

## SPOTLIGHT

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## a Community

Coverage by  
Devorah Klein

## Reyus: Spreading *Achdus*, Building Value

“We are grateful for the positive impact we have seen in the short time since its inception. Students who were struggling with making friends and were undervalued by their peers have shown marked improvement in their social sphere. In addition, the program has created a framework for our faculty to zoom in on our students’ positive qualities.”

This is how Rabbi Moshe Frohlich, principal of the Bais Yaakov of Baltimore middle school, described the impact of Reyus on his classes.

Reyus is a groundbreaking anti-bullying program developed by Rabbi Yaakov Boruch Beren and Rabbi Ezra Baldinger of Baltimore. We spoke with Rabbi Beren, who is overflowing with passion and excitement for Reyus, to hear more about this revolutionary program.

### Can you begin by telling us about your background?

I attended Yeshiva of Greater Washington. About 15 years ago, Rabbi Ezra Baldinger, my *chavrusa*, and I started Jewish Teen Camp, a day camp which had the same mission as Camp Chaverim — to promote unity among the campers. Harav Ahron Lopiansky and his Rebbetzin, Rebbetzin Yaffa Lopiansky, told us that one day we would open a real camp and encouraged us to do that. I went on to receive *semichah* from YGW and a master’s in education, a master’s in business administration and a law degree, all from George Washington University. For a few years, I was a *Rebbi* in Beth Tfiloh Day School in Baltimore, but now I work full time for Reyus.

Rabbi Baldinger also received *semichah* from YGW and a master’s in education. He was also a *Rebbi* in the day school in Memphis for several years and is now a *Rebbi* in Torah Schools of Greater Washington.

### Can you explain what Reyus is?

Reyus is a combination of two organizations — Camp Chaverim and Buildup.

Chaverim is mainstream sleepaway camp that opened in 2016 by me and Rabbi Ezra Baldinger, with the mission to create the highest possible level of *bein adam lachaveiro*. The camp is located in Pennsylvania, with approximately 180 campers from all over the United States. *Baruch Hashem*, we have been very

successful in our mission.

A big part of the success of Camp Chaverim is due to Buildup, our anti-bullying program that was first developed in Camp Chaverim in the summer of 2019, and is run and refined there year after year. Now, Buildup is entering its third year of being implemented as a school anti-bullying program.

In 2022, we created Reyus, an umbrella organization that encompasses both Camp Chaverim and Buildup.

Our mission statement is to spread unity among children by ending bullying and recognizing the genuine value of each child.

### Can you explain how Buildup works?

Buildup is an evidence-based anti-bullying program for schools that creates genuine unity and friendship among children. This is accomplished by training the educational staff how to generate genuine appreciation for each student’s tremendous inner value and how to remedy acts of bullying. The key mechanism of Buildup is a system of meetings over an eight-week period between Buildup professionals and the school staff.

During these meetings, Buildup professionals work together with the school staff to create situation-specific, concrete action steps to publicly bring out the incredible value of specific students. They also work together to identify, investigate and remedy acts of bullying.

These interventions not only create an appreciation for specific students, but they also create an entire culture of friendship and unity.

### How do you define bullying?

Our definition of bullying is any leveraging of power from one child over another to hurt that child or to accomplish something. The act might be ethically acceptable but, nevertheless, causes emotional harm.

As an example, let’s say a student is coming late every day and disturbing the class with his entrance. The other students are bothered and say, “Stop coming late!” The latecomer then makes a face.

We will call in the children who are making fun of the latecomer, one at a time, and walk them through the process. We separate the act of bullying from the bully and say, “You are not a bad person; you are an amazing person.” We ask them what is going on, and they will respond, “The other kid is coming late and it bothers us. We asked him to stop and he just made funny faces at us.” We validate their perspective and then tell them, “This is not intentional. He does not mean it to bother you. He is struggling with something and trying to improve. When you make fun of him, it makes him feel terrible.”

We then guide the students on how to fix the problem by sincerely apologizing for what they did and doing a small, positive act of appreciation for their victim.

Often, teachers will say, “We never noticed any

bullying.” Then they wait until it becomes too big of a problem to solve. We want to nip it in the bud.

### What are the steps of Buildup?

The first step is to identify children who are potential targets for bullying. Then, before anything happens, we create a proactive system of appreciating each child as an individual — that is why it is called Buildup. We create a culture of appreciating everyone.

We start by placing a physical item in the room, such as a poster that says, “Every child is amazing,” or a picture of a *Gadol*, which gives the children a certain message. The teacher needs to show leadership and demonstrate to the children how to appreciate others. The teacher will point to the poster and say, “This is an integral part of our classroom,” and will then go on to publicly recognize the genuine value of the children in the classroom and comment on their good qualities. This changes the perception of each child in the eyes of the classmates. It also builds each one’s self-image. This technique is repeated by other teachers and creates a culture of the children looking at each other in a positive way, rather than as people who are, *chas v’shalom*, not needed. The message is that everyone is needed and everyone is special.

### What is the next step?

The second technique is called the “Clean-Out.” It is the infrastructure to deal with active bullying, and it is typically done after a week of Buildup. It is a total reset, a positive resolution that replaces the negative relationship with the positive one.

A qualified and specially trained staff member meets with the child who did the act of bullying one on one. The staff member first emphasizes how special the bully is and then emphasizes that the victim is very special as well. The staff member establishes the fact of what occurred together with the bully, and then helps the bully understand the negative effects of their actions. The bully is given the tools to fix the problem completely by sincerely apologizing and doing a sincere, positive act towards the other child, such as saying good morning to him or sitting next to him during lunch.

If there is more significant, nefarious bullying going on, then the first step remains the same. However, the second step should be more pronounced. The bully should be told, “You are an amazing person, but what you did was terrible. You are both outstanding people, and this is not who you are. But we can fix it. Say I am sorry and do something positive.”

An important component of the program is to have one specific person assigned to being on the lookout for bullying and addressing it. In many schools, as much as everyone is concerned about it, no one person takes full responsibility, and it often falls through the cracks. This delegated staff member will *proactively* check in with the high-risk potential targets periodically to see how they are doing. If they are getting made fun of, the school will know about it in real time,

and will be able to address it before it becomes a bigger problem.

### How is this applied in Camp Chaverim?

Suppose, for example, that there are two boys sleeping on a bunk bed, and the one on the bottom complains that the one on the top is shaking the bed. Now, this occurs regardless when sleeping on bunk beds, but the boy on the bottom thinks that the boy on top is doing it on purpose. He becomes angry at him and they begin fighting about everything. In Camp Chaverim, there are people assigned to notice these things, deal with it using the Buildup system, and then they are best friends forever.

I want to emphasize that our camp is a mainstream camp. These types of behaviors are happening everywhere, and there is a core need for our educational system to have a strong anti-bullying component. Our goal is to bring this to the world.

### Does Reyus have *haskamos* from Rabbanim?

Harav Yaakov Hopfer, president of the Vaad Harabbanim of Baltimore, is very much behind us. He has been extremely involved in every aspect, answers our *she'eilos* and provides much guidance.

He has written about us that "...these programs are dedicated to developing genuine appreciation for each and every person and a true sense of *achdus* within *Klal Yisrael*. I can attest firsthand to the success of Reyus accomplishing its mission ... I am elated to say that the results have been magnificent for both boys and girls."

### Have you had any professional studies done?

In the summer of 2020, the Alberti Center for Bullying Prevention (affiliated with the State University of New York), one of the top bullying research centers in the United States, conducted a full study of Buildup by measuring pre-camp and post-camp surveys of the campers, who filled out the survey anonymously. The results indicated clearly that the campers' self-confidence increased significantly over the summer, and the campers felt significantly more appreciated by their peers due to attending Camp Chaverim.

We see from this study that the methods we use to address bullying are the effective best practice.

### What if the children involved have complex issues, such as mental health problems?

When complex issues such as family problems or



Rabbi Yaakov Boruch Beren



Rabbi Ezra Baldinger

mental health issues are involved, we insist on involving the right professionals, as their support in this situation is essential to success. It is important to note that many times, the need to address bullying cannot wait to be resolved until these other complex issues are resolved. *Baruch Hashem*, by creating a culture of appreciating the genuine value of children, Buildup has been successful in stopping bullying even when those complex issues were not yet fully resolved.

### How many schools have worked with you to incorporate Buildup?

This is our third academic year, and we have completed our fifth school. For the 2023-2024 school year, we have three schools signed up — in Baltimore, Washington and Dallas, Texas, with more considering the program.

I would like to emphasize that we do not charge the schools for participating. We take on the burden of

fundraising for these efforts. This is because schools are already strapped financially and by only charging them for small expenditures, we can build a relationship of trust with the school. We are a 501(c)(3) organization.

After the completion of the program, we ask the schools to write a letter of recommendation, and we have received tremendous positive feedback.

### This sounds like a really amazing program. Do you have any final message?

A school is comprised of a group, and at the same time is comprised of *yechidim*. In order to help people develop to their full potential, we can't just educate them as a group; they need to know that they have an individual *tachlis*. Our vision for the future is that every school will run this program, so that every child will feel good about himself and have direction for his unique talents and values.



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