



Social stories™ and comic strip conversations can help autistic people develop greater social understanding and help them stay safe.

What are social stories?

Social stories™ were created by Carol Gray in 1991. They are short descriptions of a particular situation, event or activity, which include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why.

What are social stories for?

Social stories can be used to:

- develop self-care skills (for example, how to clean teeth, wash hands or get dressed), social skills (for example, sharing, asking for help, saying thank you, interrupting) and academic abilities
- help someone to understand how others might behave or respond in a particular situation
- help others understand the perspective of an autistic person and why they may respond or behave in a particular way
- help a person to cope with changes to routine and unexpected or distressing events (for example, absence of teacher, moving house, thunderstorms)
- provide positive feedback to a person about an area of strength or achievement in order to develop self-esteem
- as a behavioural strategy (for example, what to do when angry, how to cope with obsessions).

How do social stories help?

Social stories present information in a literal, 'concrete' way, which may improve a person's understanding of a previously difficult or ambiguous situation or activity. The presentation and content can be adapted to meet different people's needs.

They can help with sequencing (what comes next in a series of activities) and 'executive functioning' (planning and organising).

By providing information about what might happen in a particular situation, and some guidelines for behaviour, you can increase structure in a person's life and thereby reduce anxiety.

Creating or using a social story can help you to understand how the autistic person perceives different situations.

Example:

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.

How to write a social story

Carol Gray says you will need to **picture the goal, gather information, and tailor the text.**

Picture the goal

Consider the social story's purpose. For example, the goal may be to teach a child to cover their mouth when coughing.

Now think about what the child needs to understand to achieve this goal. For example, they need to understand why covering their mouth when coughing is important, ie it stops germs from being spread which may make other people sick.

Gather information

Collect information about the situation you want to describe in your social story. 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? If it is for a situation where a particular outcome is not guaranteed, use words like 'sometimes' and 'usually' in the story.

Stories should appeal to the interests of the person they are written for and avoid using words that may cause the person anxiety or distress. The content and presentation of social stories should be appropriate to the person's age and level of understanding. Use age-appropriate photographs, picture symbols or drawings with text to help people who have difficulty reading or for younger children.

Gather information about the person including their age, interests, attention span, level of ability and understanding.

Tailor the text

A social story needs to have a title, introduction, body and conclusion.

It should use gentle and supportive language.

It should answer six questions: where, when, who, what, how and why?

It should be made up of descriptive sentences, and may also have coaching sentences. A descriptive sentence accurately describes the context, such as where the situation occurs, who is there, what happens and why, for example:

- Christmas Day is 25 December.
- Sometimes I get sick.
- My body needs food several times per day; just like a steam train needs coal to stay running.

A coaching sentence gently guides behaviour, for example:

- I will try to hold an adult's hand when crossing the road.
- It's ok to ask an adult for help with nightmares.
- When I am angry, I can take three deep breaths, go for a walk or jump on the trampoline.

How to use social stories

- Think about ways to aid comprehension – would adding questions help, or replacing some text with blanks for the person to fill in?
- Find ways to support the story, eg create poster with a key phrase from the story.

- Plan how often, and where, the story will be shared with the person.
- Present the social story to the person at a time when everyone is feeling calm and relaxed, using a straightforward approach, eg I have written this story for you. It is about thunderstorms. Let's read it together now.
- Monitor how well the story is received and whether it is working as intended.
- Keep your stories organised in a ringbinder or computer folder. This makes them easier to find and review, and to develop with new information.

What are comic strip conversations?

Comic strip conversations, created by Carol Gray, are simple visual representations of conversation. They can show:

- the things that are actually said in a conversation
- how people might be feeling
- what people's intentions might be.

Comic strip conversations use stick figures and symbols to represent social interactions and abstract aspects of conversation, and colour to represent the emotional content of a statement or message.

By seeing the different elements of a conversation presented visually, some of the more abstract aspects of social communication (such as recognising the feelings of others) are made more 'concrete' and are therefore easier to understand.

Comic strip conversations can also offer an insight into how an autistic person perceives a situation.

How to use comic strip conversations

Comic strip conversations can help autistic people understand concepts that they find particularly difficult. People draw as they talk and use these drawings to learn about different social situations.

In a comic strip conversation, the autistic person takes the lead role, with parents, carers or teachers offering support and guidance.

- Start with small talk (for example, talking about the weather) to get the person you are supporting familiar with drawing while talking and to mimic ordinary social interactions.

- Ask a range of questions about a specific situation or type of social interaction. The autistic person answers by speaking and drawing their response.
- Summarise the event or situation you've discussed using the drawings as a guide.
- Think about how you can address any problems or concerns that have been identified.
- Develop an action plan for similar situations in the future. This will be a helpful guide for the autistic person.

For complex situations, or for people who have difficulty reporting events in sequence, comic strip boxes may be used, or drawings can be numbered in the sequence in which they occur.

Comic strip conversations can be used to plan for a situation in the future that may be causing anxiety or concern, for example an exam or a social event. However, remember that plans can sometimes change. It's important to present the information in a way which allows for unexpected changes to a situation.

How to make your own comic strip conversation

You can use just paper, pencils, crayons and markers, computer word processing applications, or you could use an app.

Ask the person you are supporting to choose what materials they would like to use.

Some people may like to have their comic strip conversations in a notebook, or saved on their smartphone or tablet, so that they can refer to them as needed, and easily recall key concepts.