he calms down, you can tell him, 'Dovi, do you really like to do this? Look how sad and upset Shmuli is when

you bother him. You don't want him to suffer because of you.' You can also reassure Dovi that you know it's hard for him and he really doesn't want to hurt Shmuli. This conversation is more likely to be productive if Dovi feels accepted and not criticized."

"That sounds good, but in the meantime, I don't think Dovi can control himself. What should I do for Shmuli when he gets hurt?"

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"You can have a private talk with Shmuli and explain some of the challenges Dovi has. You can reassure him by saying, 'I am working on helping Dovi stop hurting you. But this will take time, and I can't always stop him right away. However, if Dovi is bothering you too much, please tell me and I will do something.' This will help minimize the emotional impact

on Shmuli. He will see that he has your support and won't feel like no one cares about him."

As far as what Dovi's mother can practically do to stop Dovi when he hurts Shmuli, I offered the following idea. "Tell Dovi, 'I really don't want to punish you when you hurt Shmuli, since I know how much you want to stop; you just sometimes forget yourself. I might punish you and send you to your room not because I really want to punish you—I will make believe I'm upset to help you stop and for Shmuli to realize I am doing something to protect him.'"

Dovi's mother agreed to give it a try.

I followed up with her over the next few weeks to see how things were going and to discuss any issues that came up. She shared, "At first, Dovi didn't want to discuss anything regarding Shmuli. He just insisted that Shmuli always starts up with him. But I did see that through improving my relationship with Dovi and accepting him more, he started expressing regret for hurting Shmuli and was willing to discuss different ways of stopping."

It is an ongoing struggle for parents to maintain a positive relationship with a challenging child. The daily challenges and stresses cause us to fall back on old patterns of getting frustrated and upset. But once we know what works, we can forgive ourselves and then reestablish the positive relationship with the child.

After many weeks of ups and downs, Dovi's mother reported that she was seeing some progress with Dovi, and he wasn't hurting Shmuli as much.

Today, I took Dovi and Shmuli for errands around town. They sat together in the back of the car, talking and playing with each other. They didn't get into any fights the entire time. I'm grateful that Dovi is starting to have some nice interactions with Shmuli. ●


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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