ASD Helping Hands

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Social Stories

What are Social Stories, how to write them and how to use them

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Page of Contents

1 *Introduction*

2 *What Are Social Stories For?*

3 *How Do Social Stories Help?*

4 *Writing a Social Story*

5 *Using Social Stories Effectively*

6 *Summary*

1. Introduction

Scial Stories™ are short, simple descriptions that explain a situation, event, or activity in a clear and reassuring way. They help autistic people understand what to expect and what might happen, reducing anxiety and confusion.

Social Stories™ were first created by Carol Gray in 1991. Since then, they have become a well-known and trusted tool to support understanding and communication for autistic children, young people, and adults.

Each story is written to describe what happens, why it happens, and how a person can respond. They can be used at home, school, work, or in the community. Social Stories™ are designed to:

- give clear information about everyday situations
- build confidence and independence
- encourage positive ways of thinking and responding

They can be written by parents, carers, teachers, or support staff – anyone who understands the person and wants to help them make sense of the world around them.

2. What are Social Stories for?

Social Stories™ can be used in many ways to support autistic people of all ages. They help explain the world in a clear, predictable, and reassuring way. Each story focuses on what is happening, why it happens, and what the person can do in that situation. They can be written to teach new skills, prepare for changes, or help someone understand social expectations. The key is that each story is personalised to the individual — it reflects their experiences, interests, and understanding.

Developing Everyday Skills

Social Stories™ are often used to help people learn and remember practical skills.
Examples include:

- Self-care tasks such as brushing teeth, washing hands, or getting dressed.
- Daily routines such as packing a school bag, bedtime steps, or using public transport.
- School or work skills such as listening to instructions, taking turns, or starting a conversation.

These stories give clear, step-by-step information, helping the person know what comes next and how to do things independently.

Understanding Social Situations

Many autistic people find social rules confusing because they are often unspoken. A Social Story™ can make these invisible rules visible.
For example, a story might explain:

- how to join a group activity,
- what to do when waiting in a queue, or
- how to ask a friend to play.

By describing what other people might say or do, and why, Social Stories™ help the person understand how their actions affect others and how others might feel.

Coping with Change and Uncertainty

Unexpected events can be stressful. Social Stories™ can help prepare someone for change by explaining what will happen and why.
This could include:

- moving to a new class or house,
- visiting the dentist,
- a teacher being absent, or
- changes to a daily routine.

Knowing what to expect helps reduce anxiety and makes transitions smoother.

Building Confidence and Self-Esteem

Social Stories™ can also focus on strengths. For example, a story might celebrate being kind, completing a task, or being a good helper. These positive stories help build confidence and remind the person of what they do well.

Supporting Emotions and Behaviour

Social Stories™ are a gentle way to support emotional regulation. They can describe what to do when feeling angry, worried, or overwhelmed, using calm and reassuring language.
For instance, a story might include coping ideas like:

“When I feel cross, I can take deep breaths, go for a walk, or ask for help.”

By using Social Stories™ regularly, families, teachers, and support staff can create a more predictable and supportive environment where the autistic person feels safe, informed, and understood.

3. How Do Social Stories help?

Social Stories™ work because they present information in a clear, structured and reassuring way. They remove uncertainty and help people understand what is expected in a situation. This can make daily life feel less confusing and more predictable.

Many autistic people think in a very literal and visual way. They prefer information that is clear, concrete, and easy to follow. Social Stories™ use this strength by explaining what will happen, why it happens, and what the person can do. When the world makes more sense, anxiety is reduced, and confidence can grow.

Making the World More Predictable

Change, surprises, or unclear expectations can cause distress. A Social Story™ provides structure and helps prepare the person for what's ahead. For example, before a hospital appointment, the story can describe what they will see, hear and do. Knowing this information in advance helps them to feel safe and calm.

Supporting Understanding

Social Stories™ explain social rules that many people learn naturally but that may not be obvious to an autistic person.

They answer important questions like:

- Where am I?
- What is happening?
- Who is here?
- What should I do?
- Why is this important?

By giving honest and factual information, Social Stories™ help the person understand situations more clearly and respond appropriately.

Reducing Anxiety

Uncertainty can lead to worry or challenging behaviour. A Social Story™ takes away some of that uncertainty by describing what to expect and what options the person has if they feel unsure.

For instance:

“Sometimes it is noisy in the dining hall. If it is too loud, I can wear my ear defenders or ask to sit somewhere quieter.”

This helps the person feel more in control and less overwhelmed.

Improving Communication and Relationships

When others understand how and why a Social Story™ is used, it can also improve communication between the autistic person and those supporting them. Writing or reading a story together helps everyone see things from each other’s point of view. It builds empathy and creates opportunities to talk about feelings, routines, and expectations.

Supporting Thinking and Planning

Social Stories™ can also help develop sequencing (understanding what comes next) and executive functioning skills such as organising, planning and remembering.
For example, a story about “Getting Ready for School” can list each step in order, helping the person practise independence and remember tasks.

Encouraging Positive Behaviour

Rather than correcting mistakes, Social Stories™ focus on explaining what to do. They use positive language and gentle guidance.
For example:

“When I feel angry, I can take deep breaths or squeeze my stress ball.”

This approach builds self-awareness and promotes calm, safe responses.

4. Writing a Social Story

Writing a Social Story™ is about helping someone understand a situation, rather than telling them what to do. The tone should always be calm, supportive, and respectful. Every story is unique and written specifically for the person who will use it.

Carol Gray, who first developed Social Stories™, describes three main steps: Picture the Goal, Gather Information, and Tailor the Text.

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1 Step 1 – Picture the Goal

Start by deciding what you want the story to achieve.

Ask yourself:

- What does the person need to understand?
- What might be confusing or worrying for them?
- What do I want them to learn or feel more confident about?

For example, the goal might be to help a child understand why they need to cover their mouth when coughing. The focus is on understanding, not correction.

Tip: Think about the goal as “what I want the person to understand,” not “what I want them to do.”

2 Step 2 – Gather Information

Collect as much detail as you can about the situation.

Ask yourself:

- Where does this situation happen?
- Who is there?
- What happens before, during and after?
- Why does it happen?
- How long does it last?
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Make sure the information you include is clear, accurate, and consistent. If something only happens sometimes, say so — use words like “sometimes,” “often,” or “usually” to avoid confusion.

You can also include personal details that make the story more meaningful, such as the person’s name, favourite activities, or familiar places.

Stories should match the person’s age, interests, and level of understanding. For younger children or non-readers, use simple sentences and pictures.
For older children or adults, you can use longer sentences and realistic photos.

3 Step 3 – Tailor the Text

A Social Story™ should have a clear structure:

- **Title** – what the story is about.
- **Introduction** – sets the scene (where and when it happens).
- **Body** – explains what happens and why.
- **Conclusion** – summarises the key message or positive ending.

Keep the language positive and reassuring. Avoid words that sound like rules or instructions.

Types of Sentences

- **Descriptive sentences** – explain what happens, where, and why.

  > “Christmas Day is on 25 December.”
  > “Sometimes I get sick.”
  > “My body needs food every day to stay healthy.”

- **Coaching (or directive) sentences** – gently guide what to do or how to cope.

  > “I will try to hold an adult’s hand when crossing the road.”
  > “When I feel worried, I can ask for help or take deep breaths.”

A good story has more descriptive than directive sentences. This keeps the focus on understanding rather than giving orders.

Examples of Social Stories

Example Social Story™

My Toys
My toys belong to me. They are mine.
Many of my toys were given to me.
Some of my toys have my name on them.
I may play with my toys or share them with someone.
I have toys that are mine.
(Adapted from Carol Gray's The New Social Story Book, 2015.)

Writing Checklist

Before finishing your story, check that it:

- answers the questions where, when, who, what, how, and why
- uses simple, positive language
- reflects the person's real experiences
- includes enough descriptive detail to make sense
- has a calm and reassuring tone

A well-written Social Story™ should leave the person feeling more confident, prepared, and supported.

5. Using Social Stories Effectivly

Writing a Social Story™ is just the first step. How and when you use it makes a big difference to how helpful it will be. Each person will respond differently, so it's important to introduce stories in a calm, consistent, and positive way.

When to Use a Social Story

Social Stories™ work best when used before a situation happens, not during a crisis. They are most effective when:

- preparing for a new or unfamiliar event
- explaining a change in routine
- helping someone learn or practise a new skill
- giving reassurance about something that may cause anxiety
- encouraging safe or appropriate behaviour

Examples include getting a haircut, going to the doctor, starting a new class, or joining in a group activity.

You can also use Social Stories™ to celebrate successes — for example, finishing a project, helping a friend, or learning something new.

How to Share a Social Story

Choose a quiet and calm time to introduce the story.

- **Explain simply**: "I've written this story for you. It's about going swimming. Let's read it together."
- **Read the story regularly** until it becomes familiar.
- You can use pictures, symbols, or photos to make it more visual.
- If helpful, ask gentle questions like, "What do you think happens next?" or "How does that make you feel?"

Avoid using the story as a punishment or correction. Social Stories™ should always be positive, reassuring and supportive.

Supporting Understanding

You can make the story easier to understand by:

- adding blank spaces for the person to fill in (e.g. “My teacher’s name is ____”)
- using their own photos or drawings
- repeating key messages as short phrases or posters (e.g. “I can ask for help.”)
- linking stories to routines, visuals or rewards

Some people might prefer listening to the story read aloud, while others may want to look through it on their own. Follow the person’s lead and adapt as needed.

Monitoring and Reviewing

After using the story a few times, notice how the person responds.

Ask yourself:

- Do they seem calmer or more confident?
- Do they understand the situation better?
- Is the story still accurate and relevant?

If something changes — like a new teacher, different routine, or new interest — update the story to keep it current. Social Stories™ work best when they reflect real life.

Keep all your stories together in a folder or ringbinder, or save them on a computer so they’re easy to find and reuse.

Remember

A Social Story™ is more than words on a page — it’s a way of building understanding, trust, and confidence.

Used regularly and positively, they can help autistic people feel more secure, supported, and ready to take on new challenges.

6. Summary

Social Stories™ are a simple but powerful way to help autistic people understand the world around them. They turn confusing or unpredictable situations into something clear, structured, and reassuring.

By describing what happens, why it happens, and what the person can do, Social Stories™ give information that helps people feel prepared and confident. They support understanding, reduce anxiety, and build independence.

Anyone who knows the person well a parent, carer, teacher, or support worker, can write and use a Social Story™. The most effective stories are those that are personal, honest, and written with empathy.

Used regularly, Social Stories™ can:

- help someone learn new skills and routines
- make social situations easier to understand
- prepare for change or new experiences
- celebrate strengths and achievements
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They work best when shared in a calm, positive way, with time to talk and reflect together. Over time, they can help both the autistic person and those around them communicate more clearly and understand each other better.

Social Stories™ are not about changing who someone is — they are about helping the world make sense and giving people the confidence to be themselves.

ASD Helping Hands

Our Mission

"Empowering autistic individuals and those around them, ASD Helping Hands is dedicated to fostering confidence, independence, and inclusion at every stage of life. We provide guidance, education, and resources to help individuals, families, and professionals navigate autism with knowledge and empowerment.

We champion the rights of autistic people, striving to create a more inclusive society while ensuring our services remain accessible, reliable, and built on trust."

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