Social Stories

Social stories are short stories that describe situations or concepts in a format that is meaningful for people with developmental disabilities. Social stories help people with developmental disabilities to "navigate" a situation which they find difficult to manage. The goal of a Social Story is to teach social understanding, not rote compliance.

One of the impairments that accompany many diagnoses involving developmental delays is social skills difficulties. Many individuals for whom social stories have been effective have demonstrated the following:

- Anxiety
- Insensitivity to other people's feelings
- Difficulty taking into account what other people know
- Difficulty negotiating friendships by reading and responding to other people's intentions
- Difficulty to reading the listener's level of interest
- Difficulty understanding "unwritten rules"
- Difficulty detecting a speaker's intended meaning
- Difficulty anticipating what others might think of one's actions
- Frequency of misunderstandings
- Difficulty understanding the reasons behind people's actions

Why are Social Stories used?

Social stories are used to teach individuals with developmental disabilities how to understand and interact in a variety of social situations. Social stories describe common social situations and include opportunities to learn appropriate ways to respond to the situation.

Social stories can be used to:

a) Identify important cues in a given situation
b) Present another's point of view
c) Describe routines, rules, situations, upcoming events or abstract concepts
d) Develop understanding around expectations
e) Applaud accomplishments
f) Gently suggest alternate responses in given situations
g) Bring attention to positive achievements
h) Create a permanent record of successes/strengths

What is a Social Story?

A Social Story is comprised of 4 different types of sentences:

1) Descriptive Statements (give information)
2) Perspective Statements (provide information on others' likely reactions)
3) Directive statements - fewer of these statements (give a socially appropriate response)
4) Affirmative statements (why this is important).

How are Social Stories Written?

Social Stories follow a specifically defined format and style. The information must be easily understood and written at the appropriate cognitive level.

General Rules

- Consists of either text or text and illustrations
- Includes an introduction, body and conclusion.
- Title should positively identify the main topic (i.e Learning to stay calm in class)
- Write in the first person for younger and/or more challenged individuals (from the individual's point of view) or in third person for adolescents or adults (i.e. newspaper article format)
- State what to do instead of what not to do in a situation
- Avoid referring to negative behaviour
- Describe more than direct
- Design according to the individual's abilities and interests.
- Individuals for whom the story is for can actively participate in the writing of a social story (i.e. completing sentences starters, filling in the blank, etc.)
- Perspective, Descriptive and Affirmative sentences can be combined
- Written in positive, reassuring tone
- Use sentences that built in flexibility (i.e. "Most people ….," "I will try….," "Sometimes people……," "I may……," "Break is usually at 10:00 am," etc.)

Specific Guidelines

1) Social Stories should have a ratio of two to five descriptive, perspective and/or affirmative sentences for every directive sentence. In some cases directive statements may not be necessary.
2) Define a Goal
3) Write the text and tailor it to the learning style, needs, interests and abilities of the individual.
4) Critically review the story (yourself or ask someone else)
5) Design an implementation plan with staff involved.
6) Introduce the Social Story to the individual.

How are Social Stories Implemented?

- Review regularly at a calm time
- Before the individual enters a social situation
- Review in a relaxing atmosphere
- Do NOT use as a punitive consequence
- Introduce using a straightforward and honest approach (i.e. "Let's read together," "Let's read about…," "I have a reading about….," "I wrote a story for you about….,")
- Use a positive, calm and patient manner
- Have all appropriate people review the story with the individual
- Generally, introduce one at a time
- Review once a day and/or just prior to the applicable situation (this can be very individual)
- The story should be accessible to the individual to look at on their own as well
- Fade a Social Story by decreasing it's length, size or schedule of review
- If the individual becomes consistently defensive upon presentation of the Social Story consider increasing praise statements within the story or consider switching to a Social Story that describes a very successful social situation for that particular individual.

Resources

Children's Mental Health Ontario www.cmho.org
Geneva Centre for Autism www.autism.net
Gray, C. (2000). *The New Social Stories Book.* Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.
The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding www.thegraycenter.org