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Using Social Stories to Ease Children's Transitions

One of the greatest challenges for both families and teachers is a young child's successful transition to a new school experience. To become more sensitive to the needs of children, early childhood teachers have long focused on the transition process itself. And activities such as open houses, home visits, and creating a gradual entrance into the school day are quite common.

Despite all the teacher planning and execution of developmentally appropriate strategies, some children still have difficulty separating from parents to begin their formal school experience that includes joining a classroom community. Social stories—teacher-made books written for children on topics relevant to an individual—can provide assistance for those toddlers and preschool-age children who need help in the transition process.

Social stories: Their use and start

A teacher creates personalized short social stories—books about topics such as classroom routines or social interactions—to address the needs of a particular child. Social stories are unique in that they can identify a concern and develop a story that supports a desired outcome, also allowing differing perspectives to be addressed (Gray 1994). The flexibility of the text allows the child to either learn directions for appropriate behavior or make his or her own choices (Boswell & Nugent 2002). Because the stories are written from a child's perspective and are about the child, himself or herself, they provide concreteness with an object the child can hold and emotional support from the story itself.

Originally, social stories were created to support the social and emotional development of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) (Gray 1994). Children with ASD often have challenges in verbal and nonverbal communication within social interactions (see the definition of ASD in Part B of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]). Typically, children with ASD have difficulty predicting what will happen in a social situation (Wallin 2001). As a strategy, social stories give children a personalized reference to use in adapting to social situations and experiencing successful outcomes.

A growing body of research in special education supports the use and continued study of the effectiveness of social stories for children with autism (Swaggert 1995; Del Valle, McEachern, & Chambers 2001). With the increased use of social stories within the special education population, it is reasonable to



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begin to apply the practice with children in general education programs who have limited oral language and social skills.

Creating social stories

Creating a social story requires four elements described by Gray (1994). Specific sentence structures each provide an element to the story and include descriptive, perspective, affirmative, and directive text. *Descriptive* statements relate to the most important aspect of the story and guide the telling of the story. *Perspective* sentences refer to other people's feelings or opinions in the story. *Directive* sentences provide literal behavioral choices for the reader. *Affirmative* statements highlight a "commonly shared value with a culture" (Gray 1994, 3). The use of directive statements should be limited, Gray (1994) believes, thus allowing the reader more flexibility in choices.



A toddler's transitions

Patrick, a typically developing toddler, began attending a local Montessori program at age two. Before that, a nanny had cared for him in his home, but as he approached his second birthday, his parents decided he would benefit from interactions with other children in a group setting. In early September Patrick entered full-day care in a classroom with nine other toddlers. Patrick and his parents had visited the classroom and attended meetings, but on school mornings, separating from his parents was difficult, and upsetting for Patrick and his parents.

After Patrick's primary caregiver at the Montessori program established a consistent drop-off routine with one parent, she created a social story to support him in the morning transition to the program. Photographs were taken of Patrick to document his daily routine: exiting his parents' car, entering the school building, and hanging up his coat. Additional photographs showed Patrick greeting the classroom animals, reading a book with his dad, hugging Dad good-bye, and sitting on the rug with his primary caregiver. The story concluded with photographs of Dad waving good-bye at the door and Patrick beginning his "work" at an activities table. The photographs were arranged chronologically and laminated into a book for Patrick.

Gut and Safran suggest that using illustrations in social stories helps young children make transitions by providing "a more visual understanding of the situation" (2002, 90). Following are samples from Patrick's book.



Photograph	Story text
Patrick leaving car	<i>Patrick's daddy is taking Patrick from the car.</i> (descriptive statement)
Patrick at coat hook	<i>Next, Patrick hangs up his coat. That is a good idea.</i> (descriptive and affirmative statement)
Patrick and parent hugging	<i>Patrick's daddy says good-bye with a hug. He will miss Patrick today, but he will see him again at home tonight.</i> (descriptive and perspective statements)

This social story for Patrick allowed him to review the morning routine in a predictable manner.



This social story for Patrick allowed him to review the morning routine in a predictable manner. He was able to anticipate what would happen next and revisit how his day began. All of these steps helped to reduce anxiety (Gut & Safran 2002), especially in Patrick's early verbal development. Patrick could carry his book around with him in the morning, and he had access to it during the day whenever he wanted to read it again. He and his primary caregiver also read the book together. This shared social experience led to further opportunities for dialog and caregiver reassurances.

A third level of social and emotional interaction happened when Patrick shared his book with his peers. These exchanges facilitated Patrick's membership in his new social group—his class—as he became included within the community. The consistent morning routine and the assistance his special book provided were comforting to Patrick.

Using social stories with young children is a unique way to include children with special needs. As an intervention approach it is also compatible with characteristics of typically developing toddlers like Patrick, including enjoyment in looking at picture books, pleasure from being read to by adults, and beginning signs of empathy and caring for others (Allen & Marotz 1999).

Transitions of a preschooler

Luke entered a formal preschool program at age four. Each morning he stood in the doorway of the classroom, appearing confused and unsure what to do. He waited for a teacher to take his hand and lead him to a table to find his story dictation journal. He did not interact with other teachers or children.

Often Luke's father would walk him into the classroom and help him find his journal. His father opened Luke's journal and began writing in it in an effort to help Luke with the transition. At first the teachers in his program thought that Luke was shy, and they characterized his difficult transition as an adjustment period. However, Luke's behavior remained unchanged even after several weeks in the program.

The teachers decided to create a social story to support Luke in making the transition into the preschool classroom. Only four pages long, the social story was titled "Luke Goes to School," and it featured a photograph of Luke on the cover. Here are the pages from Luke's book.

Photograph	Story text
Luke walking through the classroom door waving to his friends	<i>Luke says hello to his friends when he comes to school.</i>
Luke writing in his journal	<i>Luke finds his journal and draws a picture.</i>
Luke finding a book from the classroom library.	<i>Luke finds a book and reads it on the rug.</i>
Luke and classmates sharing a book on the rug.	<i>Luke is ready to begin his day. It's going to be a great day!</i>

In the beginning, teachers read the social story to Luke and let him to carry the book with him during his morning routine. Eventually, Luke found the book on his own and read it to himself. Luke's teachers noticed that he was more comfortable and relaxed when he entered the room with his social story in hand; he enjoyed reading the story about himself. Then, after a few

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experiences with a teacher walking him to the journal table each morning, Luke was able to do this by himself. He still had difficulty greeting the other children in the classroom, but the teachers noted the significant progress he had made in independently entering the classroom each morning and beginning his day.

Through the process of observing Luke and evaluating his difficulty in the daily transition to school, his teachers found a solution that was developmentally appropriate and generated success for Luke. The outcome of this experience showed teachers to be “social coaches” in Luke’s transition experience (Danko & Buysse 2002).

Benefits of social stories

Social stories are beneficial because they assist young children in memory development and self-regulation. For memory performance, story scripts offer general information of what will happen and when it will happen (Berk 2003).

Social stories support the development of empathy by providing children with opportunities to understand differing points of view. Empathy appears early in infant development, and around age one the foundation of the connection to other human beings is formed (Berk 2003). By age two, children explore their feelings and the feelings of others, as they begin to understand their own sense of self (Berk 2003).

Toddlers and preschoolers experience developmental challenges, including autonomy; significant gains in language and physical growth (Allen & Marotz 1999); and the socializing school experience. Social stories are a simple and dramatic way to support children with a variety of learning styles in a process that leads to more successful school experiences.

Conclusion

Social stories become visual scripts for young children. These stories help children organize and interpret daily events, such as entering a classroom without the assistance of a caregiver or separating from a parent.

Self-regulation occurs as children acquire language skills. By age two, children display growth in mental representation and language abilities, but they still have difficulty controlling and understanding their feelings and behavior (Berk 2003). For toddlers, social stories support this process and provide the language and guidance on how to behave or what to expect in a given situation. Preschoolers learn self-regulation by observing adults and imitating their actions (Berk 2003). Social stories provide a model for children to emulate; they are always written to reflect positive prosocial behaviors and outcomes.

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