Creating and Using Social Stories
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What are Social Stories?

Social Stories[TM], created by Carol Gray, are a tool for teaching social skills to children with autism and other disabilities. Social stories provide an individual with accurate information about those situations that s/he may find difficult or confusing. The situation is described in detail and focus is given to a few key points: the important social cues, the events and reactions the individual might expect to occur in the situation, the actions and reactions that might be expected of him, and why. The goal of the story is to increase the individual's understanding of, make him more comfortable in, and possibly suggest some appropriate responses for the situation in question.

Social Stories are relatively short, straightforward descriptions of social situations, specifically detailing what an individual might expect from the situation and what may be expected of him. Included in the story is "who" is involved, "what" happens, "when" the event takes place, "why" it happens and "how" it happens. Relevant social cues are included throughout the story to help the student understand the perspective of others.

Sample Social Story for "Lining Up at School"

Sometimes at school we line up.
We line up to go to the gym, to go to the library, and to go out to recess.
Sometimes my friends and I get excited when we line up, because we're going someplace fun, like out to recess.
It is okay to get excited, but it is important to try to walk to the line. Running can cause accidents, and my friends or I could get hurt.
I will try my best to walk in the line.

Benefits of Social Stories

Social stories attempt to address "theory of mind" impairment by giving individuals perspective on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of others. They help the individual better predict the actions and assumptions of others. Social stories present information on social situations in a structured and consistent manner, a particularly appropriate approach for individuals with autism, especially when dealing with skills and behaviors which are as fluid as those involved in social interactions.

Social stories can also be helpful in teaching individuals functionally-equivalent replacements to inappropriate behaviors. For instance, if an individual uses inappropriate comments repeated from a TV program to make peers laugh (*function* of comments is to make peers laugh), then a social story describing additional ways to make peers laugh may be helpful in expanding the child's repertoire. The social story may also include in formation about where and when it is appropriate to make peers laugh. By doing this, social stories give individuals direct contact with social information through pictures and text, as opposed to speech or observation, notable areas of weakness for individuals with autism. They also provide a little distance between teaching and the possible stresses of the social situation itself; they give the individual a chance to practice the skills often and on his terms.

Writing Social Stories—Identifying the Situation/Needs

Before beginning to writing a social story, determine exactly which skill or situation to focus upon. Careful observation is needed to identify exactly what the underlying causes of the difficult situation may be. Situations from which an individual withdraws, from which s/he attempts to escape, or in which s/he tantrums, cries, or becomes frightened may be appropriate targets for a social story. Ideally, anyone who works with the individual at school or at home should be consulted prior to the writing of a story. Each may have some unique insight into the situation.

A social story is intended to be written from the perspective of the individual, so it is paramount that the author is able to obtain that person's unique perspective. Some individuals may be able to assist in the writing of the story, discussing those areas where they are having difficulty and helping the educator or parent to write from that perspective. Others may require more careful observation on the part of the author. The focus of the story should be the motivation or function of the current behaviors and not necessarily to the behaviors themselves. For example, if a child begins to tantrum or cry when his assistant leaves the classroom, your first instinct might be to write a story about crying, when and where it might not be appropriate, etc. However, a more effective approach might be to write a social story about being scared or frustrated (if you have determined that fear or frustration are the underlying reason for the behavior), and what things might make him scared, and how he might go about dealing with that.

It is also very important that the expected response is clearly defined. To continue the above example, one may be tempted to define the expected response as "Kevin will reduce the number of incidences of crying each day," or something similar. A better expectation might be "We will teach Kevin what he can do when he's scared or frustrated in order to help Kevin feel more comfortable when his assistant is out of the room."

Writing Social Stories—Using the Four Sentence Types

Having determined those areas on which to focus, the writing of the social story can begin. Again, a social story is usually a first-person, present-tense story used to provide a student with as much information about a social situation as possible, so he is better prepared to face, and act appropriately in, that situation. There are four types of sentences used in a social story:

1. *Descriptive Sentences*--objectively address the "wh" questions: *where* the situation takes place, *who* is involved, *what* they are doing, and *why* they may be doing it.
2. *Perspective Sentences*--give a glimpse into the minds of those involved in the story; they provide details about the emotions and thoughts of others.
3. *Directive Sentences*--suggest desired responses tailored to the individual.
4. *Control Sentences*--used as something of a mnemonic device and often authored by the student. This can be a sentence to help him remember the story or deal with the situation. Control sentences may not used in every story. They may be specifically paired with a visual cue to use to remind the individual of the focus of the story (skill being taught or explained).

Below is a sample social story with sentences labeled to illustrate each of the above sentences:

Sample Social Story for "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 to listen so they can enjoy the story. (***Perspective***)
It may be hard for them to listen if someone is not sitting still. (***Descriptive***)
I will try to sit still during our time on the carpet. (***Directive***)
If I am having lots of trouble sitting still, I can ask for a quick "move break", to get out my extra energy. (***Directive*** to teach replacement skill of requesting movement)
If I show my teacher my "move break" card, she will know I want to take a "move break".
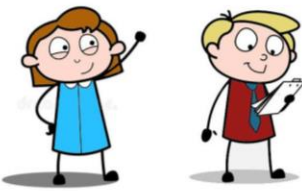(Showing the card can be a ***Control*** device)
Then she will let me take a "move break". (***Descriptive***)

Carol Gray recommends that a ratio of at least three to five descriptive or perspective sentences for every directive sentence be used for each story. It is also important to use developmentally-appropriate vocabulary and appropriate type size for the individual. Try to make each story resemble as closely as possible other literature the child encounters at home and school.

Example of How to Write a Social Script

Title
Introduces the topic/ scenario

My name is...If I don't know what to do I can ask for help.

(illustration: child with question marks)	Sometimes I need to ask the teacher for help. It's okay to ask for help when I don't know what to do.
(illustration: two children)	I put my hand up to attract the teacher's attention. I look towards the teacher.
(illustration: three children)	Sometimes the teacher is busy with someone else, that is okay I can wait for help.
(illustration: two children)	When the teacher has finished with the other student I can call out in a medium voice, "Excuse me."
(illustration: two children)	I wait for the teacher to look at me and say my name. I then ask my question.
(illustration: child saying "Thank You")	When the teacher has answered my question I say, "Thank you."

Perspective Sentence
Makes the script personal for the child and more specific to them. It appeals to their literalness.

Coaching Sentence
Keeps it positive and tells the child what to do.

Alternative Scenario
Include likely scenarios to avoid anxiety

Descriptive Sentence
Teaches the social skills necessary in the scenario

It is okay to ask the teacher for help if I don't know what to do.

Conclusion -> Affirmation
Positively reinforces and restates the original purpose with addition information

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Writing Social Stories—Variations in Story Presentation Style

Social stories are often written in a book format using visuals (photographs, picture symbols, drawings) to help aid understanding and with one concept per page. Keeping developmental appropriateness in mind, there are a variety of presentation styles and options for developing the story that can be used to meet the needs of a variety of individuals. The student (or the parent/teacher "author" of the story) can hand-illustrate each page of the story with pictures representing various sentences of the story. Photographs can also be used of the child and/or peers/others in the social situation. These pictures can add interest and visual support for the presented ideas. Be wary, though, of images that are too complex. Children with autism do not always focus on pictures as we would expect (may fail to focus on a prominent object in the foreground in favor of some other item in the background), so the pictures should be as visually uncluttered as possible.

The text of the story can also be augmented with pictures/picture symbols representing various words or ideas. Symbols can be substitutes for written words not yet mastered. Or a single, large symbol can represent a complete idea on a particular page. Symbols can also be used as cues to remind the individual of skills/strategies from the story. The social story can also be written into a "power point" file, as one would create a power point presentation (from Microsoft office). The child can "read" his story by viewing the power point presentation on a computer. Someone can read the story and record this into the presentation, so that the child can hear it. "I-Movies" can work similarly in using technology to engage the child in the social story. Stories can also be made more interactive using the Smart Board technology.

A reading of a particular story can be recorded on audio tape with a tone or verbal cue for the child to turn the page. Also, a video could be made of the student and peers acting out applicable scenes from the story. The text of the story should be edited in before the applicable scene, and the written story presented along with the video when it is presented to the child, with the hope of eventually fading the video and simply using the written text. Additionally, the individual and an adult can "role play" or act out scenes from the stories themselves or with small figures, rooms made of shoeboxes, etc. This can add interest and increase understanding of the concepts for children who are not strong readers.

Displaying Social Stories on an iPhone or iPad

If the student will view the personalized story on a Windows PC, then you can save the file in PowerPoint *.pptx format. However, if the child will be viewing the story on an Apple iPhone or iPad, you can save your PowerPoint presentation in the Adobe Acrobat PDF format and e-mail the PDF file or put it on a file sharing service such as Microsoft OneDrive or Google Drive. To save the story as a PDF, use the following steps:

- After customizing your story, click on the **File** tab and then on the **Save As** command.
- When the **Save As** dialog box appears, click on the **Save As Type** drop down, and select **PDF**.
- Click **Save**

After saving your story as a PDF, send it for the child to view on the iPhone or iPad by including it as an e-mail attachment or by putting it on a free file sharing service such as Microsoft SkyDrive and including a link to it in mail.

Using Social Stories—Implementation and Monitoring

Prior to the introduction of a story, the story should be shared with as many people who are involved in the child's program as possible. Accessing this variety of viewpoints can call attention to finer points that may have been overlooked or misstated in the initial authoring of a story. Before, or shortly after, the introduction of the story to the child, those who may be involved in the situation or with the skill targeted should be presented with a copy of the story. It is often helpful to actually have the child present the story to these other students, staff, or family members, and then to have those

people read back or discuss the story with the child. This can help the child understand that everyone is on the same page, operating with similar assumptions and expectations.

A consistent schedule for reviewing each story should be maintained. Typically, the story is reviewed at least once per day during the initial implementation, 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 individuals, especially during the first few readings of the story, the time just prior to the situation may be too exciting or busy to completely hold their attention to focus on the story.   In these situations, it may be helpful to read the story early in the day and then simply review the highlights and/or the visual cue prior to the activity. Social stories should *not* be saved to review only after inappropriate behavior occurs as a response to the use of the inappropriate behavior, or the individual may begin to see reading the story as a "punishment" for "bad" behavior.

The effectiveness of the story should be monitored consistently. If after two-three weeks of consistently reviewing a particular story, there is little/no noticeable change, the story should be reworked. Elements that may be vague or confusing should be removed or rewritten. The function/motivation behind the behavior may need to be re-evaluated. Is the story truly addressing the reasons *why* the child may be confused or misreading a situation? As the child becomes more and more successful with the situations presented in a particular 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.

It is also important not to confusing the individual by introducing several new social stories at the same time. One story per month may be introduced. However, if the child is having trouble mastering the story within the first month, in addition to possibly reworking the original text, s/he may need more focused exposure to the first story's topic. A second story should not be introduced until the child achieves some degree of success with the first or a revised version of this first story. As each story is mastered, it should be kept visible in the child's environment for review when needed. Because the stories are so personalized, so much *about* the child, they can often be favorites, something the child might want to look through on his own, even when not working on them specifically. A special basket or notebook of mastered stories may be helpful.

Tips for Writing Social Stories—Avoiding Common Mistakes

Certain individuals may be pf the opinion that social stories do not work. Usually this is because the story, itself, is flawed or it is not accurate for the targeted situation. To avoid this problem, it is extremely important to attempt to adhere to the above guidelines when writing a social story. The following tips should also help you avoid making the typical mistakes made when writing and implementing social stories:

➢ *Word it positively:* When writing a social story it is important to describe the desired response rather than the problem behavior. For instance, if Linda has a meltdown on a field trip, a social story written for subsequent field trips would ***not*** say, "It is important to not have a tantrum on field trips." The story would describe the sequence of events for the field trip, who is going, how long the trip will last, etc. The idea is to use the story to teach the student about the situation, including what he *can* do when the situation is encountered, instead of focusing solely on what *not* to do.

➢ *Keep the story's title positive, too:* For similar reasons, using negative sentences is also *not* recommended. The title of a social story should never be "Not Hitting at School". Rather the story should identify and explain the situation that usually causes the individual to feel the need to hit (antecedents or triggers for hitting) so they are clear and less frustrating, as well as replacement behavior the child can use instead of hitting to change a frustrating situation or deal with feelings.

➢ *Make reading the story FUN:* In addition to wording a story too punitively, some people can make reading or reviewing the story a "chore" or punishment, rather than a pleasant experience. Social stories and scripts should be reviewed proactively and used to teach, practice and re-teach

strategies. Also, try to make the story interesting enough for the individual to *want* to read. This may involve incorporating a special interest or preferred character into the story to develop a "power card". A Power Card is a visual aid that incorporates the child's special interest to teach appropriate social interactions, including routines, behavioral expectations and the hidden curriculum. It consists of two parts—a short scenario describing how the hero solves the problem and a small card with a picture of the hero to recap the strategy. This card serves as a way to generalize the skill to new settings (Gagnon, 2001).

- *Use directive sentences very sparingly:* Sometimes authors attempt to make the story too directive/uses too many directive sentences in an effort to try to "order" the individual to change his/her behavior. Social stories are *not* meant to compel individuals to comply with an adult's wishes. They are *not* scripts detailing consequences for inappropriate behavior. Therefore, the use of absolute, inflexible, or overly directive sentences should be avoided. Replace phrases like "I must" and "I will" with "I will try" or "I will work on" in directive sentences. "Usually" and "sometimes" are used instead of "always" in perspective and descriptive sentences. Always remember that the wording in the story should *not* be used to try to chastise a child, to order him/her or to force a child to comply.

- *Make sure the story fits the situation:* Writing a story too vaguely and/or not individualizing the story enough for the student/situation at hand (if re-using a story written for another individual) can lessen the effectiveness of the story. Incorrectly identifying the function/motivation behind the behavior can also make the resulting story ineffective for the student. Keep in mind that the goal of using social stories is to convey accurate information to the individual about a specific situation.

References

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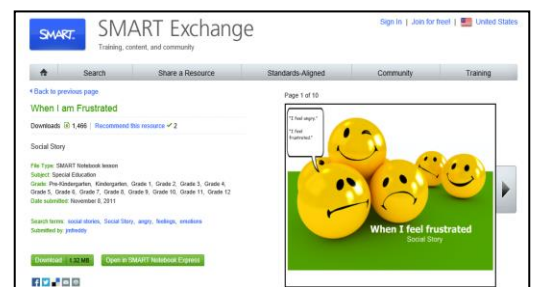
Gagnon, E. (2001). The Power Card Strategy: Using Special Interests to Motivate Children and Youth with Asperger Syndrome. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Gray, C.A. (2000). The New Social Story Book™. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

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Related Resources and Materials

- Free, downloadable examples of social stories can be found at the following sites:
    - http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html#scriptedstories
    - http://www.speakingofspeech.com/Social_Skills_Pragmatics.html
    - https://w3.setbc.org/students/Pages/Student-Resources-Library.aspx
    - http://www.autism-pdd.net/social-stories-autism-pdd/
    - http://www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/social-stories/
    - http://www.child-behavior-guide.com/social-stories.html

- For information about StoryMaker™, an app for creating and presenting social stories, go to:
    - http://kidcompanions.com/new-carol-gray-social-story-app-available/
    - http://a4cwsn.com/2012/09/social-stories/
    - http://www.handholdadaptive.com/StoryMaker.html

- For free social stories to be reviewed using the Smart Board, such as the example (above), go to:
    - http://exchange.smarttech.com/search.html?q=%22social%20stories%22
    - http://www.plattscsd.org/oak/smartboard/socialskills.htm

Social Story Quick Tips

Tip One—Make Sure You Understand the Situation from the Child's Perspective.
➢ Before beginning to writing a Social Story, determine exactly which skill or situation on which to focus. In order to do this, start by observing the child in the situation you are addressing with the story, so that you can see it through the child's eyes.
➢ Try to take on the child's perspective and include aspects of his or her feelings or views in the story. A Social Story is intended to be written from the perspective of the child, so it is paramount that the writer is able to obtain that person's unique perspective.

Tip Two—Make the Story Interesting and Engaging for the Child.
➢ Social stories are often written in a book format using visuals (photographs, picture symbols, drawings) to help aid understanding and with one concept per page.
➢ The student can also hand-illustrate pages of the story with pictures representing various sentences of the story.
➢ The story can be read then recorded on audio tape with a tone or verbal cue for the child to turn the page.
➢ The story can be written into a "power point" file (as one would create a power point presentation from Microsoft office); then the child can "read" his story by viewing the power point presentation on a computer. An "I-Movie" can also be created to make the "I-Story" more interesting to the student.
➢ A video could be made of the student and peers acting out scenes from the story, with the written story presented along with the video when it is presented to the child.
➢ The story can be reviewed using "role play" where the child and others acts out scenes from the story themselves or with small figures, rooms made of shoeboxes, etc.

Tip Three—Avoid Writing Overly Negative, Directive Social Stories.
➢ Sometimes authors attempt to make the story too directive in an effort to try to "order" the student to change his/her behavior. Social Stories are *not* meant to force children to comply with our wishes. Replace phrases like "I must" and "I will" with "I will try to" or "I will work on"; use "usually" and "sometimes" instead of "always".
➢ Try to avoid using negative sentences. For example, the focus or title of a Social Story should *never* be "Not Hitting at School". The story should explain the situation that usually causes the student to feel the need to hit and explain replacements that the child can use instead of hitting to deal with the situation.
➢ Other mistakes to avoid include writing a story too vaguely, incorrectly identifying the motivation behind the behavior, making it a "chore" or a punishment to read the story rather than a pleasant experience, not making the story interesting enough for the individual to want to read, and not individualizing the story enough by re-using a story written for another individual.

Tip Four—Determine the Best Time to Review the Story.
➢ When first introducing it, the story must be reviewed often (daily). Stories are usually reviewed every day for a month (or more, if needed).
➢ Develop a consistent schedule for when to review the story. This might be each day at a "neutral time" (i.e., before going to bed, during morning arrival at school).
➢ The story can also be reviewed *before* the targeted situation to remind the child of what will follow (i.e., just before recess, etc.).
➢ Do *not* wait to read the story until after a problem has already occurred (or in response to inappropriate behavior).