

## **Stories Online For Autism (SOFA-app.org) Guidance for writing and delivering Social Stories**

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## BACKGROUND

### What are Social Stories?

Social Stories™ follow a specific set of criteria, outlined by Carol Gray, the original developer of Social Stories. These criteria distinguish a Social Story from other forms of visual or written strategies.

A Social Story follows 'rules' that are designed to make sure that the Social Story process is a positive experience for the child/young person. They aim to accurately describe a context, skill or achievement (e.g. dinner time, bath time, waiting in line) and provide a visual tool to help the child better understand what is happening during a specific situation that they might find confusing and/or distressing. This relates to the primary goal of any Social Story, which is to help the child better understand their social environment. As a lack of social understanding can result in people with autism behaving in ways that others may perceive to be disruptive or inappropriate a good Social Story also often leads to positive behavioural changes.

### Social Stories and Autism

Most children gain an understanding of their social world in a somewhat intuitive manner. Autistic people often find this process much more difficult. This may be due to a number of factors including a lack of knowledge relating to the many 'unwritten' rules that exist within our complicated social world. It can therefore be helpful to provide support by breaking situations down into steps and highlighting the most salient points, which may not have appeared obvious to the autistic child. In addition, difficulties with understanding that other people can have thoughts, feelings and needs that are different to our own can add to the problem. Social Stories can provide a way for such information to be presented to the child in a positive, patient way.

### What are the benefits of Social Stories?

- They provide information in a **visual format**.
- Information is presented in a **structured and consistent** manner, **tailored to the ability level** of the child
- **Pictures** can aid understanding
- They provide **information on what behaviour is expected** in specific situations.

- They help to **support memory** and can be accessed whenever the child requires
- The story writing process can **help others** to better understand the situation from the child's perspective
- They can help to **reduce anxiety**
- They can provide some insight on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of others, helping the child to **access information that we assume 'everyone knows'**.
- They can be **accessed independently by the child**.
- They offer the child opportunities to **practise skills**, often and on his or her terms, and within a less pressured environment.
- Improved social understanding can lead to indirect positive changes in behaviour.

### **When might a Social Story be appropriate?**

Social Stories can help in situations which the child finds distressing or frustrating, and where you think the behaviour may be associated with a social misunderstanding. They can also be particularly useful in preparation for a potentially stressful event (e.g. going to the dentist) or when faced with a change to their usual routine (e.g. having a supply teacher). Also, when a new concept or skill has been mastered you can adapt the Story to become one that praises the child for their achievement. It is recommended that at least half of all Social Stories praise or congratulate the child in order to increase self-confidence and self-esteem.

## **STORY WRITING AND DELIVERY**

### **Overview**

The process of writing and delivering Social Stories involves three basic steps. The first step establishes a **goal** and **gathers information**. The second step focusses on **writing** the Social Story and the third on **delivering** the Social Story. There are **ten essential criteria** within the three steps. These criteria are defined by Carol Gray and are what distinguishes a Social Story from other visual or written strategies. The ten criteria are listed below:

### **STEP 1: ESTABLISH A GOAL AND GATHER INFORMATION**

Criterion 1: The Goal

Criterion 2: Two-step discovery; Gathering information

### **STEP 2: WRITE THE SOCIAL STORY**

Criterion 3: Three parts and a Title

Criterion 4: FOURmat

Criterion 5: Five factors determine voice and vocabulary

Criterion 6: Six questions that guide Story development

Criterion 7: Seven sentence types

Criterion 8: A Gr-Eight formula

Criterion 9: Nine makes it mine

### **STEP 3: DELIVER THE SOCIAL STORY**

Criterion 10: Ten guides to editing and implementation

## **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: Two-step discovery; Gathering information.**

Gathering information helps to decide the topic for the Social Story and encourages the author to see things from the child's perspective. It is an **essential** part of the Social Story process and helps to establish a better understanding of the child and their needs.

*Step 1. Try to understand the specific situation/event from the child's point of view.*

This usually involves speaking to the people who know the child well (e.g. parents, teachers, teaching assistants) and where appropriate involving the child. Try to think about questions like 'why might the child feel frustrated/angry/upset?' or 'what may they be misunderstanding?'. Observations and/or asking the child to draw a picture of the situation/event can be particularly helpful in trying to work out what might be going on from their own perspective.

*Step 2. Decide the topic for the Story and what information should be included to help the child to understand the situation better.*

Gathering information can help to determining a more specific focus. At first the problem or issue may appear too big to tackle e.g. 'lunchtimes seem difficult' but by gathering information you may be able to find out that the main problem is with trying to find somewhere to sit in the dinner hall.

## **STEP 2: Write the Social Story**

### **Criterion 3: Three Parts and a Title.**

Social Stories follow a logical sequence, providing information in a positive, simple and clear manner.

The **title** describes what the story is about. A good title should be positive, simple and engaging. It should focus on what the child can do or what they are trying to do, rather than what they cannot do. Examples of titles include: 'Getting my hair cut'; 'Smelling fresh is great'; 'Why do people feel angry?')

The story itself has three parts; a beginning (introduction), middle (main body) and end (conclusion). The **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.'

The **main body** adds the detail, describing the issue or situation 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.'

The **conclusion** summarises the main message and tries to end on a positive note. For example 'I love to smell fresh and so do my friends and family.'

### **Criterion 4: 'FOURmat'.**

Use a format that is appropriate for the child's ability level and learning style. Things to consider include:

- Using pictures and illustrations to aid comprehension,
- Choosing the most appropriate size of the font and amount of text to be displayed per page,
- Consider the use of audio support for reading,
- Make sure the story length is appropriate for the child's attention span.
- The use of rhythm, rhyme, repetition and song may also be helpful for some children.

### **Criterion 5: "Five Factors Define Voice & Vocabulary"**

*"A Social Story™ has a patient and supportive "voice" and vocabulary that is defined by five factors:*

- 1. First and/or third person perspective;*
- 2. Positive and patient tone;*
- 3. Consideration of past, present, or future tense;*
- 4. Literal accuracy*
- 5. Accurate vocabulary"*

*The 5th Criterion; Five Factors define voice and vocabulary, (Carol Gray ©)*

Social Stories are written in the **first** ('I', 'we' etc.) or **third person** ('he', 'she', 'they' etc.). Statements using 'you' should be avoided as they can make the Story too directive. If you need to explain negative behaviours you can use the third person (e.g. 'sometimes children find it difficult to share their toys').

Using a **positive and patient tone** means being non-judgemental and non-authoritarian. Words to be avoided include: 'bad/naughty'; 'should/shouldn't'; 'can't/won't'.

Social Stories can use information from the **past, present or future** – this can often help to make predictions about what might happen in the future. Past information can also help to build self-esteem by recounting previous positive events or outcomes.

Social Stories provide **literally accurate** information. This is particularly important for autistic children.

Try to be **use verbs accurately**. For example, use the word 'buy' rather than 'get' when talking about buying food from the shop.

### **Criterion 6:** Six Questions that guide Story development

Social Stories often try to answer questions involving '**who**', '**what**', '**when**', '**why**', '**where**' and '**how**'. They describe the relevant people (who), important cues relating to the situation (what), time-related information (when), the reasoning behind events/behaviours (why), the context of the situation/event (where), and the required actions/behaviour (how). These are often helpful questions to consider during the information gathering process.

### **Criterion 7:** Seven Types of Sentences

Seven types of sentences can make up a Social Story. These are as follows:

1. **Descriptive Sentences:** These sentences describe the facts relating to the situation in a clear and objective way. They are free of opinions or assumptions and can share information that "everybody knows" (but that may not be obvious to an autistic child). Examples include: 'Adults and children wash to keep clean and smell fresh', or 'Everyone needs to see a doctor from time to time'
2. **Perspective Sentences:** These are sentences describe people's thoughts, feelings or beliefs. They can be particularly helpful for autistic children who can have difficulties understanding that other people may not have the same thoughts and feelings as them. Examples of perspective sentences include: 'Many people enjoy going to the cinema', or 'When I try my best my mum feels very proud of me'.
3. **Coaching Sentences** (3 types)
  - i. Sentences that describe or suggest responses for the child (e.g. 'I will try to put my hand up when I want to speak to my teacher in class')
  - ii. Sentences that suggest or describe responses for the caregiver (e.g. 'Mrs XX can help me to use the soap when I am washing my hands')
  - iii. Sentences that are developed by the child themselves (e.g. 'I can draw in my special drawing book when I am feeling sad.')

4. **Affirmative Sentences:** These are positive phrases that enhance the meaning of another sentence or reinforce a key point. Examples include: 'this is okay'; 'this is very important'.
5. **Partial Sentences:** These are sentences with missing words included to help establish the child's level of understanding.

*Social Stories do not always need to include all seven sentence types. They must contain at least one descriptive sentence, with an option to include any one or more of the other 6 sentence types.*

### Criterion 8: 'A GR-EIGHT Formula'

It is important that Social Stories are constructive and helpful and not simply a set of instructions telling the child what to do. In order to do this Carol Gray provides a rule relating to the balance of sentences to ensure that the 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 😊

### The 9th Criterion: Nine Makes it Mine (i.e. the child's)

Social Stories should be tailored to meet the individual needs of the child. They aim to reflect the child's interests, preferences and talents in order to help maximise engagement. Things to consider might

include: using pictures of the child within the Story; using characters or pictures that reflect their favourite TV programme; giving examples that relate to their areas of interest.

### **STEP 3 – Deliver the Social Story**

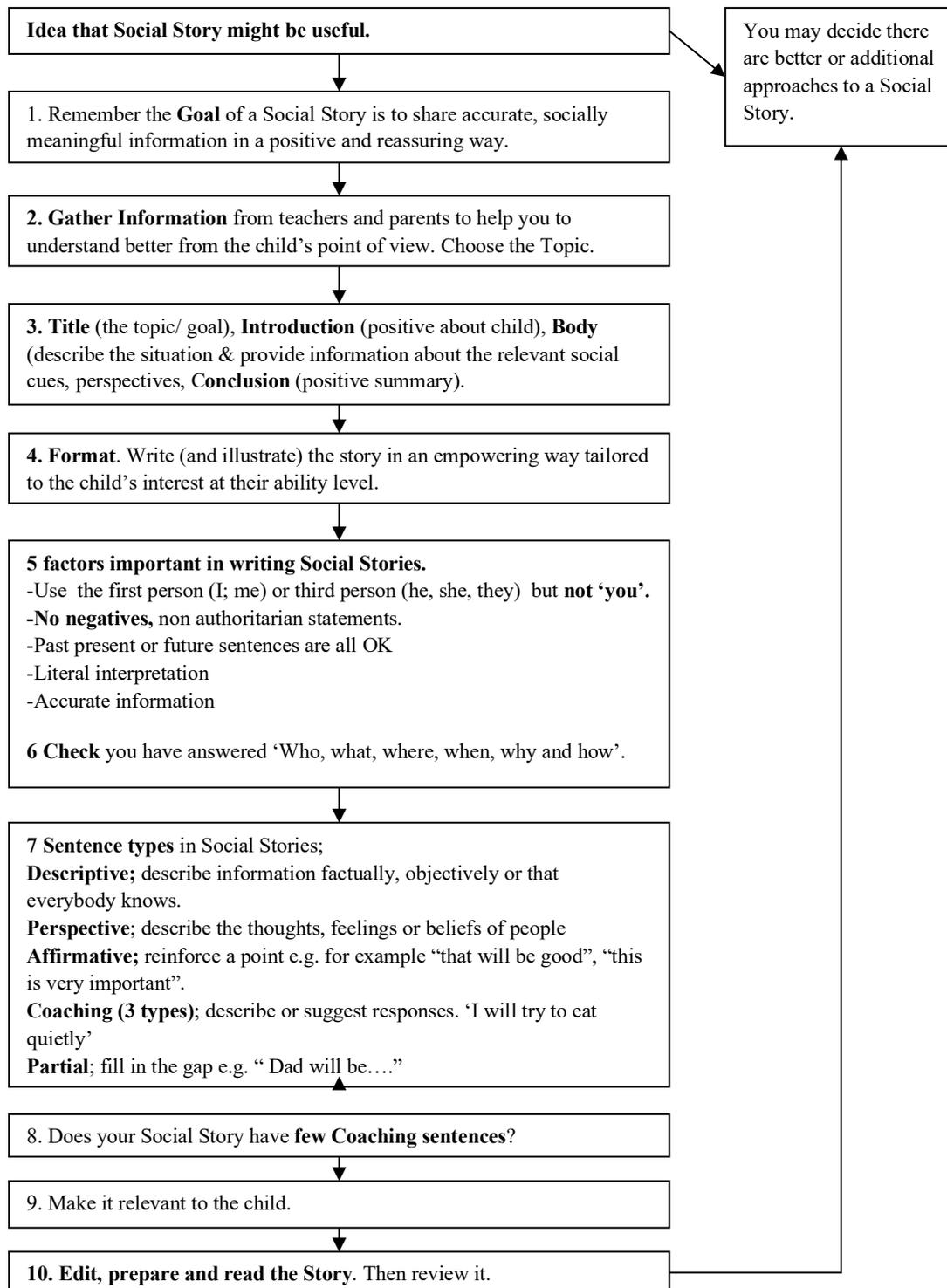
#### **Criterion 10: Ten Guides to Editing & Implementation**

Carol Gray suggests 10 steps to help with editing, preparing and reading the Story.

1. **Edit:** Once the draft Story has been written it is important to review this with the team who works with the child. The child may also be involved in this process. You can use the checklist to make sure that the story meets Carol Gray's 10 criteria.
2. **Check Comprehension:** It is important to check the child's understanding of the Story. This can be through the 'missing words game'. There are a number of ways to enhance meaning, including using supporting images and voice narration.
3. **Plan Story Support:** Think about any additional support the child may need. For example – would it be helpful to use a picture prompt or have a poster in the classroom that includes the key points within the story?
4. **Review the Story:** It is a good idea for the team to create a plan for Story review. This should be done in advance and needs to be frequent enough to be meaningful and infrequent enough to avoid needless repetition.
5. **Plan a Positive Introduction:** It is important to introduce the Story using a positive tone in a quiet and comfortable setting. You may like to start by saying something like; 'I have written a story especially for you...' or 'Do you remember when we talked about...'
6. **Monitor:** After the Story is introduced it will need to be monitored so that any revisions or updates can be made. It may be helpful to ask the child what *they* think about the story.
7. **Organise the Stories:** You may have a number of Stories that cover the same topic or that can be grouped together. These can all be kept within the 'child profile' so that they are easily retrieved when needed.
8. **Build Concepts by Mixing and Matching Stories:** Sometimes it can be helpful to have many Stories based around a similar topic or theme. They can help to build ideas and relate to each other.
9. **Story Re-Runs and Sequels:** There is often times when it is helpful to re-use a Story at a later date. Stories can also be updated and may include references to earlier concepts to tie experiences together.

10. **Recycle Instructions into Applause:** After the child has mastered a skill or gained an understanding of a particular situation/even the Story can be adapted to become one of praise or congratulations. This helps to increase confidence and self-esteem. In order to ensure that Social Stories are seen as a positive experience you should try to **ensure that half of all Stories applaud what the child does well.**

## Summary flow chart of Social Story process



Adapted from the ASSIST manual (2015)

## **OTHER RESOURCES**

### **Useful books**

ASSIST (2015) Social Stories

- Includes background information on autism, a step by step guide to writing and implementing Social Story interventions and lots of real life examples.

Gray C. (2001). My Social Stories Book Jessica Kingsley Publishers

- Comprises many example stories written by Carol Gray primarily aimed at use with younger children.

Gray C. (2010). The New Social Stories Book. Future Horizons Incorporated

- Detailed instructions and guidance on writing and delivering Social Stories according to Carol Gray's 10 step criteria. Also includes many example Stories with a CD to facilitate personalisation.

Williams C. and Wright B. (2004). 'How to Live with Autism and Asperger Syndrome' Practical Strategies for parents and teachers.

- Practical guide for parents and practitioners on living and working with autistic children

Wright B. and Williams C. (2007). Intervention and Support for Parents and Carers of Children and Young People on the Autism Spectrum: A Resource for Trainers. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

### **Internet resources**

The app is available free at [sofa.app.org](http://sofa.app.org)

<http://www.carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories>

<http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/strategies-and-approaches/social-stories-and-comic-strips/how-to-write.aspx>