

Social Stories™ and Comic Strip Conversations

What are Social Stories?

Social Stories were developed by Carol Gray in 1991 to assist individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to develop greater social understanding. A Social Story is a short description of a particular situation, event or activity, which includes specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. They can provide an individual with some idea of how others might respond in a particular situation and therefore provide a framework for appropriate behaviour. Social Stories also enable others to see things from the perspective of the individual with ASD and why the person may appear to respond or behave in a particular way.

Social Stories have a huge range of applications including:

- To develop self-care skills (e.g. how to clean teeth, wash hands or get dressed), social skills (e.g. sharing, asking for help, saying thank you, interrupting), and academic abilities.
- To assist an individual to cope with changes to routine, and unexpected or distressing events (e.g. absence of teacher, moving house, thunderstorms).
- To provide positive feedback to an individual regarding an area of strength or achievement in order to develop self esteem.
- As a behavioural strategy (e.g. what to do when angry, how to cope with obsessions).

The following is an example of a Social Story to assist 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". (p. 21)

How do Social Stories help individuals with ASD?

- Writing a Social Story requires detailed consideration of the person's perception of a particular situation, a process which can increase our understanding and empathy and may lead to a better response to the individual with ASD (Gray, 1994).
- Social Stories present information in a literal, concrete and accurate manner, which may improve the individual's understanding of a previously difficult or ambiguous situation or activity.
- The visual presentation of Social Stories utilises the preference for visual processing experienced by many individuals with ASD.
- By providing information about what to expect in a particular situation and some guidelines for the individual's own behaviour in a format that is meaningful and relevant, Social Stories can increase structure in the individual's life and thereby reduce anxiety.
- Assist with sequencing (i.e. what comes next in series of activities) and executive functioning (i.e. planning and organising) difficulties experienced by many individuals with ASD.

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 adolescents and adults (Gray, 1994). There is research to suggest that individuals with ASD who experience greater difficulties and associated learning disabilities may also benefit from the use of Social Stories (Swaggart, Gagnon, Jones Bock, Earles, Quinn, Smith Myles, & Simpson, 1995). The presentation and content of Social Stories can be adapted to meet the needs of the individual as discussed in the following section.

How do I write a Social Story?

The following information is based on Carol Gray's Social Story guidelines published in the 'The New Social Story Book' (1994). These guidelines provide detailed information regarding the structure, content and implementation of Social Stories and may also be found at The Gray Centre for Social Learning and Understanding website:

http://www.thegraycenter.org/Social_Stories.htm

1. Picture the Goal

Consider the purpose of the Social Story and think about the social understandings necessary to bring forth desired behaviours or responses from the individual. For example, our goal may be to teach a child to cover his or her mouth when coughing. To achieve this goal, the child needs to understand why covering his or her mouth when coughing is important (i.e. it stops germs from being spread which may make other people sick).

2. Gather information

The next stage is to gather information about the individual including their age, interests, attention span, level of ability and understanding, in addition to information regarding the situation described

in the Social Story (i.e. 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).

3. 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 table below:

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	Christmas Day is December 25. Most children go to school. Sometimes I get sick.
Perspective	Refers to the opinions, feelings, ideas, beliefs or physical/mental well being of others.	My Mum and Dad <u>know</u> when it is time for me to go to bed. Teachers <u>like</u> it when students raise their hand to ask a question in the classroom. Some children <u>believe</u> in Santa Claus.
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 be constructed in ways which allow flexibility (i.e. avoid statements like ‘I must’ or ‘I have to’).	I <u>will try</u> to cover my mouth when I cough. I <u>might like</u> to play outside during lunchtime. When I am angry, I <u>can</u> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Take three deep breaths ▪ Go for a walk ▪ Jump on the trampoline
Affirmative	Statements that enhance the meaning of the previous sentence (which may be a descriptive, perspective or directive sentence) and can be used to emphasize the importance of the message or to provide reassurance to the individual.	(I will try to hold an adult’s hand when crossing the road). This is very important. (Thunder can be very loud). This is ok.
Co-operative	Sentences which identify how others may be of assistance to the individual (developed by Dr Demetrious Haracopos in Denmark).	Mum and Dad can help me wash my hands. An adult will help me when I cross the road. My teacher will help me to try to stay calm in class.
Control	Statements written by the individual with an ASD to provide personal meaning to a particular situation and to assist them to	My body needs food several times per day; just like a steam train needs coal to stay running.

	recall and apply information	
Partial	Incomplete sentences, which allow the individual to guess the next step in a situation, and may be used with descriptive, perspective, directive, affirmative, co-operative and control sentences.	My name is _____ (descriptive sentence) Mum and Dad will feel _____ if I finish all my dinner (perspective sentence)

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 1 directive or control sentences and at least 2 (but no more than 5) of the remaining sentence types. The following is an example Social Story from Gray and White's "My Social Stories Book" (2002) 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)." (p. 76)

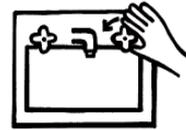
Additional points to consider:

- The Social Story needs to have an introduction, body and conclusion and should use positive language (i.e. where possible, describe what should happen, rather than what should not).
- The story needs to be as accurate as possible and should include words like 'sometimes' and 'usually' for situations where a particular outcome is not guaranteed.
- The story should appeal to the interests of the person for whom it is written and care should also be taken to ensure that words that may cause the individual anxiety or distress are avoided.
- The content and presentation of a Social Story should be appropriate to the individual's age and level of understanding. The following are some pointers for tailoring Social Stories for individuals of different ages and abilities:
 - If writing for a child, write from the first person's perspective e.g. "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 assist individuals who have difficulty reading or for younger children e.g.

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.



For further information on where to find and how to use picture symbols, refer to Autism Helpline factsheet 'Using Visual Supports' (picture symbols included in above example from www.dotolearn.com).

- When writing for adolescents or adults, use the third person's perspective (i.e. they, he, she) and adjust language and presentation accordingly (i.e. use smaller font and present in columns as in a newspaper article).

Teach with the title –

It is important to select a title which accurately reflects the overall meaning of the story. Titles may be in the form of a question (e.g. What is lightning?) or a statement (e.g. Lightning), but need to communicate the most important concept of the story.

How do I introduce a Social Story?

Gray (1994) has developed detailed guidelines on how to implement Social Stories, so that they produce the intended benefits for the individual. Summarized below is information from Gray's 'The New Social Story Book' (1994), which is also found at The Gray Centre's website:

http://www.thegraycenter.org/Social_Stories.htm#The%20Social%20Story%20Guidelines

1. Present the Social Story to the individual at a time when everyone is feeling calm and relaxed. This will maximise the individual's learning and help the person to 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 e.g. "I have written this story for you. It is about thunderstorms. Let's read it together now. Soon we will review it".

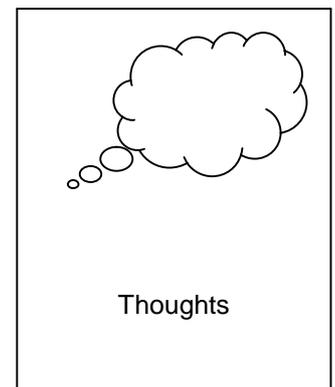
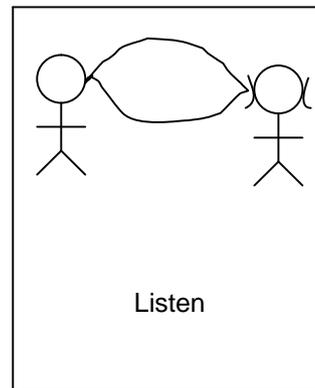
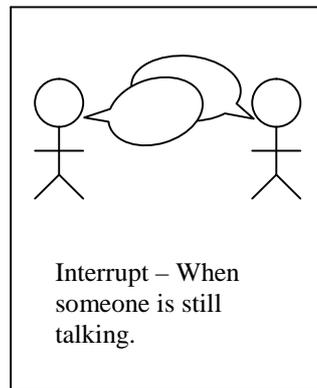
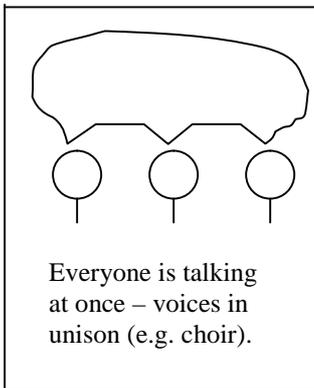
3. Review the story as often as required – some Social Stories will be reviewed initially once a day, others prior to the situation for which they were written.
4. Maintain a positive, reassuring and patient attitude when reviewing the story. This is essential for the Social Story to have the desired effect.
5. When reviewing the story, use a calm and friendly tone of voice and ensure 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 focussed 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 ensure the individual does not become overwhelmed with information.
8. There are two main ways of fading a Social Story:
 - Increase the period of time between reviewing (i.e. if a story was initially reviewed once per day, increase review period to every two days, then every three or four days, and so on).
 - Change the content of the story to reflect the individual’s new skills. For example, remove directive sentences from the story, or rewrite them as partial sentences where the individual is required to recall the missing information. If considering this approach, it is important to be aware that some people with ASD may find such changes distressing; alternative approaches should be explored if this is the case.

What is a Comic Strip Conversation?

Comic Strip Conversations are another technique developed by Carol Gray (1994) to assist individuals with ASD to develop greater social understanding. Comic Strip Conversations provide visual representations of the different levels of communication that take place in a conversation, using symbols, stick figure drawings and colour. By seeing the different elements of a conversation visually presented, some of the abstract aspects of social communication (e.g. recognising the feelings and intentions of others) are made more concrete and are therefore easier to understand. Comic Strip Conversations can also provide insight into the individual with ASD’s perception of a particular situation.

What does a Comic Strip Conversation look like?

Comic Strip Conversations use symbols to represent social interactions and abstract aspects of conversation, and colour to represent the emotional content of a statement or message (Gray, 1994). The following are some example symbols taken from Gray’s ‘Comic Strip Conversations’ (1994) used to represent a range of concepts that may be involved in a conversation:



The following are conversation colours outlined by Gray (1994) that may be used in Comic Strip Conversations to represent a range of feelings and ideas:

- Green: Good ideas, happy, friendly
- Red: Bad ideas, anger, unfriendly
- Blue: Sad, uncomfortable
- Yellow: Frightened
- Black: Facts, truth
- Orange: Questions
- Brown: Comfortable, cosy
- Purple: Proud
- Colour combinations: Confusion

Who can benefit from Comic Strip Conversations?

Comic Strip Conversations can be used to increase social understanding in adolescents and adults on the higher functioning end of the spectrum.

What do I need to write a Comic Strip Conversation?

Paper and pencils are the basic tools required to write a Comic Strip Conversation, however a range of other materials can also be used, including crayons, coloured pencils and markers. It is important to invite the individual with ASD to select the materials that they would like to use to enhance their involvement and ownership of the process. Some individuals may like to record conversations into a notebook which they can refer to at different times to recall key concepts.

How do I use Comic Strip Conversations?

Comic Strip Conversations are not intended to be used with every interaction, but rather to assist understanding of difficult or key concepts. The person with ASD takes the lead role in a Comic Strip Conversation with parents, carers and teachers offering support and guidance throughout the process. Comic Strip Conversations are usually started with ‘small talk’ (where subjects such as the weather may be briefly discussed) to get people familiar with drawing while talking and to mimic ordinary social interactions. Following this, the support person may ask a range of questions about the situation or interaction of concern, which the person with ASD answers by speaking and drawing their response. The following are some examples of questions that may be asked to start a Comic Strip Conversation from Gray (1994):

Support person: Individual with ASD:	“Where are you?” Writes response or places symbol representing location in upper left hand corner of page or box and draws stick figure to represent themselves.
Support person: Individual with ASD:	“Who is there?” Draws stick figure picture of others that may be present.
Support person: Individual with ASD:	“What are you doing?” Draws relevant actions or activities.
Support person: Individual with ASD:	“What happened?” Draws relevant actions.
Support person: Individual with ASD:	“What did you say?” Uses talk symbol to indicate what they said
Support person: Individual with ASD:	“What did others say?” Uses talk symbol to report what others said
Support person: Individual with ASD:	“What did you think when you said that?” Uses thought symbol to show what they thought
Support person: Individual with ASD:	“What did others think when they said that/did that?” Uses thought symbol to show what others thought
Support person: Individual with ASD:	Assists individual to identify possible thoughts, feelings and perceptions of others and to clarify any misunderstandings or literal interpretations of the situation.

Colour may be used throughout the above process to indicate the feelings or ideas of people involved in the situation and to assist the individual with ASD to better understand the perspectives of others. For complex situations, or for individuals who have difficulty reporting events in sequence, comic strip boxes may be used, or drawings can be numbered in the sequence that they occur in. Before finishing a Comic Strip Conversation, it is important to go back and summarize the event or situation discussed using the drawings as a guide. After this step, solutions to the problem raised during the process can be explored and an ‘action plan’ for similar situations in the future is developed. Comic Strip Conversations can also be used to plan for a situation in the future that may be causing the individual anxiety or concern e.g. an exam or social event. If used in this way, it is important to present information in a way which allows for unexpected changes to plans.

Where can I get more information about Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations?

Workshops

The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding runs workshops covering Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations from time to time in the United Kingdom. For further information regarding scheduled workshops, visit the Gray Center’s website:

http://www.thegraycenter.org/speaking_schedule.htm

Or alternatively contact:

Autism Independent UK (formally Society for the Autistically Handicapped – SFTAH)

199/203 Blandford Avenue, Kettering, Northamptonshire, NN169AT

Tel: +44 (0) 1536 523274

Email: autism@autismuk.com

Website: www.autismuk.com

The National Autistic Society also posts details of upcoming workshops at the following link:

<http://www.nas.org.uk/nas/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=114&a=2321>

Online

The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding has a range of very useful information regarding Social Stories which is available at the following link:

http://www.thegraycenter.org/Social_Stories.htm

Books and Videos

Carol Gray has developed a video workshop which provides information on how to write Social Stories. Further information is available at the following link to the Gray Center website:

http://www.thegraycenter.org/product_listing.htm

Listed below are several books which provide detailed information regarding Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations. Books available from The National Autistic Society's Publications Catalogue are indicated with an asterisk *:

Gray, Carol (1994) *Comic Strip Conversations: Colourful, illustrated interactions with students with autism and related disorders*. Jenison Public Schools: Jenison, Michigan.

Gray, Carol (1994) *The New Social Stories Book: Illustrated edition*. Future Horizons Inc.: Arlington.

* Gray, Carol, and White, Abbey Leigh (2002) *My Social Stories Book*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London.

References and Bibliography

* Attwood, Tony (1998) *Asperger's Syndrome: A guide for parents and professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

* Clements, J., and Zarkowska, E. (2001) *Behavioural Concerns and Autistic Spectrum Disorders: Explanations and strategies for change*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Gray, Carol (1994) *Comic Strip Conversations: Colourful, illustrated interactions with students with autism and related disorders*. Jenison, Michigan: Jenison Public Schools.

* Gray, Carol, and White, Abbey Leigh (2002) *My Social Stories Book*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Gray, Carol (1994) *The New Social Stories Book: Illustrated edition*. Arlington: Future Horizons Inc.

Gray, Carol (1996) 'Social Assistance.' In: A. Fullerton, J. Stratton, P. Coyne, and C. Gray (eds.) *Higher Functioning Adolescents and Young Adults with Autism: A teacher's guide* (pp 71-89). Austin: Pro-ed.

Swaggart, B., Gagnon, E., Jones Bock, S., Earles, T.L., Quinn, C., Smith Myles, B., and Simpson, R. (1994) 'Using Social Stories to teach social and behavioural skills to children with autism.' *Focus on Autistic Behaviour*, 10, 1-16.

Fouse, B., and Wheeler, M (1997) *A Treasure Chest of Behavioural Strategies for Individuals with Autism*. Arlington: Future Horizons Inc.

Howlin, P (1998) *Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome: A guide for practitioners and carers*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.

* Whitaker, P (2001) *Challenging Behaviour and Autism: Making sense-making progress*. London: The National Autistic Society.

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