

What My Brother With Autism Taught Me About Special Needs

By Hasan Zafer ELCIK

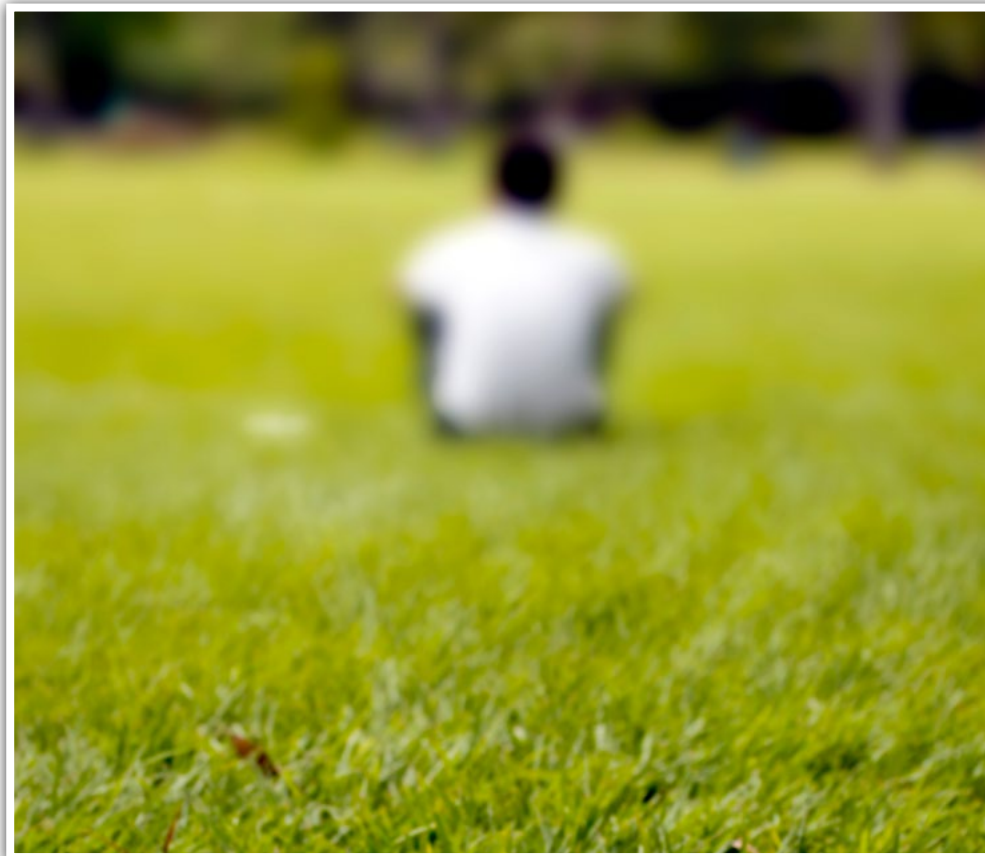
When I was 10, my two-year-old brother was diagnosed on the autism spectrum. He was nonverbal for much of his early life, unable to read or communicate effectively. He struggled to exhibit and mimic behavior that was expected of him from society, and would often find himself striking his head because of overstimulation from the world around him.

At first, I felt torn and confused; I had no idea what autism was, really, or how I could support my brother, who clearly was not only very different from who I was but other children, too.

I bought him dozens of toys, in attempts to bond with him while also seeking the right medium to attract his attention and help him become more focused, but nothing seemed to work. My family tried various tutors and approaches to teach my brother basic cognitive and behavioral skills, but nothing worked; nothing would resonate with him. As a result, he struggled at school, as well as with his tutors, unable to connect with others and unlock his true potential.

For my brother, it was only after I bought my first smartphone that I realized he had a fascination with technology. His attention zeroed in on the phone about 10 times longer than he gave to any of his other toys. It gripped him. It became clear to me that technology, as it has become more and more accessible to people over time, could be used as a vehicle for my brother's learning and development—and perhaps for others as well.

Although there are no cures for learning disorders like autism, there are alternative forms of therapy, and experts [agree](#) that using technology to apply forms of applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy at an early age is the most effective way to positively impact the lives of individuals like my brother. ABA uses positive reinforcement to inspire meaningful changes in behavior. This practice can support fun methods of learning when leveraged with technology, particularly for children.



I was working for a gaming company at the time, and I wanted to pair ABA with gamification to help my brother hone core skills in life. My brother had struggled with identifying colors, so I designed a game in an app to help him—a very simple one that taught shades of colors, letters, numbers, and emotions by drag-and-drop matching. It was amazing to see his improvement over time. This was the key that unlocked my brother's future—I saw first-hand the impact ABA learning methods could have, especially if they were readily available and accessible to all.

It's at this point I realized that using modern consumer technology, like smartphones and tablets, were preferred mediums to deliver forms of ABA therapy today, and that the future of democratizing access to special education has a clear technology-guided solution.

The Importance of Democratizing Education

There is still much room for improvement when it comes to special education in my home country of Turkey. It is known, scientifically, that the best way

to treat autism is through therapy—and therapy is incredibly expensive. Many families across the globe lack the resources to access the therapy their children need, whether it's a result of lack of income, lack of healthcare, or general lack of the service.

In the United States, some states require healthcare providers to cover various forms of therapy, such as ABA therapy, but this isn't the case universally. When families don't have the extra help from insurance or even have insurance in the first place, they're left staring at costs upwards of [tens of thousands of dollars](#).

Autism should not be a source of stress—financial or social—on families. In fact, recent research from my own company shows that nearly half of the American population believes that therapy for individuals with autism should be available for free.

However, this is not the case in America today.

Raising a child with autism is [expensive](#). If a family's healthcare system doesn't cover therapy, most families have no way to access ABA in affordable means. For families in this situation, technology is the key to unlocking these methods at a cost that is accessible. Smartphones, tablets, apps, and gadgets can offer some of the most effective vessels to deliver ABA therapy.

No child should be denied learning opportunities due to his/her family's financial or social stature. By making therapy more accessible, we can prepare children with the skills needed to succeed in life. People with autism can be some of the most dedicated and creative workers and thinkers. They are intelligent and often have untapped niches with unique abilities to think outside of the box—but to get there, they need the right education.

Society needs a shift in mindset, which starts with a ground-up approach to empathy. We have the opportunity and responsibility to make a meaningful impact on these individuals' lives from a young age.

Today, my brother is verbal, happy, and communicates well with his family. His growth is my inspiration for launching and building the game-based learning app Otsimo. My mission is to democratize access to education for all, as my brother's story is not an isolated incident. By making ABA therapy methods accessible, we can do our duty as a collective and offer all children an educational foundation that allows them to become independent and valued members of society.

Hasan Zafer Elcik is co-founder and CEO of Otsimo, the direct-to-family education app designed for children with special needs. When Elcik's brother was diagnosed on the autism spectrum disorder at a young age, he noticed that his younger brother had a fascination with technology. Elcik bought him an iPad as a gift and developed an application to help his brother learn and identify colors using applied behavior analysis techniques and practices. That initial app that Elcik created for his brother to learn and develop core competencies has since expanded into what Otsimo is today so that children across the world can have simple and easy access to forms of ABA therapy. Elcik is a computer scientist with specializations in game design and mobile development. In addition, Elcik is an Ashoka Youth Changemaker and has been featured as a TedX speaker.

Websites: otsimo.com/en, play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.otsimo.app&hl=en_US, itunes.apple.com/us/app/otsimo-special-education/id1084723774?mt=8, <https://twitter.com/otsimoen>

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