

Social Stories

What is a social story?

A Social Story is a technique developed by Carol Gray of Jenison Public School, Michigan, USA to facilitate social understanding between people who have an Autistic Spectrum Disorder and those who interact with them. Gray (1994) describes a Social Story as being a process that results in a product. She emphasizes that as a process, a Social Story requires consideration and respect to be given to the perspective of the person who has an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The product is a short narrative (20-150 words) defined by specific characteristics that describes a situation, concept or social skill in terms that are meaningful to people with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Rationale for Social Stories

The Social Story technique has evolved from a sound theoretical underpinning. Gray (2002) along with Hobson (1993) and Trevarthen (1996) and many others believe that the fundamental core impairment associated with the autistic condition is of social origin. Gray has recognised the important work of Baron-Cohen (1991) and Frith (1989). In acknowledging the Theory of Mind Deficit, (Baron-Cohen 1991), Gray puts an emphasis upon the reciprocal nature of the social impairment and advocates that all authors of Social Stories need to develop an acute understanding and empathy towards the perspective held by the person who has an Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Gray draws attention to the volume of social information that can be assimilated from the physical environment and prescribes to the view that due to weak Central Coherence (Frith 1989), people with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder may not always pick up the necessary cues to aid their social understanding.

Gray specifies that each Social Story should be written to a formula of defined characteristics which match the learning style of people who have an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. This is in keeping with the tenet that the thinking and learning of people with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder is qualitatively different from typically developing peers (Powell and Jordan 1997).

Functions of Social Stories

Translates learning targets into understandable steps

The overall goal of a Social Story is to teach social understanding over rote compliance. In this way Social Stories may be used to describe educational goals and appropriate behavioural responses. They may also be used to prepare children for changes to their routine or unexpected events. Story topics can focus upon a wide and varied range of skills and situations. By translating learning targets into explicit behaviour outcomes and understandable steps, a Social Story can be used to facilitate the development of such things as the child's ability to turn take and share with others. It is important to highlight that a Social Story does not stand on its own in teaching a new skill. Smith (2001) makes the point that a Story provides vital information and prompts a skill that already exists within the child's repertoire.

Provides a visual and concrete model for behavioural responses

A Social Story describes a situation in terms of relevant social information, which the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder may misinterpret. A Social Story can describe correct behaviour responses in a non-threatening format, thus addressing a wide variety of behaviours including anxiety, aggression, fear and obsessions.

Prepares for the unexpected

People with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder can become very confused and anxious when established routines are disrupted or when faced with an unexpected situation. A Social Story can be used to prepare the individual for the unexpected.

Acknowledges achievement

Social Stories have another purpose that is equally important and frequently overlooked. A Social Story can be used to acknowledge achievement – written praise may be far more rewarding for a pupil with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder than verbal praise. It can also serve to create a permanent record of what a child does well, providing information that is important in building a positive self-esteem.

Formula for writing a basic Social Story

Basic Social Story Sentences

There are four basic sentence types: -

- descriptive
- perspective
- directive
- affirmative

Understanding the types of sentences used in a Social Story and their role and relationship to the overall impact of the Story is the first step to writing effective Social Stories.

- ***Descriptive sentences***

Descriptive sentences are accurate free statements of facts, which describe what happens, where the situation occurs and why. It is important to highlight that when writing descriptive sentences, authors should think and write with literal accuracy. Gray (2002) has emphasized the use of “insurance policy” terms like “usually” and “sometime”, eg

“We go to art class on Tuesday at 2.00pm.”

In keeping with the defining characteristics of Social Stories an alternative form of wording could be

“Most Tuesdays we usually go to art class at about 2.00pm”.

Likewise,

“I come to school by bus each day.”

“Usually I come to school by bus.”

- ***Perspective sentences***

A Social Story may contain perspective sentences. Most of the time, perspective sentences describe the thoughts and feelings of other people. Only on occasion are perspective sentences used to describe or refer to the internal state of the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, eg

“The teacher is happy when I do my work.”

“My mum likes it when I use the toilet.”

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- **Directive sentences**

A Social Story may contain directive sentences. Directive sentences identify a possible response and suggests to the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder in positive terms what he or she should try to do or say, eg

“I can go home on the bus.”

“I will try to sit quietly when the teacher is talking to me.”

- **Affirmative sentences**

A Social Story may contain affirmative sentences. Affirmative sentences enhance the general aim of the Story and may express a common shared value, eg

“It is good to listen to the teacher.”

“This is a good thing to do.”

Basic Social Story Ratio

The Basic Social Story Ratio defines the relationship between the different types of Social Story sentences. Specifically, a Social Story has a ratio of two-five descriptive/ perspective/ affirmative sentences for every directive sentence.

“The use of this formula means that the person with an autistic spectrum disorder is given enough detailed information about the target situation to ensure that the story does not become a list of things to do.”

(Rowe, 1999) (P12)

- **Additional Sentence Types**

There are 3 additional types of sentences that may be used in a Social Story: partial sentences, control sentences and cooperative sentences. Each can be used to encourage a person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder to determine his or her own new responses.

1. Partial sentences as the name implies, encourage the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder to complete a given statement in terms of his or her perception of what will happen next or to make a guess regarding the responses of another person. A descriptive, perspective, directive or affirmative sentence may be written as a partial statement, eg

“I will sit _____ when the teacher is talking to the class.”

“My mum will probably feel _____ if I go to school on the bus.”

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2. Control sentences identify strategies the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder can use to recall a Story. These are often suggested by the person himself or herself, and can incorporate areas of self-interest, eg

“When someone says hello to me I can smile and say hello.”

“When I cannot do my maths I will ask my teacher to help me.”

3. Co-operative sentences

Statements are used to suggest what others will do to support the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder as they learn new skills and responses, eg

“My mum will help me as I learn to go on the school bus.”

“When I do not know what to do next I can look at my schedule.”

4. Combination sentences; some sentences appear to meet the criteria for more than one sentence type, eg “*My mum and dad will try to remain calm while I learn to use the toilet.*” could be identified as either a perspective or co-operative sentence.

Complete Social Story Ratio

- 0-1 (partial or complete) directive or control sentences.
- 2-5 (partial or complete) descriptive, perspective, affirmative and/or co-operative sentences.

The Social Stories Guidelines

Basic steps

1 *Picture the goal*

The main focus or goal of a Story is to share relevant social information in a meaningful way. In many cases this means describing abstract concepts and ideas in terms of concrete references and images.

2 *Gather information*

The needs of the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder determine the topic of a Story. The perspective of the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder determines the perspective of a Story.

Pre-requisite information includes:

- detailed knowledge of the person's personal characteristics, eg developmental level, reading ability, special interest
- detailed assessment information derived from structured observations carried out within the target situation

Observation should be directed toward where and when the situation occurs, who is involved, how events are sequenced, what occurs and why. The authors of the Story need to identify the source of the information which the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder may be missing or misinterpreting. The Story topic is developed from an analysis of this information.

3 *Tailor the text*

(Gray 2002) has summarised the defining characteristics which embody a Social Story. See Appendix II.

4 *Teach with the title*

Each Story has a title. Using a title provides an opportunity to state and reinforce the 'gist' or overall meaning of the Story. Sometimes a title may be stated as a question with the Story answering the question. Whether as a statement or a question the title is an integral part of the Story.

Putting it all together

First few stories

(Gray 2002) cautions that writing a Story for the first few times can be a daunting prospect. As such she recommends that a good starting point is to adopt a team approach until individuals develop self-confidence. For those who are not able to work within a team, Gray has devised the Social Story Checklist (see Appendix III), which can be used to ensure each Story is written in accordance with the key characterisations.

Working as a team

Benefits which can be accrued from adopting a team approach to writing a Story include the following:

- an established body of knowledge to generate ideas.
- instant feedback to ensure each story adheres to the defining characteristic.
- each team member is prepared and comfortable with Story implementation.

Guidelines for implementing a Social Story

The manner in which a Story is introduced must be positive and calm as this initial experience could determine the overall effectiveness. An honest straightforward approach should be adopted, "I wrote this story for you". The author should sit at the side and slightly back from the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder thus attention is jointly focused upon the Story. The author reads the Story with a positive and supportive tone.

Share with others

Once the Story has been introduced and read to the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, the Story can then be shared with other relevant people. (Gray 2002) states that the reasons for this are threefold.

"1) others physically demonstrate to the person with autistic spectrum disorder that they now have the same information; 2) it allows for immediate review of the Story within the social context of sharing it with others; and 3) it encourages generalisation of the Story to other settings and situations." (P64)

Review schedule

Stories are introduced one at a time allowing time to focus on one concept or skill. Stories can be implemented once a day or just prior to the situation described. Similarly, a Social Story describing a social skill that is used in a variety of settings may also be reviewed each day perhaps with the addition of new details as comprehension and application of the information increases.

Fading a social story

One of the simplest ways to fade a Social Story may be to re-write the content in terms of partial sentences. Alternatively, the time period between readings can be expanded. Sometimes Social Stories may evoke a negative reaction from the person with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Care should be taken to understand and respond appropriately. Whenever any form of intervention begins to generate problems it will be necessary for all involved to modify the situation.

References relating to Section 14

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Appendix 1

Activity 1

Identify the descriptive sentences

- a) **My name is Martin.**
- b) **I like to do my work at school.**
- c) **It is good to do my work.**
- d) **My teacher is talking.**

Identify the perspective sentences

- a) **My teacher is very interesting.**
- b) **Sometimes I listen to my teacher.**
- c) **My teacher likes it when I listen to her while she is reading.**
- d) **Many girls and boys want to listen to the teacher.**

Identify the directive sentences

- a) **I will try to listen to my teacher.**
- b) **My teacher likes it when I listen to her.**
- c) **Most boys and girls want to listen to the teacher.**
- d) **I will try to sit quiet and listen when the teacher is talking to my group.**

Activity 2

Identify each sentence

What sharing time really means

Sometimes my class has sharing time. Sharing time is a time to show and tell about something, like a toy or a photograph. Sometimes children let others touch or play with items. It is Ok to put the items right away. Sharing time means sharing news and sharing things to others.

Activity 3

Jamie is in Primary 3 and has settled well into his mainstream primary school. Difficulties occur when Jamie has a supply teacher. Write a Social Story to help Jamie work with another teacher.

Answers to activities

Activity 1

Identify the descriptive sentences.

- a
- d

Identify the perspective sentences

- c
- d

Identify the directive sentences

- a
- d

Activity 2

Identify each sentence

- **descriptive**
- **descriptive**
- **perspective**
- **affirmative**
- **descriptive**

Activity 3

Example of an appropriate Social Story

My name is Jamie I go to Castlebrae School. My teacher's name is Mrs Davidson, I am happy when I do my schoolwork with Mrs Davidson. Sometimes Mrs Davidson has to go to another classroom. Sometimes a different teacher comes to my classroom I will try to do my schoolwork with other teachers. It is good to work with different teachers.

Appendix 2

Tailor the text

Extract from (Writing Social Stories with Carol Gray 2000)

- 1) A Social Story has an introduction, body, and conclusion.
- 2) A Social Story answers “why” questions, include *who* is involved, *where* and *when* a situation occurs, *what* is happening, *how* it happens, and *why*.
- 3) A Social Story is written from a first person perspective, ie as though the person with ASD is describing the event or concept, and occasionally from a third person perspective, like a newspaper article (advanced).
- 4) A Social Story is written in positive language, with positively stated descriptions of responses and behaviours. If a reference to a negative behaviour is made, it is done with caution and from a third person – rather than specific first or second person – perspective. For example, *Sometimes people may unintentionally say something to hurt another person’s feelings. This is a mistake.*
- 5) A Social Story contains up to four basic types of Social Story sentences (descriptive, perspective, affirmative, and directive) that occur in a proportion specified by the Basic Social Story Ratio (0-1 partial or complete directive sentences for every 2-5 partial or complete descriptive, perspective, and/or affirmative sentences) that occur in a proportion specified by the Complete Social Story Ratio (0-1 partial or complete directive and/or control sentences for every 2-5 partial or complete descriptive, perspective, affirmative, and/or cooperative sentences).
- 6) A Social Story is *literally accurate* (can be interpreted literally without altering intended meaning of text and illustrations), with use of “insurance policy” words like *usually* and *sometimes* to ensure that accuracy.
- 7) A Social Story may use alternative vocabulary to maintain its relaxed and positive quality. (For example, the first word in each of the following pairs may elicit anxiety, it is followed by a possible alternative words in italics: different = *another*, change = *replace*, new = *better*.)

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- 8) A Social Story uses concrete, easy to understand text enhanced by visual supports if needed (translating abstract concepts into tangible, visually based terminology and illustration).
- 9) A Social Story may contain illustrations to clarify and enhance the meaning of the text. Illustrations are frequently helpful in stories for young children, or for those who are more severely challenged. If illustrations are used, they reflect consideration of the age and personal learning characteristics of the person with ASD.
- 10) A Social Story is written in a style and format that is motivating, or reflects the interests of the person with ASD.

(Gray 2000)

Appendix 3

The Social Story Checklist Extracted from (Writing Social Stories with Carol Gray 2000)

Title of story _____

Author _____

The story is written for _____

Carefully read the story aloud and place a check (tick) in the appropriate blank:

YES NO

1. Is there an introduction, body and conclusion?

2. Does the story answer the relevant "wh" questions? Sometimes, many of these questions may be answered in a single (often opening) statement.

3. If the story is written for a young student, is it written from a first person perspective, as though the student is describing the event? Or, if the story is for an older student or adult, is it written from a third person perspective, similar to a newspaper article?

4. Does the story have a positive tone? If negative information is included, is it stated carefully using a third person perspective?

5. Does the story adhere to either Social Story Ratio (Basic or Complete)? (0-1 partial or complete directive and/or control sentences for every 2-5 partial or complete descriptive, perspective, affirmative, or cooperative sentences = The Complete Social Story Ratio)

6. Is the story literally accurate? Can it be interpreted literally without altering the intended meaning?

7. Is alternative vocabulary used in place of terms that may cause the person with ASD to become upset or nervous?

8. Is the text written with consideration of reading ability and attention span of the person with ASD, using visual supports to enhance the meaning of the story?

Handout relating to Section 15

YES NO

9. If illustrations are used, are they developed and presented with consideration of the ability of the person with ASD?

10. Has an effort been made to incorporate the student's interests into the format, content, illustrations, or implementation of the story?

11. *Overall*, does the story have a patient/reassuring quality?