

Social Stories: A Supportive Tool for Understanding Social Experiences

What are social stories?

Social stories are short, personalized stories that help children understand what may happen in a specific situation or environment. They provide predictability and clarity, which can reduce anxiety and support regulation—especially during new, uncertain, or emotionally charged experiences.

Social stories are most effective when they are personalized, simple, and used as a support—not a demand.

What Social Stories Are:

- ✓ A way to help children preview and understand social situations
- ✓ A tool for reducing uncertainty and anxiety
- ✓ A visual support that explains what might happen
- ✓ A shared language for talking about experiences and expectations
- ✓ Most effective when based on the child's real life and real people

Examples of situations social stories can support:

- Visiting grandma's house
- Going to a birthday party
- Starting school or a new classroom
- Attending a medical or therapy appointment
- Traveling or changes in routine

What Social Stories Are Not:

- ✗ A way to teach compliance or “expected” social behaviors
- ✗ A tool for enforcing social norms (e.g., eye contact, forced turn-taking)

- ✗ A script children are required to follow
- ✗ A checklist of “right” behaviors

Social stories should support understanding, not pressure children to perform.

How to Create an Effective Social Story:

Use real pictures whenever possible

- Photos of the child
- Photos of the actual people involved (e.g., grandma)
- Photos of the real location (e.g., grandma’s house, classroom, clinic)

While examples may use stock images, the most effective social stories use real, familiar visuals.

Keep it simple

- Use short sentences
- Focus on what the child may see, hear, or experience
- Avoid “must,” “should,” or behavioral demands
- Include reassurance and flexibility (e.g., “Sometimes...”)

Use accessible formats

- Create the story using Google Slides or PowerPoint
- Print the slides and staple them into a small book
- Read it together or allow the child to look through it independently
- You can also scroll through the story on a phone, tablet, or computer

Involving Older Children:

Older children can help create their own social stories, which can be especially powerful. This process allows them to:

- Ask questions
- Express worries or uncertainties
- Share their thoughts and expectations
- Feel more in control of upcoming experiences

Making the story together can be just as supportive as reading it.

