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Social Stories: An Introduction

Written by and permission to reprint given by Gary J. Heffner.

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I remember using "social stories" when my kids were little. Of course, none of us called them social stories back then - it was just good parenting. "Charity, we are going to the doctor's office tomorrow. He will give you a shot so you do not catch a disease. The shot will hurt. I will be there and I will hold you if you want me to. The nurse will probably give you a sucker when we are done." I know it doesn't fit Carol Gray's structured approach to a social story but it prepares the child for an uncertain event, shares important information, and gives her a strategy to deal with it.

Carol Gray defines a social story in this way: "A social story is a short story that describes a situation in terms of relevant social cues and common responses, providing a student with accurate and specific information regarding what occurs in a situation, and why." (Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations, Social Stories Unlimited TM, 1997, page 1).

Social stories work especially well for children with autism because often they lack the ability to see situations from the perspective of others (Theory of Mind), may miss important social cues ("tunnel vision", Stimulus Over selectivity, and social interaction deficits), they tend to dislike surprises, and tend to respond well to repetition. A social story is designed for the specific child and may include things the child values and is interested in. For example, if a child likes dinosaurs, you could include dinosaurs as characters in a story about going to school, etc. Children with autism are often visual learners, so the story can include drawings, pictures, and even real objects.

Carol Gray recommends a specific pattern to a social story (see the links below and/or attend one of her presentations). The pattern includes several descriptive and perspective sentences. Descriptive sentences clearly define where a situation occurs, who is involved, what they are doing, and why. They are used to describe a social setting, step-by-step directions for completing an activity, etc. Example of a descriptive sentence: "Sometimes at school, the fire alarm goes off. The fire alarm is a loud bell that rings when there is a real fire or when we are practicing getting out of the building. The teachers, janitors, and principal all help us to line up and go outside quickly. The fire alarm is loud so that everyone can hear it. Sometimes I think it is too loud."

Perspective sentences describe the internal states of people, their thoughts, feelings, and mood. Perspective sentences present others' reactions to a situation so that the individual can learn how others perceive various events. Example of a perspective sentence: "The fire alarm does not bother all people. The teachers, janitors, and principal may not understand how much the fire alarm bothers me. Sometimes they get mad if I do not move quickly or get confused. Their job is to get me outside quickly so I am safe in case there is a real fire."

Two other types of sentences are sometime used: directive and control sentences. These sentences may not be used at all and if they are, Carol Gray recommends using them in the ration of 0 - 1 directive or control sentence(s) for every 2 - 5 descriptive and/or perspective sentences. Too many directive and/or control sentences turn a social story into an "anti-social story" of demands and commands. As Carol Gray would say, "Try the decaf!"

Directive sentences are always stated in positive terms and are individualized statements of desired responses. Directive sentences often follow descriptive sentences, sharing information about what is expected as a response to a given cue or situation. Directive sentences often begin with "I can try..." "I will try..." or "I will work on...." Example of a directive sentence: "I will work on staying calm when the fire alarm rings."

Control sentences identify strategies the person can use to remember and apply the social story. A control sentence should be written or inspired by the child. Example of a control sentence: "When the fire alarm rings, will think about a the dinosaurs following each other out of the forest to escape the burning meteors."



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When the story is put together, you may include pictures that mean something to the child and will help them remember the story. The story can be used as a bedtime story, a story for story time, etc. It may be read daily by the child or read to the child at various times during the week. Carol Gray reports fantastic results with her stories.

Social stories are not just for children. I have used a modified version of the stories to prepare an adult with autism and mental retardation for a visit to his physician (who planned a very invasive procedure). The result was absolutely perfect and the man was a perfect gentleman with his physician. To learn more about social stories, visit the following web sites:

Internet References on Social Stories

Social Stories by Meredyth Goldberg Edelson, PhD - Center for the Study of Autism summary on Social Stories. Provides a good summary of the structure of a social story, a link to The Morning News, and Carol Gray's address.

<http://www.autism.org/stories.html>

The New Social Story Book by Carol Gray - Order Carol Gray's newest book from Future Horizons.

<http://www.futurehorizons->

[autism.com/detail.asp?PRODUCT_ID=The+New+Social+Story+Book+%2D+Illustrated+Edition&SRCH_ID=&SRCH_DESCRIPTION=Social+Stories&SRCH_MANUFACTURER=ALL&SRCH_SUBJECT=ALL&SRCH_CATEGORY=ALL&PageNo=1&RowCount=6](http://www.futurehorizons-autism.com/detail.asp?PRODUCT_ID=The+New+Social+Story+Book+%2D+Illustrated+Edition&SRCH_ID=&SRCH_DESCRIPTION=Social+Stories&SRCH_MANUFACTURER=ALL&SRCH_SUBJECT=ALL&SRCH_CATEGORY=ALL&PageNo=1&RowCount=6)

Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations - From the Online Asperger Syndrome Information and Support (O.A.S.I.S.) web site. Includes links to Carol Gray videos, books, and newsletter.

<http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/socialcarolgray.html>

Newsletter #2 - Powerful, Effective Social Stories - An article by Lee Irwin, PhD. Includes helpful information on how to write simple, effective social stories. <http://www2.ari.net/leeirwin/news02.html>

Social Stories . . . What They Are and How They Can Help - An article by Reva Schafer, MEd. Provides a good definition and description of social stories, when to use them, and some neat examples.

<http://home.ican.net/~cha/strategies/socstor.htm>

Personalized Stories - From Unspoken Communications. The author will write a personalized story for your child, include language your child understands, pictures you supply, and prepare it in laminated book form for you and your child. Includes some sample pages. The author plans to charge \$20 a day for her work on your book - not sure what that would amount to nor do I have any references or experience with this author. Worth a look for ideas, if nothing else.

<http://unspoken.penguinpowered.com/autism/books.php>

What Are Social Stories? - A brief description of social stories, some good links to social skills information, and a list of social storybooks. Some of the social story links do not work. <http://www.zoomnet.net/~tdotson/socialstories.html>

Examples of Social Stories - Three short social stories.

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/mdenoncourt/examples.htm>

Sumlin Stories - Richard Saffran provides an excellent list of many social sentences or "Sumlin stories" (not technically Social Stories - but close) on a variety of topics. Includes some good notes on applied behavior Analysis (ABA) strategies.

<http://rsaffran.tripod.com/social.html>



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Social Stories.com - A description of several prepared books with "social stories" on a variety of topics. Titles include: "Going to the Dentist," "Going to the Doctor," and "Going to the Grocery Store." Each title costs \$14.95. I have not reviewed the books nor have any experience with the author. Interesting pictures and ideas though.

<http://www.socialstories.com/>

Social Stories - From the Four Points web site. Cool and cute little social stories. <http://www.fourpointsinc.com/social.html>

The Sumlin Social Stories - A repeat of Sumlin Stories (above) but in an easier to follow format. Includes a link to Playskills Home, which has several neat play skills ABA drills.

<http://melindasmith.home.mindspring.com/websocial/sumsocial.htm>

The Links Between Social Stories, Comic Strip Conversations and the Cognitive Models of Autism and Asperger's Syndrome - Tony Attwood shares an excellent article on why social stories work.

<http://www.tonyattwood.com/paper5.htm>

Social Skill Stories: A Low-Tech Method for Increasing Appropriate Social Behavior - From the Training and Technical Assistance Center at Old Dominion University. A brief article on how social stories become "assistive technology."

http://www.ttac.odu.edu/newsletter/fm00_atech.html

Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations, Unique Methods to Improve Social Understanding – A comprehensive article on social stories (looks like Carol Gray's material) from www.autism.net . Includes the Social Story Quiz.

<http://www.autism.net/html/gray.html>

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