

An Introduction to Social Stories

What are Social Stories?

Social Stories were developed in America by Carol Gray in 1994. Social Stories are a tool for teaching social skills to children with autism and related disabilities. A Social Story is a short story, defined by specific characteristics, that describes a situation, concept or social skill using a format that is meaningful for people with ASD. Each story is written to meet an individual need.

How can Social Stories help?

Social Stories can:

- Help to increase the individual's understanding of specific social situation
- Enable him/her to feel more comfortable in a social situation
- Help suggest some appropriate responses for the situation in question.

It is important to describe the situation - not to direct the child what to do.

Who writes Social Stories?

Social stories are written by people who live or work with people with ASD such as parents, siblings and other family members, teachers, neighbours, speech therapists, doctors, psychologists, social workers, friends, dentists and physiotherapists.

Why use Social Stories?

Difficulty with social interaction is thought by some to be the defining characteristic of autism. These difficulties are largely caused by difficulties with 'theory of mind'. Social Stories attempt to address difficulties with 'theory of mind' by giving individuals some perspective on the thoughts, emotions and behaviour of others.

So what is Theory of Mind?

- Many people with autism have difficulties with social understanding - the ability to think in ways necessary for appropriate social interaction.
- People with autism do not understand that others might have a different opinion to them, or that others may want to do something different to what they want to do.
- From their perspective, the statements and actions of others may at times seem to occur without meaning or identifiable purpose, occurring randomly and without logic or warning.
- Many people with autism do not understand that other people have their own thoughts, feelings, plans and points of view so..... if I am angry and want to hit you, you must be angry and want to hit me too... this is frightening.
- All this means that social situations become unpredictable and can be confusing. This can lead to social isolation, exclusion and lack of opportunities.

So what makes Social Stories effective?

Carol Gray suggests that social stories are successful as they:

- Are visual
- Provide an individual with accurate information about those situations that he /she may find difficult or confusing
- Minimise the social aspects of teacher/student interactions involved in instruction.
- Present information as clearly as possible, taking away social interference in order to maximise learning. Any language is to the point and not too wordy.
- Describe, clearly, expected behaviours.

How can Social Stories be used?

Social Stories have a wide range of uses. These include:

- Describing a wide range of social situations, often teaching the child relevant social cues and or an appropriate response for that situation in what is a non threatening format
- Personalising or emphasising social skills covered as part of a social skills training programme
- Translating goals and targets (possibly written by pupils) into understandable steps
- Explaining the “fictional” qualities of commercial stories / movies etc., identifying realistically appropriate from inappropriate interactions depicted in those stories
- Teaching routine as well as helping students to accommodate changes in routine or “forgetting”. It helps to prepare for a new experience
- Teaching academic material against a realistic, social backdrop - assisting students in relating and generalising learned skills to real situations;
- Address a wide variety of behaviours, including aggression, fear and obsessions and compulsions.

How else can Social Stories help?

Social stories provide a script for staff working with a child. The information is consistent so staff are clear what to do. This provides reassurance to the child.

What kinds of topics can a Social Story cover?

Social stories may be used to address a seemingly infinite number of topics. For example, a person with ASD may asks a question or makes a comment that indicates that he/ she is misreading a given situation

In education settings, they may describe skills that are part of the academic or social curriculums.

Often, Social Stories are used to describe a classroom routine or variations to that routine (e.g. a Social story may describe factors that may lead to the cancellation of a school trip, fire drills, assemblies, special events or the use of supply teachers).

Social Stories also serve a purpose that is equally important and frequently overlooked - **acknowledging achievement**. Written praise is likely to be far more meaningful for children with ASD than its verbal counterpart. It also creates a permanent record of what the child does well – information that is important in building a positive self esteem.

Abandon all assumptions!!

People with autism find it difficult to make accurate judgements about what people around them are feeling. Generally, people get a lot of social information from the environment (central coherence) and have the ability to get the gist of what's going on. This is not the same for people with autism so it is not possible to make accurate judgements about what people with autism are thinking. .

The first step to teaching social skills is to ensure, beyond all assumptions, that the child with ASD has accurate and specific information.

How do you write a Social Story?

Support is available from The Autism and Complex Communications Disorder Team and The Educational Psychology Service.