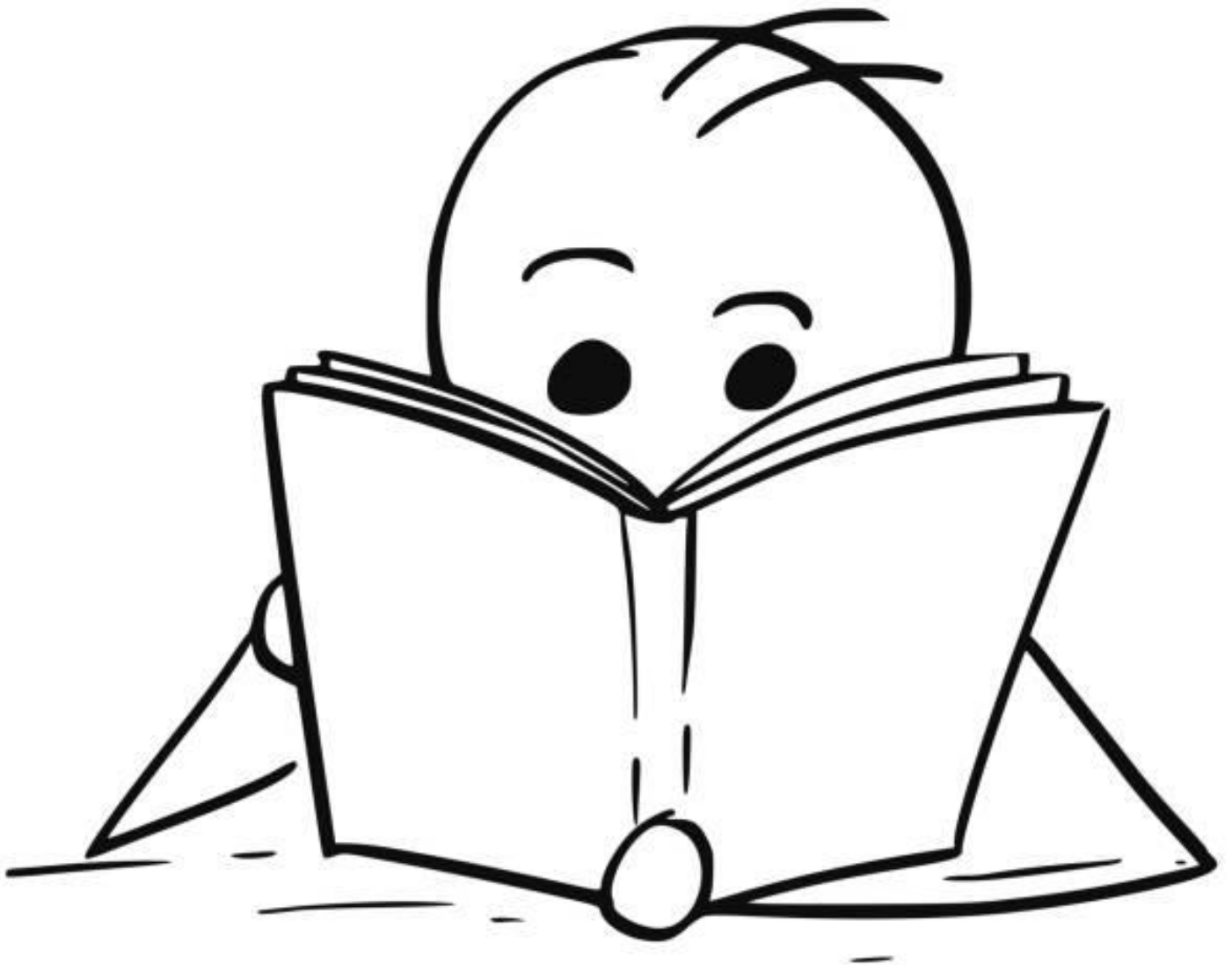


Social Stories

Guidance for using Social Stories produced by Kent Educational Psychology Service.



What are social stories?

Social stories were created by Carole Gray in 1991. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event, or activity which a child or young person may find difficult or confusing. A Social Story accurately describes a situation, event or activity and provides the child or young person with specific information about what occurs and why. They provide a visual tool to help the child or young person to better understand what happens during a specific situation. Social stories support the exchange of information between parents, professionals and children or young people in a way that is meaningful and understandable to the child or young person. They contain information that people often assume other people already know.

Like most stories, Social Stories have an introduction, body, and conclusion. They should be positive, use language that the child or young person understands, include pictures to support understanding and be tailored to the child or young person. Social Stories follow ten defining criteria which are outlined below.

What are social stories used for?

Social stories can be used for a variety of reasons, for example:

- To help an individual to understand how others may behave or respond in a certain situation.
- To prepare and support an individual to cope with changes to routine or unexpected or distressing events.
- To develop self-care skills, social skills, and academic abilities.
- To provide information on what behaviour is expected in specific situations.
- To help reduce anxiety.
- To provide an insight into the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of others, helping the child or young person to access information that others may assume they already know.
- To allow the child or young person opportunities to practise skills within a less pressured environment.
- To improve social understanding.
- To help others understand the perspective of the child or young person and why they may respond or behave in a particular way.
- To provide positive feedback to a person about an area of strength or an achievement.

Who can benefit from Social Stories?

Social Stories were initially written for individuals with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition. However, they can be used effectively with many individuals, including people with other social and communication difficulties and people with learning difficulties.

How to create a social story

Carole Gray (2015) outlined three basic steps and ten essential criteria for writing a Social Story.

Step 1 – Establish a goal and gather information:

Criterion 1: The Goal – The overall goal of a Social Story is to provide socially meaningful information that is accurate and presented in a positive and reassuring manner.

Criterion 2: Discovery and Gathering Information - Gathering information is an essential part of the Social Story process. It helps to establish a better understanding of the child or young person's needs and enables the author to see things from their perspective.

1) Try to understand the specific situation from the child or young person's perspective – talk to other people who know the child or young person well. Consider questions, such as 'why might the child or young person feel angry/frustrated/upset?' or 'what might be the misunderstanding?'. Completing observations or asking the child or young person to draw the situation or event can be helpful.

2) Decide on the topic for the Social Story and what information needs to be included to support the child or young person to understand the situation better. Gathering information can help to determine a more specific focus (e.g., if lunchtimes appear to be difficult, gathering information may highlight that the main difficulty is trying to find somewhere to sit in the dinner hall).

Step 2: Write the Social Story

Criterion 3: Parts of a Social Story – Social Stories should follow a logical sequence, providing information in a positive, simple, and clear way. The following parts should be included:

Title – Describes what the Social Story is about. It should be positive, simple, and engaging, focussing on what the child can do or is trying to do. 'Getting my hair cut'; 'Smelling fresh is great' and 'Why do people feel angry?' are examples of possible titles.

Like most stories, Social Stories should have an introduction, body, and conclusion:

Introduction – Identifies the topic in a positive way. For example, ‘Every day, I wash my body. This is how I keep my body smelling fresh’.

Main body – Adds detail, describes the issue, situation or event that has been identified as the focus of the story. For example, ‘Adults and children all wash to keep clean and smell fresh. I like to smell fresh all the time. After I have washed and dried my body, I use a roll-on or spray under my arms. It smells fantastic.’

Conclusion – Summarises the main message and ends on a positive note. For example, ‘I love to smell fresh and so do my friends and family.’

Criterion 4: Format – Use a format that is appropriate to the child or young person’s age and learning style. Consider:

- Using pictures and illustrations
- The most appropriate size of font and the amount of text displayed on each page.
- Use of audio support for reading.
- The length of the story – ensure it is an appropriate length for the child or young person’s attention span.
- The use of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition – some children or young people may enjoy this.

Criterion 5: A Social Story should have a patient and supportive ‘voice’.

- Use the first (e.g., ‘I’, ‘we’) and/or third person (e.g., ‘he’, ‘she’). Avoid statements which use ‘you’ as these can appear too directive. If negative behaviours need to be explained, use the third person. For example, ‘sometimes children find it difficult to share their toys’.
- Ensure the language used is non-judgemental and non-authoritarian. Avoid using words, such as ‘bad’, ‘naughty’ ‘should/shouldn’t’, ‘can’t/won’t’.
- Social Stories can use information from the past, present, or future.
- Ensure information included in the Social Story is literally accurate.
- Use accurate verbs. For example, use the word ‘buy’ instead of ‘get’ when talking about buying food from the shop.

Criterion 6: Six Questions that Guide Story Development – Social Stories tend to attempt to answer questions involving ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’, ‘where’ and ‘how’. It is helpful to consider these questions when gathering information for the Social Story.

Criterion 7: Types of Sentences

- 1) Descriptive sentences – describe the facts related to the situation in a clear and objective way (free of opinions and assumptions). For example, “Adults and children wash to keep clean and fresh’, or ‘Everyone needs to see a doctor from time to time’.
- 2) Perspective sentences – describe people’s thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. For example, ‘Many people enjoy going to the cinema’, or ‘When I try my best, my mum feels very proud of me’.
- 3) Coaching sentences -
 - a. Sentences that describe or suggest responses for the child or young person. For example, ‘I will try to put my hand up when I want to speak to my teacher in class’.
 - b. Sentences that suggest or describe responses for the caregiver. For example, ‘Mrs X can help me to use the soap when I am washing my hands’.
 - c. Sentences that are developed by the child or young person. For example, ‘I can draw in my special drawing book when I am feeling sad’.
- 4) Affirmative Sentences – Positive phrases that enhance the meaning of another sentence or reinforce an important point. For example, ‘this is okay’, ‘this is very important’.
- 5) Partial Sentences – Sentences with missing words included to help establish the child or young person’s level of understanding.

A Social Story does not need to include all these sentence types. It must contain at least one descriptive sentence in combination with some of the other sentence types.

Criterion 8 – Social Stories must be constructive and helpful. They should not simply list instructions telling the child or young person what to do. Carole Gray created a formula relating to the balance of sentences to ensure that the Social Story describes rather than directs:

The rule states:

$$\frac{\text{No of sentences that describe}}{\text{No of coaching sentences}} \geq 2$$

Descriptive sentences

Perspective sentences

Affirmative sentences

} ‘Sentences that describe’

To check if your Story follows this rule you can complete the following basic steps:

Step 1: Count how many ‘sentences that describe’ there are within the Story

Step 2: Count how many coaching sentences there are within the Story

Step 3: Divide the total number of ‘sentence that describe’ by the total number of coaching sentences. If this number is 2 or more then your story meets Carol Gray’s criteria ☺

Criterion 9: Personal to the child or young person – The Social Story must be tailored to meet the individual needs of the child or young person. It should reflect their interests and preferences.

Step 3 – Deliver the Story

Criterion 10 – Editing and implementation – Once you have written the Social Story, ensure that you review and edit it carefully. Even when the Social Story has been introduced to the child or young person, it is important to monitor it, so that any revision or updates can be made.

Examples of Social Stories can be found within some of the resources listed under 'Further Resources'

Further Resources

These resources provide further guidance and information related to social stories:

Social Stories Writing Guide - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1x7i7HfVow>

National Autistic Society - <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/social-stories-and-comic-strip-conversations>

Carole Gray - <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/what-is-it/> (There are some examples of social stories on this website).

The new Social Story book: 15th Anniversary Edition by Carole Gray (2015)

My Social Stories Book by Carole Gray (2001)

Successful Social Stories for School and College Students with Autism: Growing up with Social Stories, by Dr Siobhan Timmins (2017)

References

Gray, C. (2015). *The new Social Story book: 15th Anniversary Edition*. Future Horizons.

National Autistic Society (2020). *Social stories and comic strip conversations*.

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/communication/communication-tools/social-stories-and-comic-strip-conversations>