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Social Stories: An Accessibility Ramp

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The importance of ramping treatment and the need for everyone to have accessibility was something David Hingsburger taught us. Using Social Stories is one way to ramp information, expectations, concepts, or instructions. The term "Social Story" was defined by Carol Grey in 1991 as a communication tool for individuals with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). Individuals with ASD characteristically view the world through a lens that is different from the general population and often struggle with the ability to understand the perspectives of others. This can lead to misinterpretation of other people's intentions and to behavioural reactions that may be seen as socially inappropriate or out of context. Social Stories were historically used to help explain different perspectives to those with ASD in a format that would make social information easier to understand by converting complex information into meaningful words and illustrations.

Over the past 20 years, there has been significant research and development on the use of Social Stories. They can be adapted for a wide range of populations and are now commonly used by professionals and families as a tool to assist people with developmental disabilities to have greater accessibility to all kinds of information! Although the basic structure of a Social Story has remained the same, Carol Grey outlined 10 criteria that contributes to a well-written Social Story (Grey, 2019).

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1. **The Social Story Goal:** The author needs to share accurate information in a format that is meaningful to the individual.
2. **Two-Step Discovery:** The author needs to gather information to a) improve their understanding of the individual in relation to a situation, skill, or concept, i.e., What do they already know how to do? What do they need to learn? and b) identify one topic to focus on in each Social Story. At least 50% of all Social Stories also provide praise for achievements or things done well.
3. **Three Parts and a Title:** The Social Story should have a title and an introduction that makes the topic clear, a body that adds additional detail, and a conclusion that supports and summarizes the content.

4. **Four-mat:** The Social Story should be tailored to the individual's abilities, attention span, learning style, strengths, and interests. Social Stories should be written with the person being supported in mind. Like other forms of accessibility, one size/practice does not work for everyone! The words used should be the words most commonly used when talking with the supported individual. Words do not have to be proper words but those that the person can most easily identify. Pictures can be added to help the individual understand the concept being shared better; however, they don't need to be included if they are not adding to the level of understanding. The type of pictures used can be actual photos of places, items, or people, or generalized clipart-type images from a computer program, such as Boardmaker, or a drawing by the supported individual. It is important to only use images that are familiar to the individual; this isn't the time to introduce a person to the world of peccs.

Social Stories may be combined with modelling and role modelling to increase the comprehension of the information. The care provider can ask the individual questions to check for comprehension of the story and make changes as needed. Social Stories can also be recorded and played for the participant to follow. Other things to consider include attention span, audio support for reading, font size, as well as the use of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition.

5. **Five Factors Define Voice and Vocabulary:** The Social Story should convey a patient and supportive "voice" and vocabulary that is defined by 5 factors:
 - 1) Past, Present, and/or Future Tense: Use information from past events to guide future behaviours
 - 2) Positive and Patient Tone: Avoid judgmental words/phrases
 - 3) Literal Accuracy: Use clear sentences, avoid metaphors, etc.
 - 4) Accurate Meaning: Select the most accurate VERB. Analogies and metaphors are okay if understood.
 - 5) Use only the first- and/or third-person perspectives and avoid second-person statements. For example, "I will go to day services" or "They will help me at day services" instead of "you will go to day services."

It is important to be aware of words that can be triggering. Often, these words are related to changes or transitions. These words should be replaced with alternative words that the individual can also understand.

6. **Six Questions Guide Story Development:** The Social Story should answer the WHO (relevant people), WHAT (important cues), WHEN (time-related information), WHERE (place), HOW (activities, behaviours, statements, etc.), and WHY (reasons/rationale) elements involved.
7. **Seven is About Sentences:** A Social Story is made up of descriptive and coaching sentences.

Descriptive sentences are the only sentences that must be in every Social Story. They describe the who, what, when, where, how, and why of the context. For example, "The taxi will be at my house between 1 pm and 2 pm to take me to day services; I will have my morning routine done before the taxi arrives, and I will get to go to day services."

Perspective sentences: These provide information to the participant on the reactions and feelings of others involved when the desired behaviour is completed. For example, "The staff at day services will be happy to see me," and "The taxi driver will be able to stay on his schedule."

Affirmation sentences: These are sentences of encouragement and motivation. For example, "I feel good when I go to day services and my friends like to spend time with me."

Coaching sentences: These are sentences that gently guide behaviour. For example, "I will try my best to wake up at 8 am to start my morning routine."

8. **A GR-EIGHT Formula:** The traditional format of a Social Story developed by Carol Gray is a minimum of a 2:1 ratio of descriptive to coaching sentences. This means a well-written Social Story is much more descriptive than directive.
9. **Nine to Refine:** Review and revise as needed to ensure all criteria are met.
10. **Ten Guides to Implementation:**
 - **Plan for comprehension**
 - **Plan Story Support:** For example, visuals of key images, bookmarks, etc.
 - **Plan Story Review:** This teaching tool is proactive, meaning it should come before a transition or change occurs. ***Social Stories should never be used as a consequence for misbehaviour.*** A schedule for review should be developed. Having set times and people to review the Social Story creates consistency. The number of times per day to review the story depends on the subject matter and comprehension level of the participant. Often, this is once per day or before the event occurs.
 - **Plan a Positive Introduction:** All team members should know the story, and the story should be presented to the individual when they are in a calm state.
 - **Monitor:** Data needs to be taken on the effects of the Social Story and, if there is no effect on the behaviour after a few weeks, it is recommended that the Social Story be redone. Once the participant has mastered the desired behaviour, the Social Story should gradually fade out.
 - **Organize the Stories**
 - **Mix and Match Stories to Build Concepts**
 - **Story Reruns and Sequels to Tie Past, Present, and Future:** Keeping successful Social Stories for future reference on wording, length, etc. can help write future Social Stories.
 - **Recycle Instruction into Applause**
 - **Stay Current on Social Story Research and Updates**

Carol Gray (1989) describes the history of Social Stories as a 'silent coach,' helping to teach skills needed when no instructors were available. Social Stories can help to maintain consistency between instructors, especially when there are gaps in services or high turnover

rates. Social Stories also ensure that the personal opinions and values of the Direct Support Professional (DSP) do not get mixed within the messages being delivered. Sentences may be written in the Social Story about what the DSP or care provider will do to help support the individual. This reassures the individual that everyone will do the same thing and ensures routines and expectations are consistent.

The following is an example of a Social Story about sleep, including nine of the concepts discussed in this article:

Sleeping At Night Social Story

It is good for me to lie down on my bed to rest at the end of my day.



Rest keeps me healthy.

I will put my tablet away in my desk before I lie down on my bed to rest.

Sleep will happen when my body is ready.



I will try my best to think about things that make me happy and calm.

When I think about whiskers my cat, it helps me feel happy and calm.

When I sleep, I am rested and healthy for the next new day.

I feel good when I am rested and healthy for the day.

Friends like to spend time with me when I am rested for my day.

After a night's sleep or rest, it will be a new day for me.



I will lie down, and rest, and sleep will happen when my body is ready.

Goodnight everyone.

Conclusion

Social Stories, today, are written on many different topics, from changes in social expectations such as physical distancing and mask-wearing, to relationships, and healthy sexuality. Social Stories can also be a helpful tool to assist with transitions and routines, as well as academics. There is no limit to when a Social Story can be used to ramp up communication.

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