

Social Stories in the Early Years

What are social stories?

The concept of the 'Social Story' was developed by Carol Gray. Social stories are a means of helping a child to develop social understanding of situations and are often used to encourage appropriate behaviour. A social story is a description of a situation, event or activity which explains what is going to happen and how the child should respond.

It describes what is obvious to most of us but not obvious to those with who have difficulties with social understanding.

Why use social stories?

Social stories are useful in supporting children with social communication difficulties, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), who do not like change and have difficulty predicting what is about to happen. We know that children with these needs respond well to visual support and therefore the social story presents information in a structured, visual way.

The aim is to help the child understand a social situation and the motivations of other people. This may lead to a change in behaviour, but this should not be the main aim – we want to develop *understanding* rather than just compliance, as well as reducing anxiety.

Elements of a social story

A social story needs to be written in a specific style and format. It should include the following sections:

- **Title** which reflects overall meaning of the story and can be phrased as a question
- **Descriptive** which tells the child what happens, where and why. They are accurate, assumption free statements of fact
- **Perspective** which tells the child what other people feel in that situation. Not all social stories contain a perspective statement
- **Directive** which tells the child what to do
- **Affirmative** which emphasises what to do and provides reassurance
- **Co-operative** which tells the child how other people may be able to help.

Guidelines for writing social stories

- Focus on only one issue per story – keep it simple.
- Try to put yourself in the child's position and consider the situation from their point of view. If possible and appropriate, try to reflect the child's interests.
- Remember the child may interpret the information *literally*.
- Write from the first-person perspective – '*I ...*' (or you can use the child's name).
- Do not focus on negative behaviours and use positive language, focusing on what the child *should* do.

- Do not describe the feelings of the child (you're only guessing) unless they can express them themselves.
- All adults should use the same language (as written) to ensure consistency, paired with the visuals most appropriate for the individual child e.g. photos, symbols.
- Share the social story regularly, especially before the event.
- Remember to use words such as 'usually' or 'sometimes' – the child will hold us to whatever we have written and may interpret the statement literally.
- Highlight important details with illustrations (but *keep them simple and uncluttered*), e.g. photos or symbols. Generally, use one concept per page plus illustration.
- Keep the text simple and avoid 'unnecessary' punctuation, e.g. commas when writing for young children.
- There should be 0 – 1 directive sentences for every 2 – 5 descriptive, perspective or affirmative sentences.

For example:

Title: What may we do at carpet time?



Descriptive: At school I sometimes sit on the carpet with the other children

Perspective: Teachers usually like it when children sit on their bottom on the carpet and look at them.



Directive:

I will try to sit still on my carpet mat

I will try to be quiet



Co-operative: My teacher will try to help me to do 'good sitting'.



She will tell me when carpet time starts and has finished.



There are some other types of sentences that are described in the approach, but these are more appropriate for older children.

How to introduce the social story

- Choose a time when the child is calm and relaxed and keep the story time calm also.
- Sit beside/slightly behind the child so that they can focus on the story and not be confused by your social communications.
- Introduce the story casually, e.g. 'here's a story I wrote for you – I think you'll like it'.
- Get the child to show other adults and/or have other adults read the story with the child so that they know other important adults share the same information.
- Read the story with the child daily or just before the relevant activity occurs.
- You will need to share the story a lot initially but will gradually be able to reduce the frequency.

Further information

Please contact your link EYST teacher/Area SENCO for further information or training