

Understanding and Using Social Stories

The information below is credited to the National Autistic Society (2017) and was retrieved from: <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips.aspx>

What are social stories?

Social stories were created by Carol Gray in 1991. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.

What are social stories for?

Social stories can be used to:

- Develop self-care skills (e.g. how to clean teeth, wash hands or get dressed), social skills (e.g. sharing, asking for help, saying thank you, interrupting) and academic abilities
- Help the reader understand how others might behave or respond in a particular situation
- Help the reader understand the perspective of others and why they may respond or behave in a particular way
- Help a person cope with changes to routine and unexpected or distressing events (e.g., absence of teacher, moving to a new house, thunderstorms)
- Provide positive feedback to a person about an area of strength or achievement in order to develop self-esteem
- As a behavioral strategy (e.g., what to do when angry, how to cope with obsessions)

How do social stories help?

Many individuals with autism have good visual learning skills and like social stories because they are written down and can be illustrated. The presentation and content can be adapted to meet different people's needs.

Social stories present information in a literal, 'concrete' way, which may improve a person's understanding of a previously difficult or ambiguous situation or activity. They can help with sequencing (what comes next in a series of activities) and 'executive functioning' (planning and organizing).

By providing information about what might happen in a particular situation, and some guidelines for behavior, you can increase structure in a person's life and thereby reduce anxiety.

Creating or using a social story can help you to understand how an individual with autism perceives different situations.

How to use social stories

- Carol Gray has developed guidelines on how to use social stories effectively.
- Present the social story to the person at a time when everyone is feeling calm and relaxed. Social stories should never be used as a punishment for misbehavior.
- Use an honest and straightforward approach when introducing the story, e.g. I have written this story for you. It is about thunderstorms. Let's read it together now.
- Review the story as often as needed. Some social stories will be reviewed initially once a day, others prior to the situation for which they were written.
- Maintain a positive, reassuring and patient attitude when reviewing the story.
- When reviewing the story, use a calm and friendly tone of voice and make sure the environment is quiet, comfortable and free of distractions.
- Involve others in the review of the story where appropriate. For example, a story that is focused on a situation or activity at school could also be reviewed with the child's teacher or learning support assistant.
- Introduce one story at a time to make sure the person does not become overwhelmed with information.
- There are two main ways of 'fading' a social story. You can increase the period of time between reviewing it, i.e. if a story was initially reviewed once per day, increase the review period to every two days, then every three or four days, and so on. Or you can change the content of the story to reflect the person's new skills. For example, remove directive sentences from the story, or rewrite them as partial sentences where the person is required to recall the missing information. However, some people may find such changes distressing, and alternative approaches should be explored.

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