

Using Social Stories to Support Understanding, Emotional Regulation, and Participation

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Session Overview

By the end of this session, you will:

- Understand what social stories are and their purpose
- Know the core writing principles
- Identify when and how to use them effectively

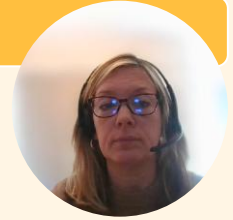


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What Are Social Stories?



Developed by Carol Gray (1991)

Short, descriptive stories that explain a situation or expectation

Aim to build understanding and reduce anxiety

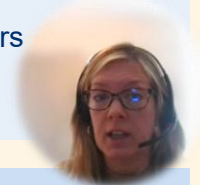
Used widely with autistic children

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- Personal space
- Following group or classroom plans
- Using kind words and positive communication
- Turn-taking and sharing
- Making friends or starting conversations
- Managing anger or frustration
- Potty training and personal hygiene
- Safety (e.g., crossing the street, using scissors safely, riding the bus)
- Coping with anxiety or changes/routines (e.g., transitions, fire drills)
- Problem-solving and independent conflict resolution

- Understanding uniqueness and differences, including diagnosis awareness
- Participating in group activities or working together
- Saying hello and greeting others
- Asking for help appropriately
- Dealing with loss or tragedies



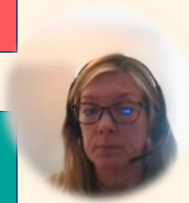
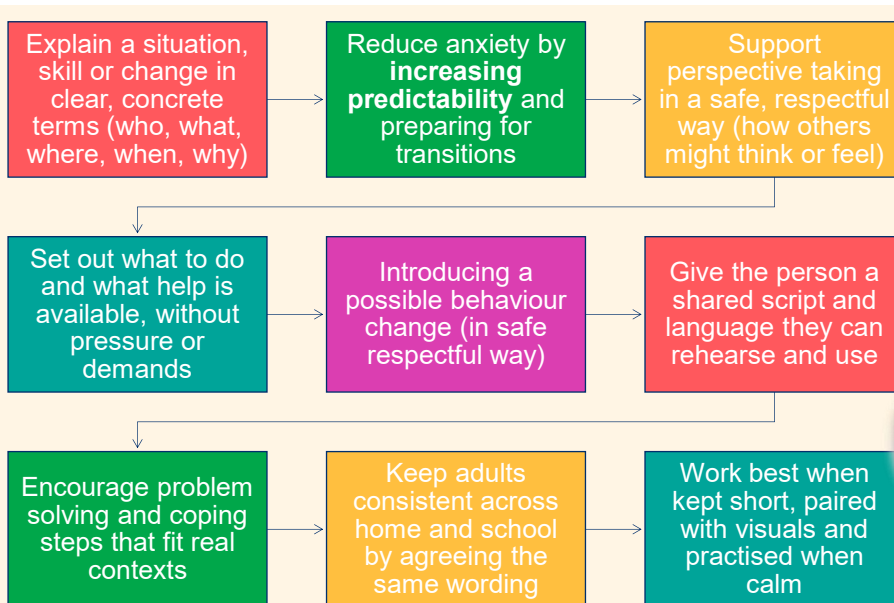
Settings for Social Stories

- School and classroom routines (raising hand, lining up, breaktime)
- Home routines (getting dressed, brushing teeth, mealtime)
- Community and unfamiliar environments (going to the doctor, grocery shopping)

Frequent Social Story Topics & Settings

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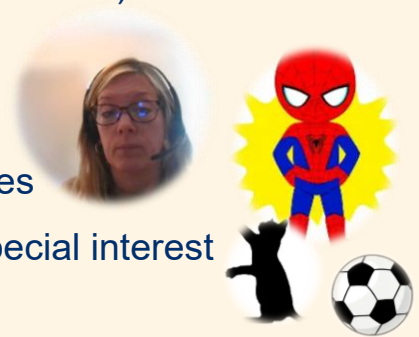
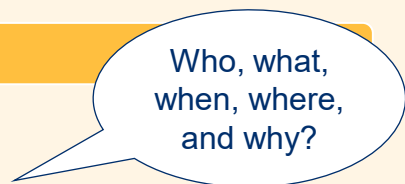
Purpose of Social Stories

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Writing Social Stories

- Focus on one area at a time
- Social Stories are written from a first person (e.g. I/we go to school) or third person perspective (e.g. children go to school)
- They typically contain 3 to 12 short sentences
- They use literal and accurate vocabulary
- Can use repetition, rhythm and rhyme or images
- Consider the use of a favourite character or special interest

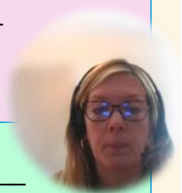


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Sentence Types in Social Stories

<p>Descriptive sentences: Answers the 'wh' questions- where does the situation occur, who is it with, what happens and why? Descriptive sentences need to present information from an accurate and objective perspective.</p>	<p>Every _____, we study _____</p> <p>When we feel anxious, we might _____</p>
<p>Perspective sentences: Describe the internal status of the person or persons involved- their thoughts, feelings, beliefs or moods.</p>	<p>I might feel _____</p> <p>Some people might believe _____</p>
<p>Directive sentences: Gently offer a response or series of responses to the situation. It is important that these sentences have a positive focus. They can also affirm what the response will lead to.</p>	<p>I can try _____</p> <p>I will work on _____</p> <p>This will help me _____</p> <p>This will prevent me _____</p>
<p>Cooperative/affirmative sentences: Statements about who might be able to help in this situation and/or why it is good to act this way in this situation.</p>	<p>If I am struggling, I can ask _____</p> <p>It makes me happy to _____</p>

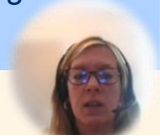


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Example Social Story – Playing Football



<p>Descriptive</p>	<p>At break times I play football with other students. Some of these are my age. Others are younger than me, including Sam. Football has rules about how and when to touch other players (e.g., only using open hands, tackling safely, no grabbing clothes or arms). Grabbing during sports can hurt others or make them feel unsafe.</p>
<p>Perspective</p>	<p>When I grab Sam, I sometimes grab him too hard. Usually, I am just having a bit of fun. My grabbing hurts Sam and makes him feel scared.</p>
<p>Directive</p>	<p>When I feel like grabbing Sam, I can remember to use football moves like blocking, intercepting or tagging. I can take a deep breath and count to three. I can ask for help or a break if it feels too hard not to grab.</p>
<p>Affirmative</p>	<p>Playing fairly and following rules helps everyone enjoy the game and want to play together again.</p>



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Story Structure



A beginning

The title
The introduction
What people do

A middle

Why they do it

An end

Common responses
What behaviour is anticipated

- Use more descriptions (descriptive sentences) and explanations (perspective sentences) than instructions (directive sentences).
- Too many directive sentences and child finds it “controlling” and punitive.
- Use 5 descriptive/perspective sentences to 2 directive sentences.
- For younger children, or those who find it hard to focus or learn new things, keep stories short and use simple sentences.
- For older children, or those who are more confident learners, you can add more detail and use longer, more complex sentences.



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Using Images



- Images can support children in understanding the content of a Social Story.
- Make sure pictures are purposeful and clearly related to the message (they should add meaning, not just visual appeal).
- Check that images are appropriate and safe (think about how your child might interpret what they see).

<p>Sometimes, there is too much noise. It is loud and it bothers my ears.</p> <p>When it is noisy in the classroom, it is easy to get confused and frustrated.</p>	<p>When it's too noisy, I can:</p> <p>Find a quiet spot</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Take deep breaths.</p>	<p>When it's too loud, I can:</p> <p>SAY:</p>
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Mummy will need to go to the Exeter Oncology Centre for her chemo.
Oncology is a type of medicine that specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer.
Mummy may also have to take some medicine at home.



The doctors hope that the chemo will get rid of the sick cells so that the healthy cells can grow.

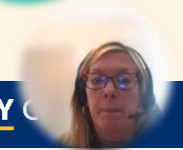
The chemo might make mummy feel poorly and tired on some days and on other days she may feel fine.



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When to Use Social Stories

- Preparing for change or new events
- Teaching social understanding (turn-taking, greetings)
- Reducing anxiety around specific settings
- Supporting transitions after behaviour incidents
- Use at quiet time. Review and share when the child is calm
- Go back to the story



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Writing Steps



1. Write with the child in mind (what does the child need to understand / know?)
2. Keep the story accurate but **positive**
3. Use 3rd person to share negative information in a positive way e.g. 'Many children find it hard to...'
4. Use language that is factual, clear, and simple.
5. Let the child know who can help them
6. Let the child know what they can do, not just what is not allowed.
7. What images would you use?



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Example Social Story – Kind Hands



Descriptive	<p>Many children find it hard to remember to use kind hands, especially when they are excited, angry, or frustrated.</p> <p>Our hands can do lots of things. We can use our hands to wave, high-five, help a friend, or play games.</p>
Perspective	<p>Sometimes, when we feel big feelings, we might want to hit, push, grab, or squeeze others with our hands. This can happen to anyone—it is okay to feel this way, but it's not okay to hurt others.</p>
Directive	<p>When I feel like I want to use my hands in an unkind way, I can try something different. I can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Squeeze a soft toy • Take a deep breath • Ask for help or space • Use my words to tell someone how I feel



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Example Social Story - Moving House



		Moving House	
Descriptive	<p>I live at 5 Busy Road. Next week I am moving to 22 New Street. We are moving to a house that has three bedrooms instead of two. This means my mum, my brother and I can have a bedroom each.</p>		<p>I live at 5 Busy Road. Next week I am moving to 22 New Street.</p> <p>We are moving to a house that has three bedrooms instead of two.</p> <p>This means my mum, my brother and I can have a bedroom each.</p>
Perspective	<p>My mum is excited about the house move and is looking forward to having a bigger house. I might feel worried about being somewhere new.</p>	 	<p>My mum is excited about the house move and is looking forward to having a bigger house.</p> <p>I might feel worried about being somewhere new.</p>
Directive	<p>I will make plans for my new room to help me stay focused on what I will like about having a new room.</p>		<p>I will make plans for my new room to help me stay focused on what I will like about having a new room.</p>

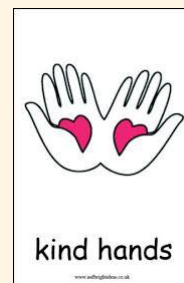


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Delivering the Story



- Read in a calm, positive tone
- Review regularly, not only before target events
- Pair with visual supports if needed
- Fade use gradually as understanding develops
- Use again when needed



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Customising for Individual Needs



- Use language and words that your child will understand
- 3rd person statements may work better for older or demand avoidant children, e.g. children go to school rather than I go to school
- Explain words they might not understand e.g. 'interrupting means talking when someone is already speaking.'
- Use words like 'might' / 'scheduled' / 'sometimes' or 'most', 'many', 'lots of' to provide flexibility.
- Use photos or drawings the child recognises
- Embed emotion understanding gently
- Adapt pronouns and settings as needed
- Once you have shared the social story with the child, revise it if necessary to improve clarity and meaning.



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Everyone is different

Some people have blonde hair and some people have brown hair

Some people wear glasses and some people don't

It's ok to be different

Many people have a diagnosis of something from the doctor

Something in their body works differently than other people

Some people have a diagnosis about how they think or the way their

mind works

you have a diagnosis about how your mind works. You have

autism.

Autism means that your brain works differently to some people

Autism means:

•You might find noises sound louder to you

•You might find peoples words hard to understand

•You might think about one thing a lot

Personalise to show relatable famous people with autism and tell the child what their strengths are and what they need help with



Everyone is different

It is ok to be different

Made using Widget online <https://widgitonline.com/en/home>

Example Social Story – Autism

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Common Pitfalls



Avoid:

- Too much text or complexity
- Using 2nd person statements (e.g. 'You go to school').
- Corrective tone ("I must")
- Using words like should/ shouldn't, must/ mustn't, naughty/ bad/ inappropriate.
- Introducing new skills in a story
- Overuse—dilutes impact



Best outcomes are achieved when stories are individualised and delivered consistently

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Core Principles



- Social Stories work best when they match the unique needs of each child.
- Describe, don't prescribe
- Include more descriptive than directive sentences
- Write from the child's perspective ("I" or 3rd person neutral)
- Use clear, concrete language
- Match story length to attention span



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Summary

Social Stories help children:

- Understand situations
- Manage anxiety
- Feel safe and prepared

Success depends on:

- Accuracy
- Calm tone
- Individualisation



Reflect:

- What situations might benefit from a social story?
- What makes a story truly supportive rather than corrective?



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Further information

- Website of the founder of Social Stories, Carol Gray:
 - <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/>
- Information about using Social Stories on the National Autistic Society website:
 - <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/autism-know-how/training/enhance-your-autism-knowledge-and-practice/social-stories>
- Free printable social stories and videos:
 - <https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/category/social-stories/>
- YouTube channel with Social Stories featuring the puppet Scout
 - <https://www.youtube.com/@ScoutsSocialStories>



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