

A teacher works with a child to help him have a more successful circle time



Social stories for children with autism

Lynn McCann outlines the rationale behind social stories and offers advice on how to write them effectively

Social stories¹ are a useful tool in supporting children with autism to understand social situations and prepare them for change and new experiences.

They can cover almost any subject, from personal habits to dealing with a death in the family, from school events to world events. If written and presented well, they can help a child learn, grow, deal with stress and develop self-confidence.

Many schools are advised to use social stories for their pupils with autism. Education Health and Care Plans include them in their list of strategies; educational

“*At least half of all stories should affirm and celebrate the child’s achievements*”

psychologists, SEN advisors and speech and language therapists all recommend using them.

Yet the most common question I get asked as a specialist teacher going into schools is: ‘How do we write them?’ It seems that the advice to use social stories doesn’t come with guidance on how to set about it.

What is a social story?

Social stories were invented by Carol Gray in the early 90s. The structure and format she developed are effective and should always be followed to ensure that you are creating a story that will support and help the child rather than overload them with information and instruction.

Social stories can be written for any age, and should be presented in a way that is age and developmentally appropriate.

They can be written by parents or anyone who works with the child, and can cover any setting, event or situation.

- A social story is written for an individual and is a visual and permanent account that describes and explains a social situation, issue or skill that the person with autism is finding difficult.
- Adults may wish to use a social story to help change a behaviour, but this should not be its main purpose. Instead, the aim is to provide the social information that the child is lacking

¹ The terms ‘social story’ and ‘social stories’ are trademarks originated and owned by Carol Gray

or misunderstanding, so that they can make informed and supported choices about how they are going to respond in a more appropriate way.

- Carol Gray stipulates that at least half of all stories should be written to affirm and celebrate the child's achievements. This can be done in *any* story as a basis for affirming the child before introducing the issue that they misunderstand or are learning about. Or it can be a stand-alone story celebrating their many qualities.
- Social stories provide an explanation of other people's perspectives – their beliefs, opinions, social conventions, likes and dislikes – and often shed light on why people do the things they do. Then, rather than being told how to behave, the child is able to see for themselves how more appropriate responses and choices will lead to better outcomes, both for them and for others.

Preparing the ground

You can't write an effective social story without first improving your understanding of the child and how they perceive the situation. It is useful to note down the answers to these questions.

The child

- What are the child's strengths, talents and interests?
- What is their reading ability and how much information can they process at a time?
- Do they have any sensory processing issues that may be impacting on their response to the situation?
- Do they understand language literally?
- What makes them stressed?
- What makes them calm and happy?

The parents and adults who work with the child

- What do they think about the issue?
- What do they think causes or triggers the child's response?
- How do they usually react to the child and the child's response in the situations you are discussing?
- What effect is the adult's response having on the child's behaviour?
- Do they have any strategies that usually help the child?

The context

- WHAT is happening?
- WHERE is it happening?
- WHEN is it happening?
- WHO is it happening to and with?
- HOW is it happening?



Lynn McCann uses a social story to help a child feel more confident in his learning

You can then try to draw some conclusions about WHY it is happening, based on all of the above information.

Above all, you must remember to take account of the child's autistic perspective... what is logical to them? You cannot assume that you and your pupil have the same social understanding. Ask them what they think and observe the situation carefully. Often what they are missing is something that is totally obvious to you.

Deciding what you want to achieve

What will be the purpose of the social story? You might choose one of the following.

- To give the child some social information that they are lacking or a better understanding of something they have misinterpreted.
- To reduce the child's stress and anxiety about an issue, situation or future event.
- To celebrate the child's achievements and reinforce their positive self-awareness.
- To prepare the child for a new experience.
- To help the child understand a new concept, particularly a social communication concept.
- To help change how a child responds to a situation.

Once the purpose is clear, you are ready to draft a title. This needs to explicitly explain what the story is about and be literal. Like the Ronseal advert, 'it does

what it says on the tin'. Here are some examples.

- I can greet people I know.
- There are toilets at the zoo that I can go to.
- People in my class like the models I make.
- Growing up brings a lot of unknown things, but that's okay.
- I am clever and accomplished.

Setting the right tone

In the many years I have been teaching people to write social stories, I have seen quite a few misguided attempts that have only made the situation worse. Here is an example of what *not* to do.

Rosie's Day

Rosie, today is Thursday 28 September. You have not had a good day and all because you did not share your friend, Alysha. You have been:

- climbing on the tables and chairs in the library
- not doing any work
- leaving without an adult saying you can
- not lining up properly
- refusing to go into the dinner hall for lunch.

You also hit Nikita on the head with your bag on purpose. **This is very serious and made Nikita upset.**

Tomorrow is Friday 29 September. You need to have a better day. If you come to school you will be rewarded for good behaviour, working in class and not getting angry with your friends.

If you have a bad day like today, your teacher will have to ring your mum to take you home.



Lynn McCann and a child read a story together. Their smiles show that this is a very positive experience

This story is overwhelmingly negative. It blames the child and uses lots of absolute expressions, such as ‘need to’ and ‘you will’. The writer has not investigated why Rosie is behaving in this way and there is no explanation of what a good or bad day will look like, or who will be the judge of this. And why use such an emotive word as ‘bad’?

A social story is the very opposite of this. It is positive, emotionally safe, encourages, informs and explains in language that the child can understand.

Following a clear structure

It is helpful when writing a social story to think in terms of a story structure – a beginning, a middle and an end.

The beginning

The beginning is where you set the scene and draw the child in. It is personal to the child and describes a situation or event literally and objectively. It clearly identifies the topic, as captured in the title, and affirms and encourages the child from the outset.

It is usually written in the present tense, but uses past or future tense where appropriate. It is written in first person narrative and takes account of how the child would speak of themselves.

If the writer of Rosie’s Day had taken the time to find out more about Rosie and

the situation, they might have discovered that she is finding it hard to cope with a new child in the class being befriended by her friend, Alysha.

In the light of this, here is a new introduction.

Making new friends can be good

My name is Rosie and I am in Class 3. I usually like school because I am good at making things and know a lot about science. My friend Alysha is in my class too. We like to sit next to each other and play together at playtimes. This is great. In my class there used to be 28 children and now there are 29. Nikita has come to our school and is in our class too. She sits on the same table as Alysha and me.

This text is reassuring, celebrates Rosie’s strengths and helps her understand exactly what the situation is and what the story will be looking at. It also answers the ‘Wh’ questions of what, where, who and when.

The middle

This is where you introduce the perspective sentences that will help the child understand the situation and explore how they feel about it. Perspective sentences explain the social information that you wish to help the child understand.

It is important to stay positive and

avoid putting blame on the child for something they have done in response to the situation. In this case, the aim is to help Rosie see why her friend is trying to include another child and appreciate that she is not being pushed aside or ignored, which is what she believes and what is fuelling her distressed behaviour.

When Nikita came to a new school it was a big change for her. She felt afraid that she might not make any new friends. Alysha is trying to help Nikita by including her in our play and group work. This is a kind and friendly thing to do.

I like playing and doing group work with Alysha because she is kind. I am kind and friendly too. This is great. We can have two friends just as well as having one friend. I am a kind friend and Nikita will like that, just as much as Alysha does.

The end

The end of the story summarises the situation and makes suggestions as to what the child could do, what support is available and reassures them that they are not in trouble. It is important that the story is balanced, with more describing and explaining than directing.

This is where you suggest the positive behaviours that the child could adopt to make the situation work for them and

others, while continuing to affirm and encourage them. You need to choose our words very carefully here. Nothing should be absolute. So words like 'must' or 'should' are to be avoided and replaced by 'can', 'could' or 'try'.

It would be good to include Nikita in our group and play. I can try to wait when Alysha is talking to Nikita and then she will talk to me. I could ask Nikita questions about her family and what she likes. She might ask me too. Then I can tell her about my pony collection. It will be great if we like some of the same things.

My teachers will help me by doing some special activities with Alysha, Nikita and me. We can enjoy playing with ponies and Lego. We all like these things. This is brilliant. I can know that making new friends can be good. Well done me!

You will notice that there is no mention of bad behaviour, getting angry or being stressed. Often the issue we think we need to address isn't the one we need to write about in the social story at all.

“ A social story is a tool for positive encouragement and help in a difficult situation ”

Reviewing and illustrating


Once the story is written, you need to read it through carefully to make sure it will achieve what it sets out to achieve. Check that it has a patient and encouraging tone and will not lead to unintended consequences if interpreted literally.

Carol Gray has a very useful checklist on <http://bit.ly/sc228-14>. Even after writing hundreds of social stories, I regularly use this as a guide.

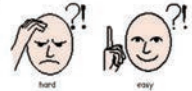
And finally, you need to add illustrations. Illustrations are there to enhance the meaning of the story and help children to process the language and ideas you are presenting. They also enable you to separate the text into chunks, again making it easier for the child to process the content.

Whether you use online images, photos of the children and setting, symbols or the child's drawings, take time to think about what the pictures are communicating and keep them simple.

I can do it... even though it's hard.

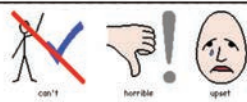


Exams are something you have to do. This is ok.




Some are easier and more interesting than others.


I did _____ This is brilliant.




If I think I can't do it then I feel horrible and upset. This can mean that I find it hard to think.



If I think I can do it, even though it's hard then I feel determined and positive.



This can give my brain more focus and energy. This is great.



I can remember by reading this before I go into an exam.

Support assistants can also remind me by telling me to think about this advice.

Brilliant!

Symbols from Widgeit Software © 2010

Presenting your story to the child

Choose a calm and relaxed time and place with minimal distractions and sit comfortably with the child. They may want to read it to themselves, or they may prefer you to read it to them, particularly if it's the first time.

Read it slowly, allowing the child time to process the language, and respond if they so wish. Speak in a patient, calm and positive tone. When you have finished, ask them what they think and/or explain the activities you are going to do to support them. The story usually needs to be read a few times over a few days and with different people. You could send a copy home so parents can read it with the child too.

This is where your knowledge of the child is important. The social story is not about nagging, it is a tool for positive encouragement and help in a difficult situation. The number of repeat readings

has to be right for the child. Some children love to keep their stories and refer to them when they need to; others lose interest after a while, but that is often because they have moved on and have been able to deal with the issue confidently.

Lynn McCann is a specialist autism teacher and consultant and owner of Reachout ASC, www.reachoutasc.com. Her new book, How to Support Children with Autism Spectrum Condition in Primary School, will be published by LDA Learning in April 2016, www.ldalearning.com

FIND OUT MORE

- **The New Social Story Book** by Carol Gray, Future Horizons Incorporated (revised and expanded 2015): <http://bit.ly/sc228-15>