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Behavioral Issues and the Use of Social Stories

(BBB Autism; printable article #46)

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A frequent positive programming recommendation for an individual with autism, Asperger's syndrome, or other pervasive developmental disorders is that the family or the staff of an agency develop one or more "social stories" to present particular information or to address specific situations. Such a recommendation may reflect either a proactive or reactive programming stance. Regardless of its purpose, the development and use of social stories is often a task that is underestimated in terms of its complexity, or one that may simply be misunderstood. This article will attempt to identify some of the issues that should be considered when using this intervention tool.

"Social stories" have become a popular programming buzzword. Trainings about the development and use of social stories can be quite varied experiences on the in-service market. This may occur because "social stories" is both a program-specific term and a generic term. The program-specific term was initially used by Carol Gray as a descriptor for her intervention strategies. (Gray has presented her information at many conferences and has published various print resources regarding the programming and materials developed and piloted within her school district. Her materials are presently available from Future Horizons and are identified under the rubric of Social Stories Unlimited™, although most people simply use the term "social stories.")

"Social stories" as a generic term currently refers to print- or text- supported picture material that presents information or scripting. The informal intervention concept pre-dates the program introduced by Gray. The informal "stories" may or may not be stories in the sense of having a plot or a narrative form. Rather, they may be descriptive of a situation, or may outline the steps in a sequence or process. Some forms might be called "social scripts." People who talk about social stories in this generic sense may or may not be utilizing any of the guidelines of Gray's program. These "stories/ scripts," however, can also represent a legitimate means of providing visual information and support for a person with a social/language-processing disability.

Whether one chooses to follow Gray's program or not, much can be learned by looking at her program and at the considerations regarding its implementation. The development of social stories, as defined by Gray, places a central focus on writing the stories in a positive tone. A given story may have an impact on the reduction of a specific behavior because of the information and insight it provides for the person with autism. The stories are not meant to be judgmental or to be strongly directive. In order to avoid the latter tone, Gray developed her published guidelines regarding the ratio of sentence types for each social story. The stories try to help the person with a autism spectrum disorder have a better understanding of the parameters of a problem situation and to have some idea of how to cope, manage, or operate within that situation.

Social stories usually are not a unilateral means of changing behavior or the performance of the person with autism, however. More typically, social stories may represent only one intervention strategy out of several that may be needed in order to impact or reverse a given situation. For example, if John experiences much frustration in the classroom and he releases some of his tension by hitting other students on the playground, his positive program might involve many components. It might include a social story about being a good friend and sharing, but it may also include a reassessment of his academic skills and the subsequent addition of extra academic support, the adaptation of work assignments, in-service training for support staff to increase daily instances of positive interaction, general instruction regarding social skills, and specific teaching of playground games and rules in order to facilitate successful outdoor play. The social story might not be effective enough by itself to modify a complex situation such as John's frustration and aggression, but it might have a powerful impact when combined with other tailored strategies.



Factors to consider when writing a social story for an individual include the following:

- Know that social stories will not work with everyone. For some individuals, they may be inappropriate; for others, they may be especially inadequate, if used as a sole intervention tool.
- Know Gray's guidelines and the literature regarding the writing of good social stories, even if you choose not to use her approach.
- Gather appropriate information about the complexities of the situation before attempting to write a social story.
- Consider doing a positive programming behavior analysis with the key people involved in a situation before writing a social story.
- Identify the cluster of strategies needed for circumventing or managing a certain situation. The development of a social story could be a high or low priority, depending on the individual situation. One or more stories may be needed when the strategy is appropriate.
- A story should only be written if one has some idea of WHY, that is, for what purpose(s) the individual is engaging in a specific behavior. A story may have a totally inappropriate focus or present an irrelevant set of information if the person is engaging in a behavior for a different reason than what is covered in the social story.
- A behavior analysis would also identify the frequency of a behavior and if it is specific to a given setting or person. Sometimes ignoring a specific behavior is a better positive programming strategy than making an effort to call attention to it.
- View the social stories in the books available from Future Horizons only as examples of how to write a positive story. It is important to remember that each story should be written for a specific child. The child or student's behavior may have different factors that need to be considered or addressed than what appear in the example story. Many of the sample stories were written, under Gray's supervision, by high school students in psychology classes. Family members and adult staff, who have broader experiences and more personal knowledge of the person for whom the stories are intended, may incorporate some different insights and information into their narratives.

Have other people review the story before presenting it to the person with autism. Consider involving a speech language pathologist in the review process since language comprehension is frequently an issue. The reviewer will want to consider:

- *The agenda or purpose of the story.* Is the story written with the objective of promoting self management, positive self esteem, a better understanding of the seemingly confusing world around the individual, and with recognition of what is difficult for people with autism?
- *The level of language used in the story.* Does the child know the vocabulary? Is the grammar too complex or are sentences too detailed? Conversely, is the text level too simple for someone with more sophisticated language skills?
- *The processing demands of the story.* Are some steps or any information missing? Does the individual have to make inferences that he or she cannot easily make? Is the story line brief but too complex? Is the individual missing some prior experiences or basic understanding that will make comprehension more difficult? Is it clear how the individual might handle a situation in a positive manner in the future?
- *A positive message.* Is the story more of a "Thou shalt not . . ." commandment than a positive source of information? Does the thrust of the story depend on the individual being empathetic and understanding of the feelings of others (something that is difficult for the person with autism)? Does the story try to foster a feeling of guilt or shame, for example, "Don't do X so Mommy will be proud of you"?
- *The plan for the use of social stories.* Has a plan been devised about who will introduce the social story, who will supervise use, and who will monitor and revise the plan or story, as needed?

Just as social stories may be one piece of a behavior or positive programming plan, it is also important to remember that social stories represent one strategy when attempting to teach social skills. Multiple strategies are usually needed in this area as well. Numerous books, articles, and materials are available as resources for developing and implementing a social skills training program.



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Resources Regarding Social Stories:

Monographs:

Carol Gray publications: **New Social Stories, Taming the Recess Jungle, and Comic Strip Conversations**

Available from: Future Horizons, 720 North Fielder, Arlington, TX 76012, Phone: 800-489- 0727, Fax: 817-277-2270

Articles and Book Chapters: Gray, C. (1993). **Social stories: Improving responses of students with autism with accurate social information.** Focus on Autistic Behavior, 8, 1-10.

Gray, C. (1996). **Teaching children with autism to "read" social situations.** In K. Quill (Ed.), **Teaching students with autism: Methods to enhance learning, communication, and socialization** (pp. 219-242). New York, NY: Delmar Publishers.

Gray, C. (1996). **Social assistance.** In A. Fullerton (Ed.), **Higher functioning adolescents and young people with autism** (pp. 71-89). Austin, TX: Pro Ed Inc.

Newsletter:

Morning News, c/o Carol Gray, Jenison Public Schools, 2140 Bauer Road, Jenison, MI 49428

Resources Regarding Positive Programming and Positive Behavior Support Components:

Books:

Carr, E. G., Levin, L., McConnachie, G., Carlson, J. I., Kemp, D. C., & Smith, C. E. (1994). **Communication-based intervention for problem behavior: A user's guide for producing positive change.** Baltimore, MD: Paul H. rookes Publishing Company.

Demchak, M. A., & Bossert, K. W. (1996). **Assessing problem behaviors.** Washington, DC: American Association for Mental Retardation.

Koegel, L. K., Koegel, R. L., & Dunlap, G. (1996). **Positive behavioral support: Including people with difficult behavior in the community.** Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

Koegel, R. L., & Koegel, L. L. (1995). **Teaching children with autism: Strategies for initiating positive interactions and improving learning opportunities.** Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

Quill, K. (Ed.). (1996). **Teaching students with autism: Methods to enhance learning, communication, and socialization.** New York, NY: Delmar Publishers.

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