

SOCIAL STORIES

As developed by Carol Gray, The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding, and Presented by Jocelyn Taylor, MA, Autism Specialist, Utah State Office of Education
Review and information written by Jody Jones, Parent Consultant, Utah Parent Center

What are Social Stories?

Social Stories are a tool for teaching social skills to children with autism and related disabilities. They provide accurate information about situations that children may find difficult or confusing. The story is told in a first person, present-tense layout and is used to provide a student with as much information about a social situation as possible. The situation is described in detail. Focus is given to a few key points and prepares the student to face that situation and act appropriately

What are the main features of a Social Story?

A social story has a story line that includes the child in the starring role, important social cues, accurate information about the child's environment, actions that might be expected of him and why, and Positive Behavioral Supports. It teaches social understanding.

What does a Social Story do?

A social story creates a shared understanding, alleviates fear, stress and confusion and often results in improved behavior. The goal of the story is to increase the individual's understanding, make him more comfortable, and suggest appropriate responses for the situation in question.

Four-Step Method for Writing a Social Story

Step-one: Picture the goal. How would you like the child to act?

Step-two: Gather information and identify what the child needs to learn. A Functional Behavior Assessment can help to determine needs. Look at how a child socializes overall and determine what impairments need to be addressed. Social impairments may fall in three broad categories;

1. Social avoidance (having tantrums, shying away from, or attempting to escape social situations)
2. Social indifference (common to the majority of children with autism who don't actively seek social interaction nor do they aggressively avoid such interaction). And
3. Social awkwardness (seen typically in higher functioning kids who may try hard to gain and keep friends, but are hindered by a lack of reciprocity in conversation and interest).

Step-three: Narrow the needs down and choose one skill or behavior to teach. Write the story.

- Tailor the text, writing with the child in mind.
- Use an appropriate vocabulary and an appropriate type size.
- Include positive language, literal accuracy, and non-anxiety producing vocabulary,
- Reflect the student's age, characteristics, and interests.
- Use visual supports.

- Answer “wh” questions (where, who, what, why, when).
- Make it fun!

The story’s layout should have an introduction, body and conclusion. Four types of sentences are used to present information in a Social Story. Include 2-5 sentences of each type except the Directive. Only include 0-1 Directive sentences.

- Descriptive sentences address the “wh” questions: *where* the situation takes place, *who* is involved, *what* they are doing, and *why* they may be doing it. This is the story frame work with observable truths, such as:
 - “My name is...”
 - “Many children play on the playground...”
- Perspective sentences give a peek into the minds of those involved in the story; they provide details about the emotions and thoughts of others, such as:
 - “Some children like to play the piano”, or
 - “My mom is happy when...”.
- Directive sentences suggest a desired response or action tailored to the individual. These are also known as “control” sentences. It is to help the student deal with the situation, such as:
 - “I will try to stay in my chair.”
 - “I can think of an idea”.
- Affirmative sentences enhance surrounding statements. These are also known as “cooperative” sentences, such as:
 - “This is a good idea.”
 - “Mom and dad will remain calm when I talk to them.”

Step-four: Teach with the title. Label the story to illustrate the desired end result. Here are 2 examples geared for different children:

Hugging: Why Do People Hug?

People hug to show that they love each other.

When I hug someone I put my arm around them and squeeze gently.

Sitting on the Carpet

Sometimes our class sits on the carpet. (Descriptive)

We sit on the carpet to listen to stories and for group lessons.

(Descriptive)

My friends are trying hard to listen so they can enjoy the story or learn

from the lessons. (Perspective)

It can be hard for them to listen if someone is noisy or not sitting still.

(Descriptive)

I will try to sit still and stay quiet during our time on the carpet. (Directive)

This is a good idea because my teacher and friends will be happy when I am sitting still and quiet. (Affirmative)

Writing with the Child in Mind - Is Your Social Story Complete?

Check for the following ingredients in your Social Story as appropriate.

1. Introduction, body and conclusion
2. Answer "wh" questions
3. First person, the child as the starring role
4. Positive language
5. Literal accuracy
6. Non-anxiety vocabulary
7. Appropriate vocabulary and text size
8. Concrete text
9. Visual supports
10. Reflects student's age and characteristics
11. Reflects interests of student
12. Check the ration of sentence types; descriptive, perspective, directive and affirmative.

Presentation, Variations and Authoring styles

There are a variety of presentation styles and options that can be used to meet the needs of a variety of children.

- **Text on paper** is likely the easiest presentation to prepare and use but it may not be the most appropriate for every child (non-readers, etc.).
- **Illustrations** – The child (or parent/teacher) can illustrate each page of the story, or photographs can be taken of the child and his peers in the social situation. These pictures can add interest and visual support for the presented ideas. Pictures (photographs, especially) should be as visually uncluttered and as simple as possible.
- **Symbols** – The text of the story can be augmented with pictures representing various words or ideas. The Mayer-Johnson Picture Exchange symbols are typically good choices for this use.
- **Social Stories on tape** – A story can be recorded on audio tape with a tone or verbal cue for the child to turn the page.
- **Video** – A film can be made of the student and peers acting out applicable scenes from the story eventually fading the video for the written text.
- **Story boxes** – The child and an adult can act out scenes from the stories with small figures, rooms made of shoeboxes, etc. This can add interest and increase understanding of the concepts.

Other variations of stories may include checklist stories, curriculum stories, generic stories, goal stories, judgment stories, stories addressing aggression, stories addressing fears, stories addressing obsessions and compulsions, question and answer stories, media stories, group stories, and comic strip conversations.

Implementation, Monitoring and Fading out

Prior to the implementation of a story, it should be shared with as many people who are involved in the child's program as possible. This will allow cooperation and support to be gathered while also checking for over-looked information or key points. Before the introduction of the story to the child, those who may be involved in the situation and people in the student's life should be presented with a copy of the story. It can also be helpful to actually have the child present the story to other students, staff or family members.

A consistent schedule for reviewing each story should be maintained. At first this is typically once a day, usually right before the targeted situation (e.g. right before the bell dismissing the class to recess, if the story is about the need to take turns on the monkey bars). For some kids it may be helpful to read the story early in the day and then simply review the highlights prior to the activity.

The effectiveness of the story should be monitored consistently. If after a week or two of working with a story and there is little noticeable change, the story should be reworked. The motivation behind the behavior may need to be re-evaluated. As the child becomes more and more successful with the situations presented in a story, that story can begin to be faded out or changed to meet the new needs of the child. The number of review sessions can be lessened from once a day, to every other day, to once a week, to twice a month, and so on until they are no longer needed or the directive sentences in the story can be reduced or eliminated. As the story is mastered, it should be kept visible in the child's environment for review. Because the stories are personalized, they can often be favorites, and the child might want to look through them on his own, even when not working on them specifically.

What a Social Story is NOT...

A social story is not a behavior program or a rote compliance program.

Summary

"A social story describes a social skill or situation in terms of relevant cues and information and common response. The goal of each social story is to describe what occurs, over directing the behavior or responses of the student. Understanding the goal, and translating social information into tangible, concrete and easily understood text and illustrations is critical to writing four different basic types of sentences which occur in a specified proportion. In addition, guidelines based on the learning characteristics of students with A.S.D. (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and the specific interests and abilities of an individual student are also essential to every social story. Social story titles are developed with careful consideration of the goal. This helps to focus the efforts of the author and results in a social story that covers a reasonable amount of information. Sometimes, a series of related social stories might be needed to cover a single, general topic." Gray, Carol 1999 *"From both sides now: teaching social understanding with social stories and comic strip conversations"*.

For more information or examples of social stories, parents may wish to consult the book, **Social Stories**, by Carol Gray or visit her website at www.thegraycenter.org. You may also contact Jocelyn Taylor at the Utah State Office of Education by emailing her at: jocelyn.taylor@schools.utah.gov.