

Social stories

I freely admit this is 'nicked' from the National Autism Society's website and can be found at:

www.autism.org.uk/16261

So all credit goes to them for this useful article!

Social stories are ways to help people with autism develop greater social understanding.

Here, we'll tell you a bit more about this technique and how you can produce your own.

(We use the term 'autism' in this information to include all autism spectrum disorders, including Asperger syndrome.)

What are social stories?

Social stories were created by Carol Gray in 1991 to help teach social skills to people with autism. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.

Social stories: their uses and benefits

Social stories are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.

Social stories have a huge range of applications, including:

- to develop self-care skills (eg: how to clean teeth, wash hands or get dressed), social skills (eg: sharing, asking for help, saying thank you, interrupting) and academic abilities
- to help a person with autism to understand how others might behave or respond in a particular situation, and therefore how they might be expected to behave
- to help others understand the perspective of a person with autism and why they may respond or behave in a particular way
- to help a person to cope with changes to routine and unexpected or distressing events (eg: absence of teacher, moving house, thunderstorms)
- to provide positive feedback to a person about an area of strength or achievement in order to develop self-esteem
- as a behavioural strategy (eg: what to do when angry, how to cope with obsessions).

The following is an example of a social story to help a child's understanding of nightmares from Carol Gray's *The new social stories book* (1994).

“Nightmares

Sometimes I may have a nightmare when I am sleeping. Nightmares are the same as a dream, but more scary.

Events in nightmares do not really happen. They are like pictures in my mind.

It is all right if I am scared. I may try telling myself it is all in my mind. It is only a dream. Adults can help children with nightmares, too. It is okay to ask an adult for help with nightmares.

When I wake up, I will see that I am all right.”

How do social stories help people with autism?

- If you're writing a social story for a person with autism, you'll need to think about how they perceive different situations. This can also increase your understanding & empathy (Gray, 1994).
- Many people with autism are good at visual learning, and like social stories because they're written down. Social stories can also be illustrated.
- Social stories present information in a literal, 'concrete' way, which may improve a person's understanding of a previously difficult or ambiguous situation or activity.
- Social stories can help with sequencing (what comes next in a series of activities) and 'executive functioning' (planning and organising) - difficulties experienced by many people with autism.
- By providing information about what might happen in a particular situation and some guidelines for behaviour, you can increase structure in a person's life and thereby reduce anxiety.

Who can benefit from social stories?

Originally designed for children at the higher functioning end of the autism spectrum, social stories can also be helpful for young people and adults (Gray, 1994). In addition there is research to suggest that people with autism who experience greater difficulties and associated learning disabilities may benefit from the use of social stories (Swaggart et al, 1995).

Introducing and using social stories

- 1. Present the social story to the person at a time when everyone is feeling calm and relaxed.** This will maximise their learning and help them develop positive associations with the story. Social stories should never be used as a punishment for misbehaviour.
- 2. Use an honest and straightforward approach when introducing the story,** eg I have written this story for you. It is about thunderstorms. Let's read it together now. Soon we will review it.
- 3. Review the story as often as required** - some social stories will be reviewed initially once a day, others prior to the situation for which they were written.
- 4. Maintain a positive, reassuring and patient attitude when reviewing the story.** This is essential for the social story to have the desired effect.
- 5. When reviewing the story, use a calm and friendly tone of voice** and make sure the environment is quiet, comfortable and free of distractions.
- 6. Involve others in the review of the story where appropriate.** For example, a story that is focused on a situation or activity at school could also be reviewed with the child's teacher or learning support assistant.
- 7. Introduce one story at a time to maximise learning** and to make sure the person does not become overwhelmed with information.
- 8. There are two main ways of 'fading' a social story:**
 - increase the period of time between reviewing it, ie; if a story was initially reviewed once per day, increase the review period to every two days, then every three or four days, and so on
 - change the content of the story to reflect the person's new skills. For example, remove directive sentences from the story, or rewrite them as partial sentences where the person is required to recall the missing information. However, some people with autism may find such changes distressing; alternative approaches should be explored if this is the case.

How to write a social story

These guidelines give detailed information about the structure, content and implementation of social stories.

The information here is based on Carol Gray's social story guidelines, published in *The new social story book* (1994), and can also be found on [The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding website](#).

Picture the goal

Consider the social story's purpose. For example, the goal may be to teach a child to cover their mouth when coughing.

Now think about what the child needs to understand to achieve this goal. For example, they need to understand why covering their mouth when coughing is important, ie; it stops germs from being spread which may make other people sick.

Gather information

The next stage is to gather information about the person including their age, interests, attention span, level of ability and understanding.

As well as this, collect information about the situation you want to describe in your social story. For example: where does the situation occur, who is it with, how does it begin and end, how long does it last, what actually happens in the situation and why?

Tailor the text

A social story is made up of several different types of sentences that are presented in a particular combination. Sentence types are described in the Figure 1 below:

Figure 1

Sentence type	What is it?	Examples
Descriptive	Answers the 'wh' questions <i>where</i> does the situation occur, <i>who</i> is it with, <i>what</i> happens and <i>why</i> ? Descriptive sentences need to present information from an accurate and objective perspective.	<i>Christmas Day is 25 December.</i> <i>Most children go to school.</i> <i>Sometimes I get sick.</i>

Perspective	Refers to the opinions, feelings, ideas, beliefs or physical/mental well being of others.	<i>My Mum and Dad <u>know</u> when it is time for me to go to bed.</i> <i>Teachers <u>like</u> it when students raise their hand to ask a question in the classroom.</i> <i>Some children <u>believe</u> in Santa Claus.</i>
Directive	Gently offers a response or range of responses for behaviour in a particular situation. It is important that these sentences have a positive focus and are constructed in ways which allow flexibility (ie avoid statements like <u>I must</u> or <u>I have to</u>).	<i>I <u>will try</u> to cover my mouth when I cough.</i> <i>I <u>might like</u> to play outside during lunchtime.</i> <i>When I am angry, I <u>can</u>:</i> § <i>take three deep breaths</i> § <i>go for a walk</i> § <i>jump on the trampoline.</i>
Affirmative	Statements that enhance the meaning of the previous sentence (which may be a descriptive, perspective or directive sentence) and can be used to emphasise the importance of the message or to provide reassurance to the person.	(I will try to hold an adults hand when crossing the road). <i>This is very important.</i> (Thunder can be very loud). <i>This is ok.</i>
Co-operative	Sentences which identify how others may be of assistance to the person (developed by Dr Demetrious Haracopos in Denmark).	<i>Mum and Dad can help me wash my hands.</i> <i>An adult will help me when I cross the road.</i> <i>My teacher will help me to try to stay calm in class.</i>
Control	Statements written by the person with autism to provide personal meaning to a particular situation and to assist them to recall and apply information.	<i>My body needs food several times per day; just like a steam train needs coal to stay running.</i>
Partial	Incomplete sentences, which allow the person to guess the next step in a situation, and may be used with descriptive, perspective, directive, affirmative, co-operative and control sentences.	<i>My name is _____ (descriptive sentence)</i> <i>Mum and Dad will feel _____ if I finish all my dinner (perspective sentence)</i>

The sentence types described in the above table need to be put together in a particular combination to make a social story (referred to as the social story ratio).

In each story, there should be no more than one directive or control sentence and at least two (but no more than five) of the remaining sentence types.

The following is an example social story from *My social stories book* (2002, p.76), which illustrates the use of a variety of sentence types (indicated in brackets) using the social story ratio.

“What are unexpected noises?

There are many noises (descriptive).

Sometimes noises surprise me (descriptive). They are unexpected (descriptive).

Some unexpected noises are; telephones, doorbells, barking dogs, breaking glass, vacuum cleaners, slamming doors, honking horns, and thunder (descriptive).

These sounds are okay (affirmative). I will try to stay calm when I hear unexpected noises (directive).

Adults can tell me when the noise will stop (co-operative).”

Additional points to consider:

- social stories need to have an introduction, body and conclusion and should use positive language (ie; where possible, describe what should happen, rather than what should not)
- stories need to be as accurate as possible and should include words like sometimes and usually for situations where a particular outcome is not guaranteed
- stories should appeal to the interests of the person for whom they are written. Avoid using words that may cause the person anxiety or distress
- the content and presentation of social stories should be appropriate to the person's age and level of understanding.

The following are some pointers for tailoring social stories for people of different ages and abilities.

- If writing for a child, write from the first person perspective (**I** will try to wait until it is daytime before **I** get up in the morning).
- Pair age-appropriate photographs, picture symbols or drawings with text to help people who have difficulty reading or for younger children, as in Figure 2 at the bottom of this article.
- When writing for young people or adults, use the third person perspective (**they, he, she**) and adjust language and presentation accordingly. You could use a smaller font size, or present the story in columns as in a newspaper article.

Teach with the title

Select a title which accurately reflects the overall meaning of the story. Titles can be a question (What is lightning?) or a statement (Lightning), but need to communicate the most important concept of the story.

Figure 2: How to wash my hands

People usually wash their hands using soap and water. There are five steps I will try to follow when washing my hands. An adult can help me learn these steps.

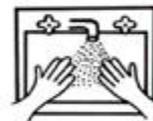
Turn tap on.



Put soap on hands.



Wash hands together under water.



Turn tap off.



Dry hands on towel.

