

## Using Social Stories

Prepared By Michelle Lockwood,  
Positive Behavior Support Specialist, NJCIE

### **What are Social Stories?**

Social Stories are tools, originated by Carol Gray, 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. Carol Gray, the developer of Social Stories, has edited several books on Social Stories.

### **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 also attempt to address the "theory of mind" impairment by giving individuals some 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 favorite TV program to make peers laugh (*function* of the comments is to make peers laugh), then a Social Story describing additional ways to make peers laugh may be helpful in expanding the individual's repertoire. The Social Story may also include information about where and when it is appropriate to make peers laugh.

Social Stories give individuals direct contact with social information through pictures and text, as opposed to speech or observation, notable areas of weakness for many individuals with autism and other disabilities. Finally, Social Stories 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 himself. This can be a sentence to help him remember the story or deal with the situation. Control sentences may not be 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).

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 the other literature the child may be encountering at home and school.

Below is another sample social story. Each of the sentences in this story has been labeled to illustrate each of the types of 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 my teacher for a quick “move break”, so I can 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 sentence)

### **Writing Social Stories—Variations in Story Presentation Style**

Keeping developmental appropriateness in mind, there are a variety of presentation styles and options that can be used to meet the needs of a variety of individuals. Several ideas about the visual presentation of the Social Story follow below.

The individual (or parent/teacher) 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 (they sometimes fail to focus on a prominent object in the foreground in favor of some other item in the background), so the pictures (photographs, especially) should be as visual 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. As noted above, symbols can also be used as cues to remind the individual of skills/strategies from the story.

The Social Story can 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.

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 too, can add interest and increase understanding of the concepts for children who are not strong readers.

### **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.

Other students, staff, or family members should be encouraged to refer to the story and use the visual cue from the story when appropriate (when the topic situation arises). As an example, if a child were currently working with a story about raising his hand to gain teacher attention before he speaks out at school, the classroom teacher might want to refer back to that story prior to circle time and/or show him the cue for hand-raising from the story (without verbally addressing the behavior) if he begins to speak out.

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 reviewed immediately after an inappropriate behavior 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.

### **Writing Social Stories—Common Mistakes**

Certain individuals may be of the opinion that Social Stories do not work. Usually this is because the story, itself, is flawed. It is extremely important to attempt to adhere to the above guidelines when writing a Social Story. Be cautious to avoid the following typical mistakes made when writing and implementing Social Stories.

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" should be used instead of "always" in perspective and descriptive sentences.

For similar reasons, using negative sentences is also *not* recommended. The focus or 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 the replacement behavior the child can use instead of hitting to change the frustrating situation or to deal with his feelings.

There are several other common mistakes made when writing social stories. As noted above, other mistakes include writing a story too vaguely, incorrectly identifying the function/motivation behind the behavior, writing the story too punitively, making it a “chore” or a punishment to read the story rather than a pleasant experience, not addressing the reason why the child is misreading the social situation, 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.

Often adults may be confused about what the appropriate/desired outcome will be when using the Social Story. Keep in mind that the goal of using Social Stories is to convey information to the individual. Using a story to try to motivate a child, to chastise a child, to order or to force a child to comply will not yield desired results.

© NJCIE 2008