

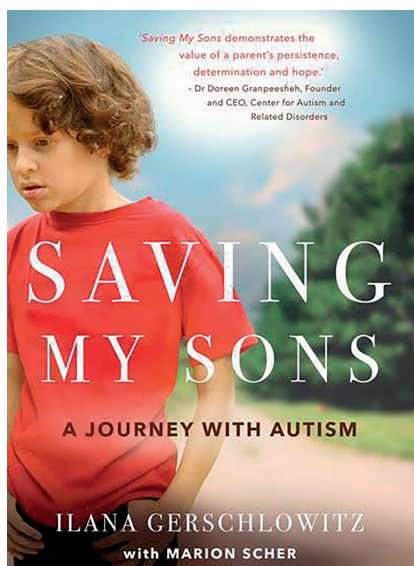
LEADING THE WAY TO SUCCESSFUL AUTISM TREATMENT

Jewish Life speaks to Ilana Gerschlowitz - Founding Director of The Star Academy and Catch-Ups kids



WHAT DOES A TYPICAL DAY IN YOUR LIFE LOOK LIKE?

My day starts the night before. I have to be incredibly organised. The kitchen has to be spotless before we go to bed and ready for the next day. I'm up at 4am answering emails, and by the time my admin team arrive at work, they are briefed for the day. At 6am, I'm in the kitchen packing school lunch and making breakfast. At Star Academy we schedule almost 200 hundred instructors in one-on-one sessions daily. Inevitably, someone always calls in sick. We have to ensure that every child has an instructor by 8am. My admin team often feel like air traffic controllers. We move around teams and scheduled times to ensure that every child is taken care of. My first consultation with parents whose child has autism or ADHD begins at 7:30am. I'm fully scheduled until 1pm when my son, David, comes to my office for lunch. I run out the office to fetch the other kids from school. I am always on my phone from the second I climb into the car until I arrive back at the office.



TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT YOU DO AT THE STAR ACADEMY?

At Star Academy we draw on the principles of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) which is the only evidence-based treatment for children with autism, regarded as a medical necessity. We service children of all ages and across the autism spectrum. Our team creates treatment plans for each individual child. Over a decade ago, a team at the Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD) in the USA created a developmental curriculum which is the most comprehensive assessment of a child's skills ever created, spanning eight developmental areas, including social, motor, language, adaptive, play, executive functions, cognition, and academic skills. All skills have assigned ages for when they emerge in typical development. The curriculum allows our team at Star Academy to formulate and manage a fully individualised intervention plan for each child with autism. Behaviour management is often our focus. In addition, the data tracking system allows us to track each child's progress. Some children attend our academies or receive our remote services via Zoom. There are a number of children who attend mainstream school with the support of a trained facilitator.

ARE YOU ONLY BASED IN JOHANNESBURG, OR DO YOU OFFER SERVICES ELSEWHERE?

We have academies around South Africa and service families in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban. Additionally, we provide services internationally to countries in Africa such as Malawi, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ghana, Seychelles, Mauritius, and Nigeria. There are also staff stationed in Switzerland, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE YOUR ORGANISATION GROW IN THE FUTURE?

I would like to reach many more families around South Africa in order to make access to ABA possible for all South Africans. We're working on multiple projects which focus on disadvantaged communities. I am passionate about making a real difference to families by providing affordable access to ABA. This way, children with autism can learn to function, communicate, and gain independence. I'm also in the process of establishing a base in the UK to accommodate the multiple requests for services we have received from UK families.

YOUR BOOK, SAVING MY SONS - A JOURNEY WITH AUTISM, HAS BROUGHT HOPE TO MANY FAMILIES RAISING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM. WHY DID YOU WRITE THE BOOK?

I wrote the book to dispel the old-archaic notion that autism HAS to be a lifelong disability. I had a story to tell and wanted to share our journey with other parents in the hope that I'd provide them with a roadmap and a way forward. I also wanted to educate parents and professionals on the true make-up of autism. Children with autism are not just simply 'neuro-diverse'. In fact, they are medically ill and require specialised medical treatment. They do not require psychiatric medication as a first-line treatment. Evidence-based medicine has proved the gut-brain connection. Autism is a digestive disorder, it is a metabolic disorder, and it is auto immune. Food allergies, inflammation, and infections are common in children with autism and cause autism symptoms. Environment, coupled with vulnerable genetics, cause a cascade of events that lead to regression in a young developing child.

PHOTOGRAPHS: SUPPLIED

Children with autism are not born 'autistic' – they develop autism. Recovery from autism is possible and my book documents our families' heartbreak but also our victory over autism.

NOT ONLY ARE YOU THE DIRECTOR OF STAR ACADEMY, BUT YOU ALSO ESTABLISHED CATCH UP KIDS. TELL US MORE ABOUT CATCH UP KIDS.

Our expert tutors at Catch-Up Kids provide educational support to foundation-phase learners. We focus on teaching foundational skills to ensure academic success in the classroom. Our goal is to keep learners in mainstream school. Our tutors provide one-on-one tutoring at our academies, online, or at the child's home. We also facilitate at mainstream schools and provide the necessary support for inclusive education. We teach executive functioning skills which are often deficient when a child is struggling to keep up with classroom demands. We use the child's homework as a basis to deliver their developmental curriculum,

build their confidence, and teach emotional coping skills. We also strengthen academic skills and we break down barriers to learning.

AUTISM: NOW WHAT? IS A SUPPORT GROUP YOU CREATED ON FACEBOOK. WHAT PROMPTED YOU TO START THIS GROUP?

This international support group and the information I share on this platform was created to empower parents and professionals around the globe, with the information they need to unravel the mystery of autism. Through my support group, I have been able to provide South African parents the opportunity to connect and learn from international parents. I also share numerous podcasts, where I interview international experts on autism treatments. My goal is to provide hope to families raising children with autism and to bring them the latest developments on treatment options.

YOUR OLDEST SON DAVID HAS AUTISM. I KNOW THIS IS A SENSITIVE

QUESTION, BUT WHY DO YOU THINK YOU WERE GIVEN THIS CHALLENGE IN YOUR LIFE?

As much as the physical day-to-day caregiving is challenging, I know that David has a pure soul. He is incapable of sin. His purpose is our soul correction. David has taught us to see through the superficial to what truly matters. As hard as it's been for us physically, he is our spiritual guide. Because we live in a physical world, it's natural for us, as his parents, to long for him to manifest himself in a physical way which we can relate to. It's been extremely challenging to achieve this level of understanding of his condition.



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in our lives, where we
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