

# Extending the Use of Social Stories to Young Children With Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities

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Many students identified with emotional or behavioral disorders have social skill deficits, often displayed as less mature or inappropriate social behavior (Kauffman, 2005, p. 10). Students may have difficulty engaging in appropriate play or social interactions and may at times become aggressive. Some students in this population may act out in class, and others may be withdrawn and become socially isolated. The inability to interact with others has a negative impact on academic achievement (Cullinan, 2004, p. 33) and places children at risk for the development of secondary problems (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse). Improving social functioning and behavior are primary intervention targets for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities (EBD).

Gray and Garand (1993) introduced the Social Story™ intervention as a method of teaching children with autism how to read social situations. The Social Story™ intervention involves a child reading a brief, individualized story, which explains how to negotiate a social situation the child finds challenging. The story provides the child with information about the situation and what other people in the situation may be thinking. The story may also validate what the child may be feeling and identify appropriate responses for the child. Social Stories™ have several advantages for use in the classroom. For example, the teacher can individualize the intervention to a child's unique strengths and skill deficits. Implementation of the intervention requires a minimal amount of instructional time. In addition, Social Stories™ incorporate

several effective strategies that special educators typically use with students with disabilities (Lorimer, Simpson, Myles, & Ganz, 2002) such as task analysis, modeling, priming, and visual supports. Teachers can also use Social Stories™ to support existing interventions (e.g., comprehensive behavior support plan, social skills curricula).

A growing body of literature has investigated the effectiveness of Social Stories™. Several studies have reported positive effects on the use of Social Stories™ to reduce challenging behaviors (Adams, Gouvousis, VanLue, & Waldron, 2004; Agosta, Graetz, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004; Brownwell, 2002; Crozier & Tincani, 2005, 2007; Kuoch & Mirenda, 2003; Kuttler, Myles, & Carlson, 1998; Lorimer et al., 2002; Reynhout & Carter, 2007; Scattone, Wilczynski, Edwards, & Rabian, 2002). A number of studies have also reported positive results on the use of Social Stories™ to increase appropriate behaviors (Barry & Burlew, 2004; Bledsoe, Smith-Myles, & Simpson, 2003; Crozier & Tincani, 2007; Delano & Snell, 2006; Ivey, Heflin, & Alberto, 2004; Norris & Dattilo, 1999; Sansosti & Powell-Smith, 2006; Swaggart et al., 1995; Thiemann & Goldstein, 2001). This research provides preliminary support for the use of Social Stories™ (Sansosti, Powell-Smith, & Kincaid, 2004) and suggests that the Social Story™ intervention is a promising practice for supporting appropriate behavior and teaching prosocial skills to students with autism (Simpson et al., 2005, p. 147).

Because young children with EBD may benefit from instruction in some of the same skills targeted in previous research on Social Stories™

(e.g., decreasing challenging behaviors, increasing appropriate social and communication skills), the Social Story™ intervention may be a useful tool for teachers working with young children with EBD. Based on prior research and classroom experiences, the authors suggest Social Stories™ be used with children with EBD between the ages of 5 and 9 years who display disruptive behaviors or refuse to engage in instructional activities. Students may be readers or nonreaders. Often, children at this age are accustomed to reading and listening to stories in the course of their school day. Social Stories™ may be combined with other interventions or used before the teacher tries more intrusive interventions. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers of students with EBD a simple process for including Social Stories™ as part of a comprehensive behavior support plan for children with EBD. Readers who would like training and information about Social Stories™ should visit the Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding at <http://thegraycenter.org/>. The process presented (see *Figure 1*) in this article is based on the authors' experiences in using Social Stories™ to help children replace inappropriate behavior with appropriate behavior that will serve the same function.

## Activities to Complete Before Implementing a Social Story™ Intervention

*Gather Information About the Child and Identify Challenging Behaviors*  
Before developing a Social Story™ for a child, it is important to

**Figure 1** CHECKLIST FOR INCLUDING FUNCTION-BASED SOCIAL STORIES™ IN A BEHAVIOR SUPPORT PLAN

**Gather information about the child and identify the challenging behavior.**

- o How old is the child?
- o What does the child like and dislike?
- o What are the child's skills in reading and writing?
- o What challenging behaviors currently interfere with the child's academic and / or social engagement?
- o Define the challenging behaviors in concrete, observable terms.

**Assess the target situation and identify the function of the challenging behavior.**

- o Collect data to identify the antecedents and consequences of the challenging behavior and to describe the baseline rate of the behavior.
- o Develop a hypothesis about the function of the challenging behavior.

**Develop a function-based Social Story™.**

- o Identify skills that can replace the student's challenging behavior and serve the same function as the challenging behavior.
- o Identify important social information (e.g., social concepts, social rules, and answers to "Wh" questions) about the target situation (Gray 2000).
- o Identify actions that other people in the environment can take to support the child.
- o Review Gray's (2000) guidelines for writing Social Stories™.
- o Write a skeleton story that is consistent with the student's reading skills.
- o Review the skeleton story and provide the student with opportunities to add information to the story.
- o Based upon student input, write the complete story.

**Implement the intervention, collect data and monitor progress.**

- o Identify additional strategies that teachers may implement initially to support the student.
- o Identify reinforcement and error correction procedures.
- o Develop a method (e.g., frequency, duration) for collecting data on the challenging behavior(s) and the replacement behavior(s).
- o Identify a schedule for reading the story and a means for monitoring story reading.
- o Implement the intervention.
- o Collect data and monitor progress.
- o Make data-based decisions to guide the implementation, modification and fading of the intervention.

know the child well and obtain information about the child's age, likes and dislikes, reading skills, and writing skills. If the child is a nonreader or beginning reader, it will be especially important to identify strategies that may enhance the child's comprehension of a story (e.g., picture cues, photographs, line drawings, etc.). If the child reads

independently, it will be necessary to identify the level of text the child can easily comprehend. Knowledge about the child's writing skills will enable the teacher to find ways to increase the child's active participation in the development of a Social Story™. When working with children with disruptive behavior, it is also important to define the

behaviors in concrete, observable terms.

For example, Murphy is an 8-year-old student in Mrs. Hernandez's second-grade class. Murphy likes ice cream and his friend Andrew. Among other things, he does not like "mean people." Murphy reads and comprehends material at a third-grade level. Writing is a laborious

process for Murphy. His teachers have difficulty reading his handwriting, and he tends to write word lists instead of sentences. Murphy loathes math. Murphy takes more time than his peers to complete addition and subtraction problems. His math teacher, Mrs. Franks, is concerned about Murphy's lack of participation in class and reports that Murphy often covers his head with his jacket, places his head on his desk, and pretends to be asleep. According to anecdotal reports in Murphy's school file, his previous teacher observed these behaviors in math class.

***Assess the Target Situation and Identify the Function of the Challenging Behavior***

The next step in the process is to gather information about the context and environment where the challenging behavior occurs. The purpose of conducting a functional assessment is to enable the educator to develop a hypothesis about the function of the student's inappropriate behavior and determine baseline levels for the behavior. In other words, a functional assessment lets the teacher understand why a student is displaying inappropriate behavior (e.g., to obtain attention, to escape demands, to obtain something tangible; Collins, 2007, p. 228). There is a variety of interview and observation tools available for conducting functional assessments. (See Fox & Gable, 2004, for a description of functional assessment procedures.) Once the teacher understands the function of a student's inappropriate behavior, she or he can begin to develop a comprehensive behavior support plan. One part of this plan may be the use of a Social Story™ to describe information about the target situation and to teach an alternative, appropriate behavior that will serve the same function as a problem behavior.

In returning to Murphy's situation, a functional assessment

revealed that whenever Murphy pretends to be asleep during math class, Mrs. Franks refrains from asking him questions and does not attempt to collect his daily assignment. This provides an escape from questions and completing his assignment.

***Identify Replacement Behaviors and Develop a Function-Based Social Story™***

The next step is for teachers to use the results of the functional assessment to write a Social Story™. It is important for teachers to identify replacement skills that can serve the same function as the challenging behavior and to pinpoint relevant social information about the target situation that will be incorporated into the story. It is also important for teachers to identify additional strategies that they will implement to support the student. In other words, the teacher will create the Social Story™ based on the function of the child's problem behavior. The story will provide the student with information about the situation, suggest appropriate behaviors that may replace his or her current inappropriate behavior, and describe ways that other people in the environment will support the student.

In Murphy's case, the story will teach Murphy to request more time when Mrs. Franks asks him to answer a math problem. This would provide an escape from answering the question immediately. The story will also include information about teachers' or peers' perspectives and describe what other people in the situation can do to assist Murphy. For example, Mrs. Franks identified several strategies that she will use to help Murphy be more successful in class and perhaps prevent Murphy's challenging behavior. Mrs. Franks will preview the daily math problems with Murphy before class and let him start the problems before class begins. Mrs. Franks will also provide Murphy with a short list of questions

that she will ask him during whole-group instruction. While students are completing independent seatwork, Murphy will have an opportunity to ask Mrs. Franks for clarification about any of these questions so that he is prepared to participate in whole-group instruction.

After the teacher has identified the skill that will replace the student's challenging behavior, relevant social information, and any other strategies that will be used to support the student, it's time to write the Social Story™. Although the method for writing Social Stories™ is not based on empirical research, Gray (2000) presented very specific guidelines for writing a Social Story™. She suggested adhering to these guidelines to ensure that the story has a patient and reassuring quality and to create a story that focuses more on describing social information and less on directing behavior. We have tried to follow Gray's guidelines in writing stories and have found them quite useful in ensuring that stories are informative and maintain a positive tone. However, in our work with children with EBD, we have found it useful to focus on teaching skills to replace a child's challenging behavior. Thus, we have often found that our stories tend to be more directive than the guidelines suggest. Although our stories do provide important social information (e.g., social concepts, social rules, answers to "Wh" questions), the stories tend to focus primarily on changing behavior. This is not consistent with the guidelines. Future research may address the application of the guidelines with various populations of students. At this point, we can only make suggestions based on clinical experience. Although a teacher may find that in the process of individualizing a story for a child with EBD there may be a benefit to deviating from the guidelines, as a starting point, we recommend that teachers consult the many available resources (e.g., Gray, 2000, 2004) for learning how to write a Social Story™

consistent with Gray's guidelines. We will summarize these guidelines next.

According to Gray, a Social Story™ includes an introduction, body, and conclusion; answers "Wh" questions; is written in the first person; has a positive tone; and is concrete and easy to understand. Gray also suggests that a Social Story™ consists of four basic types of sentences: (a) descriptive sentences that provide facts about the situation ("The children play kickball at recess"), (b) perspective sentences that describe another person's feelings ("The teacher likes it when the children raise their hands"), (c) directive sentences that suggest an appropriate response to a situation ("I may ask my friend for help"), and (d) affirmative sentences that stress an important point ("This is a good idea"). In addition, Gray (2000) suggested that a Social Story™ should have a ratio of two to five descriptive, perspective, and/or affirmative sentences for every zero to one directive sentence. This means that for every directive sentence in the story, there will be two to five other types of sentences in the story.

We recommend that teachers of children with EBD create a skeleton of a story and engage the child in writing the complete story. This will provide an opportunity for the adult and child to examine the situation together. The child actively contributes to the story and helps identify appropriate behaviors that could replace the problem behavior. First, the teacher writes a skeleton story at the appropriate level for the child and includes picture supports when necessary. The skeleton story contains blanks where the teacher has omitted facts and information, much like in Gray's (2004, p. 9) partial sentences. See *Figure 2* for an example of a skeleton story. Then, the teacher and child discuss the target situation, and the teacher explains how a Social Story™ can help the child be successful in the situation. The teacher and child read the skeleton story, and the child is encouraged to

help complete the story by filling in the blanks. See *Figure 2* for an example of a complete story.

Mrs. Franks wrote a skeleton story and then reviewed it with Murphy. He made suggestion for behaviors to replace Murphy's sleeping behavior and for filling in the other blanks in the skeleton story. When they completed the story, Murphy was ready to start using it before class.

### Implementation and Progress Monitoring

After writing the function-based story, the teacher is ready to implement the intervention. As with all interventions, and especially when extending the use of an intervention to a new population, it is critical to monitor student progress and make modifications as appropriate. The teacher will monitor the student's progress by collecting data on the target challenging behavior and the target replacement behavior. The teacher may also collect information about how often the student reads the story and how often the teacher uses additional strategies to help the student be successful. At first the teacher or another adult and child will read the story together. It may be useful to read the story immediately prior to the target situation. After several sessions reading with an adult, students who are independent readers may start reading the story on their own. Beginning readers may continue to read the story with an adult, or they may listen to a tape of the story.

Murphy and Mr. Bryant, a paraprofessional, read his story just before math class. Mr. Bryant provided questions or role-play activities to assess Murphy's comprehension of the story. After several sessions in which Murphy accurately completed comprehension activities, he started reading the story on his own before math class. Murphy used a chart to record each time he read the story. During math

class, Mr. Bryant recorded the number of 10-minute intervals in which Murphy was awake and his head was not on his desk. He also recorded the number of questions Murphy answered.

As the student with EBD is first learning to apply the information from the story to the classroom, it may be helpful to pair other interventions with the Social Story™. Simpson (1993) suggested including a simple reinforcement system with a Social Story™. Teachers may also consider the use of visual supports (Thiemann & Goldstein, 2001) or prompting procedures. It is important for teachers to identify reinforcement procedures that they will implement when the child displays the replacement behavior or refrains from engaging in the target challenging behavior. It is also important for teachers to identify error correction procedures that they will implement when the child displays the target challenging behavior.

Mrs. Franks provided verbal praise after every 10-minute period in which Murphy did not put his head on his desk. She also placed a visual support on his desk. This visual support included two pictures. The first picture illustrated a child raising his hand in class with a caption that read, "I will try to answer questions." The other picture showed a teacher standing next to a child at his desk. The caption read, "I can ask for help. I can ask for more time." If Murphy did not participate and answer questions, Mrs. Franks implemented an error correction procedure. She pointed to the visual supports and reminded Murphy to remember his story. Mr. Bryant recorded the number of times Mrs. Franks provided these prompts.

Teachers continue to review the data on a regular basis and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. If the data demonstrate that the student is making progress, the teacher may choose to fade the additional intervention. If the student

Figure 2 MURPHY'S STORIES

### Skeleton Story for Murphy Math Class

Students go to math class every day. It's important to learn math skills because \_\_\_\_\_. I can do well in math class by trying to \_\_\_\_\_. Mrs. Franks can help me do well in math class by \_\_\_\_\_. Mrs. Franks knows a lot about math. She likes to teach us math. Sometimes Mrs. Franks asks us to sit at our desk and do math problems. Most days we get to work with blocks and shapes. Mrs. Franks asks us questions about math. She asks questions to help us learn. Sometimes when Mrs. Franks calls on me, I know the answer and I tell her the answer. Sometimes Mrs. Franks calls on me and I don't know the answer or I need more time to think or finish the problem. This is okay. If I don't know the answer I can \_\_\_\_\_. If I need more time I can \_\_\_\_\_. I will try my best to do my work in math class and answer questions. It's important that I try to answer some of the questions. It's okay if I make a mistake or if I don't answer every question. Nobody knows the answer to every question. It's difficult to finish all of the problems during class. This is okay. If I want her to, Mrs. Franks can help me by working with me before \_\_\_\_\_. She also can let me start the math problems before class. At the end of class, I will give my assignment to \_\_\_\_\_. She will know that I did my work and tried to learn.

### Complete Story for Murphy Math Class

Students go to math class every day. It's important to learn math skills because I want to learn about money. I can do well in math class by trying to stay awake. Mrs. Franks can help me do well in math class by liking my answers. Mrs. Franks knows a lot about math. She likes to teach us math. Sometimes Mrs. Franks asks us to sit at our desk and do math problems. Most days we get to work with blocks and shapes. Mrs. Franks asks us questions about math. She asks questions to help us learn. Sometimes when Mrs. Franks calls on me, I know the answer and I tell her the answer. Sometimes Mrs. Franks calls on me and I don't know the answer or I need more time to think or finish the problem. This is okay. If I don't know the answer I can say, "I need help". If I need more time I can say, "I need more time". I will try my best to do my work in math class and answer questions. It's important that I try to answer some of the questions. It's okay if I make a mistake or if I don't answer every question. Nobody knows the answer to every question. It's difficult to finish all of the problems during class. This is okay. If I want her to, Mrs. Franks can help me by working with me before class. She also can let me start the math problems before class. At the end of class, I will give my assignment to Mrs. Franks. She will know that I did my work and tried to learn about math.

continues to progress, the teacher may reduce the story-reading schedule (e.g., reading the story every other day, once a week, etc.) gradually as the rate of challenging behaviors decreases and the rate of

the replacement behavior increases. It is critical that the teacher continue to collect data even after the intervention is faded. This will enable the teacher to act quickly if the student's performance declines. For

example, if the duration of Murphy's sleeping behavior increases, Mrs. Franks may initiate a more frequent story-reading schedule or reintroduce the visual supports. Progress monitoring and data-based

instructional decisions are critical parts of successfully incorporating a Social Story™ into a child's behavior support plan.

### Summary

Teachers and researchers have effectively implemented Social Stories™ to support children with autism spectrum disorders. We have described a process for extending the use of Social Stories™ to children with EBD. Teachers may complete this process as an educational team completes a functional assessment. It consists of four steps, including gathering information about the child and problem behavior, assessing the situation and identifying the function of the problem behavior, developing a function-based Social Story™, and implementing the intervention and monitoring progress. Social Stories™ provide teachers with a versatile intervention that may be incorporated into a comprehensive behavior support plan. This intervention provides teachers with a strategy that requires minimal instructional time, can be implemented in a variety of settings (e.g., self-contained classrooms, inclusive classrooms, etc.), and can be individualized to address a variety of contexts and instructional needs. Although additional research is necessary to examine the use of Social Stories™ with children with EBD, when Social Stories™ are based on the results of a functional assessment, they may be a useful component of a behavior support plan for a child with EBD.

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