

The Most Comprehensive Special Needs Solutions in the World



Special Learning



# Special Learning Social Stories

Unlocking Social Growth One Story at a Time



Instructional Guide

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# Special Learning Social Stories Kit

## Unlocking Social Growth One Story at a Time



## Instructional Guide

**Special Learning's** mission is to help individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities, around the globe, achieve their highest level of potential. We provide customized solutions that inform, educate and empower parents, care providers, educators and professionals to implement effective teaching and treatment practices. Our comprehensive line of products and services, developed in accordance with Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) practices, is designed to promote successful learning and independence for individuals with special needs.

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For all individuals with special needs who inspire us to reach toward a brighter future for all.

– **Karen Chung**, Founder and CEO,  
Special Learning, Inc.



## **A Message From the Founders**

Special Learning, Inc., an educational resource company and provider of mobile technology solutions, exists to offer every parent of a child diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, or other developmental disability a genuine chance to help their son or daughter attain a more successful and independent life.

Our products and services are developed in accordance with the evidence-based practice of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Therapy. ABA Therapy is a scientific approach used to change behavior. It is derived from the principle that behavior is affected by consequences, and these consequences can be used to change behavior. For individuals with ASD or another developmental disability, the focus of ABA is on affecting or changing behaviors that will allow that individual to achieve more independence.

More than five decades of scientific research have proven that treatment based on the principles and procedures of ABA can significantly improve the quality of life for children with ASD. In many cases, with early and intensive intervention, ABA therapy can permit these children to mainstream into the typical classroom. Our extensive experience providing intensive behavioral intervention using ABA confirms what the research tells us.

We believe ABA provides powerful teaching strategies and have designed our Social Stories around ABA principles. This instructional booklet contains information and explanations of how to incorporate social stories into your child's educational curriculum.

Special Learning is dedicated to becoming a global leader in special needs by empowering you with the tools and technology to help your child reach his or her full potential. We look forward to helping you and your child grow!

## Social Stories: Unlocking Social Growth

Most children start developing social skills at a young age by learning through their environment. Basic social skills like greeting others, asking for help, sharing, and waiting their turn are lessons that children generally pick up by watching others, imitating what they see and taking notice of social cues in their environment. Children with special needs, like Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, and other developmental disabilities, often do not understand what is taking place in their own environment. Social skills are one of the core deficits of individuals with ASD, thus causing them to be less likely to engage appropriately in social situations. Children with special needs often require more structured interventions in order to learn the skills they need to be successful in society and to have more positive experiences with peers. One of the most successful strategies for teaching social skills to children with special needs is social stories.

### What is a social story?

Social stories, created by Carol Grey, are short stories that depict specific social situations that children with special needs may encounter. Each unique story features a lesson to teach certain social norms and behaviors accepted in society that a child with special needs may find difficult or confusing. Through the use of repetitive examples and illustrations, social stories help children understand the behavior that is expected of them. This prevents further anxiety on the part of your child and allows them to fit in more comfortably in society.



There are several distinguishing characteristics of a social story that set it apart from any other children's story:

1. Social stories are very short.
2. Social stories are personalized.
3. Social stories are written in first person, from the perspective of



the child.

4. Social stories use very simplified language.

### How are social stories created?

The first step in creating a social story is to decide what social behavior will be targeted. Each Special Learning social story targets a specific behavior or skill for a specific age group. Parents may wish to target different behaviors than teachers, but it's important



to realize that social stories can cross over to any environment. When choosing a social story that targets a specific behavior, it's necessary to assess your child's current skill level to determine if he or she has the pre-requisite skills necessary to be successful at learning the new behavior.

Social stories are written with a child's strengths in mind. They are meant to be positive and engage your child in learning something new by focusing on what he or she is already good at and what makes him or her feel good about themselves. To accomplish this, three different sentence types are used, all designed to teach and reinforce positive and targeted behavior.

1. **Descriptive Sentences:** These types of sentences objectively define where a situation occurs, who is involved, what they are doing, and why. Descriptive sentences give context to the situation.

Example: "When I'm at recess with nothing to do and I see my classmates doing something I enjoy, I can go to them and say, "Hi guys. Can I play with you?"

2. **Directive Sentences:** These are individualized statements of desired responses.

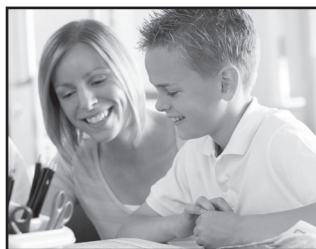
Example: "When someone gives me something I say THANK YOU."

3. **Perspective Sentences:** These sentences describe the feelings and reactions of others in certain situations.

Example: "It makes my family and friends happy when I wear clean clothes every day."

## Benefits of Social Stories

Social stories are an effective intervention for children with special needs for several reasons. Social stories take skills that may be complex and overwhelming for your child with special needs and break them down into steps that are much easier to understand. Social Stories have been shown to successfully reduce disruptive behaviors, and increase peer interaction and social engagement. Social stories provide both visual cues and verbal cues to a learner, thus leading to a more integrated approach for learners of different levels. As a parent, educator or caregiver, you can read the story to your child, or engage your child in reading the story independently because of the simplistic language that a social story uses.



Social stories can be written to teach a wide variety of skills and behaviors, and are ideal for use in any environment. Because of their short length, social stories are a quick way to introduce or reinforce a skill in your child's natural learning environment. Through the use of simple, repetitive language, social stories promote more review of the skills being taught.



## Using Social Stories for Teaching

Incorporating social stories into your teaching repertoire may seem like a no-brainer, right? Not so fast. While social stories are very easy to use for any parent, teacher, or caregiver, it's important to remember a few

key tips to optimize learning.

1. Assess your child's current learning level to determine the appropriate social story level.
2. Evaluate prerequisite skills the child has before deciding on what skills to teach.

3. Establish a routine with each social story based on what skills you are teaching.
4. Allow your child to easily access the story by keeping it in a location that is familiar and within your child's reach.
5. Prompt your child to read the story independently at regular times throughout the day or directly before entering certain social situations. For example, if you are teaching your child to greet others, it would be appropriate to read the story, *Saying Hi*, one to times per day. Reading the story before your child goes to school in the morning or before going to see family or friends would be strategic times to read the story also.
6. Involve other family members, caregivers, treatment team members and peers to reinforce *generalization* of the skills. Generalization happens when your child begins to apply the skills learned in one specific situation to other similar situations. For example, if Susie is taught to say "Thank you" after receiving a ball from her mother and she then says "Thank you" when she receives a pencil from her teacher, she is beginning to generalize the skill.
7. Utilize teachable moments by reading the stories to your child while in the social situation or during a behavioral moment. Dramatically enhance the effectiveness of social stories by looking for teachable moments in which to use them. Read an appropriate social story to your child while a given social situation is occurring or during a behavioral moment. For example, you are teaching your child how to tie his shoes and he becomes upset when he has a difficult time getting the hang of it. This would be a perfect time to read, *Trying When It's Hard*, and review the concept of continuing try something, even though it may be hard to learn.
8. Provide positive reinforcement, or praise and rewards, to your child when he or she is displaying appropriate behavior.
9. Upon mastery of the skill, continue to review the social story periodically to maintain the skill.

## Using Reinforcement

The use of a social story with your child with special needs may be challenging at first. Often, it takes many reads of the story with high reinforcement of each lesson before your child can begin to perform the skill appropriately. A parent, teacher, or caregiver can help by praising your child after reading the story and providing reinforcement for displaying appropriate behavior in the social situation. You should give assistance to your child in reading the story and provide additional understanding. However, assistance should be limited and faded out over time to increase independence.



A schedule of reinforcement like this can be followed when teaching social skills with social stories:

- Initially, your child should receive reinforcement after engaging in any appropriate behavior. This includes sitting quietly, listening, paying attention to the story, reading the story, answering questions, engaging in role play, and displaying the appropriate social skill.
- After time, the frequency of reinforcement is systematically decreased by providing a reward for two responses (i.e. listening to the page and answering a question correctly), then three responses (i.e. listening to the page, answering a question correctly, and listening to the next page) and so on.
- Eventually provide your child with a variable schedule of reinforcement. This means that the number of responses required for a response or amount of time that passes between rewards is unpredictable to your child.

## Using a Token Economy System

A token economy system is a well-researched reinforcement method in which your child earns tokens for positive behavior. Earned tokens can be exchanged for desired rewards (e.g. activities, items or privileges), also



referred to as reinforcers. Token systems require a pre-determined number of items to be completed by your child to earn a token—star, smiley face, check mark, dollars, etc. These are only a few examples of what an individual may earn. The tokens become conditioned reinforcers. As they are paired with something that your child already considers rewarding, your child understands that they symbolize reinforcement.

To explain further, the token, a smiley face picture, is not automatically reinforcing for your child. However, you know that cheerios, tickles, and a hug and kiss are reinforcing for your child. If you give your child cheerios, tickles or a hug and kiss at the same time that you give the child a token, the token eventually feels just as reinforcing to your child as those things that were already reinforcing.

In a token economy, a “contract” is made between your child and you, where your child is working for a “big reinforcer.” Your child must earn a predetermined number of tokens before receiving the “big reinforcer.” You then give the child tokens for correct responses or correct behavior. When the child has received enough tokens, he or she trades them in to you for the contracted reward, also referred to as a reinforcer.

Token economy systems may benefit individuals within the home, academic, community, and vocational settings. In practice they can be easily implemented to increase attention, task performance and compliance.



A token system can be easily implemented if you follow the steps as outlined below:

1. **Select tokens** – this step has already been completed for you with the tokens provided at the end of this booklet.
2. **Decide the target behavior** – If this is a correct answer, then does the correct answer come with appropriate behaviors as well or is the

child young enough and a new enough learner that it would be unfair to expect the answer with the absence of behaviors. If the target behavior is an appropriate behavior such as raising his or her hand before talking in class, the definition of the behavior that earns a token would be hand raising before talking.

3. **Select reinforcers** - Create a menu of reinforcers. Select a variety of items that typically motivate your child. Provide choices to the child by showing the actual objects, a picture menu, or listing whatever is appropriate for your child. Remember, your child will be working a lot for the 'big' reinforcer. Make sure that your child will be earning a large enough amount of the item or a long enough time with the item to make it worth the amount of work expected.
4. **Decide exchange schedule** – How many tokens does the child need in order to trade them in for his or her true reward? At first, only expect a few tokens in order to receive the reward. You are still teaching your child how a token economy works. Later, you can expect 6-10 short, quick, or easy responses or 1-2 longer or more difficult responses. That way, no matter how many tokens you expect before exchange, the child is provided with a clear visual as to what is needed before starting to work.
5. **Teach tokens are reinforcers** - Prior to beginning to use the token economy for the first time, make sure that your child has practiced receiving a single token and exchanging it for a small reward. This can be done just by handing them a token when they do something well or answer something correctly and then holding out your hand to take away the token at the same time as handing them the reward.
6. **Begin using the token system** - When you use the token system, first, you should ask your child what he or she is working for and provide the menu of reinforcers. After he or she selects the reinforcer, you should write in the chosen reward in the space provided. Then, begin your work with the child and provide a token for each correct response or behavior. When your child receives a token, prompt him or her to put the token on the token board. Once all tokens are earned, show him or her that they have all their tokens and now can get the

reward they had chosen.

7. **Increase expectations** – As the child becomes familiar with the use of a token system, begin expecting more responses before giving a token and expect more tokens in order to exchange them for the ‘big’ reinforcer.

## Maintaining Social Skills

Social skills can take a long time to master for many children, especially those with autism or other developmental disabilities. Once your child has practiced the skill, learned it, and is able to perform the skill in the situation necessary, the skill is considered mastered. However, you will want to make sure that your child can perform the same skill after a period of time. It's important to do regular maintenance activities to ensure your child's continued ability to keep the skill or maintain the knowledge. Maintenance is a vital step in the teaching process that often gets overlooked.

The simplest approach to maintenance is a systematic one. Up to this point, the skill has been presented and practiced daily until mastery. So, in order to begin checking maintenance the first few times, check the skill three times per week. Make sure to document if your child can do the skill so you are able to adjust the schedule of maintenance based on if he or she can consistently perform without the use of prompts or “teaching.”

If your child can perform the skill independently for two weeks in a row, decrease the maintenance schedule to two times per week. If he or she continues to demonstrate the skill as mastered, adjust the maintenance schedule in order as follows: two times per week, one time per week, three times per month, two times per month, one time per month, one time per quarter and a six month checkup. Skills that are used much less frequently, are not used in daily life, or that do not prove as mastered should be checked more frequently to assure that mastery is maintained.

Conversely, if your child cannot perform the skill independently on a three times per week schedule for the two weeks in a row, *increase* the schedule to four or five times per week. Any time your child cannot perform the requested skill during maintenance after two weeks or two months, depending on the maintenance schedule, increase the schedule to the

last maintenance schedule he or she was successful on. Then decrease the schedule when your child shows they are maintaining it. This should flow back and forth between schedules based on your child's independent responses or lack of them.

## Special Learning Social Stories Kits

At Special Learning we take a comprehensive approach to teaching any skill. Each story comes to you in an 8 1/2 x 11 full color version, along with additional teaching tools that fit together to create a robust learning solutions kit to teach fundamental life and social lessons.

We have outlined the manner in which you can best utilize these tools together to help your child grow socially.

### 8x11 Social Story Book in Color

Begin by using this tool to introduce the story and the skill to your child. It's important to use this story with your child consistently throughout the day to teach the skill first without worrying about him or her actually using the skill.

Also, be sure to read the story right before social situations where your child could potentially use the skill, or when he or she might be exhibiting a behavior that is opposite of the skill you are trying to teach. For example, if the child begins to cry when something is hard, it would be a good time to review the story *Trying When it's Hard*.

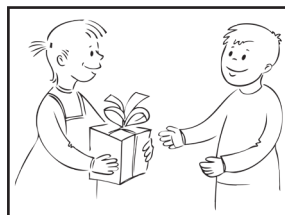
- Read the story in repetition as much as possible. Social stories are meant to be very well learned, if not memorized by a child. As a behavior note, in most cases, it is fine for your child to *perseverate*, or become hyper-focused, on a social stories book as long as it is not a target behavior that you are currently working on reducing.
- After your child is familiar with the book, in addition to reading it immediately prior to the social situation, begin to also reference the book during circumstances when the skill is necessary. You can reference it verbally or visually by showing the page(s) that are specific to each step of the skill.



- If your child has the communicative ability, begin stopping him or her in the situation and ask, “What are you going to do?” or “What comes next?” or “What do you say?” or any other appropriate question format that triggers the desired social response.

### **Black and White Coloring Book**

The social story coloring book can be used in conjunction with reading the actual story and is a fun way to reinforce the skill that your child is learning. Coloring can be a very reinforcing activity for children, creating a great learning opportunity for new skills.



- If your child finds coloring reinforcing, have him or her color a page for each page of the story that is read, or color all the pages after reading the entire book.
- After the pages are colored, the story can be further reviewed and practiced by having your child put the pages in order and tell the story at the same time. This can include as few as two pages and as many as all of them. Hanging the pages on the wall can also be helpful for your child to review at their leisure.
- Actively engage in coloring along with your child. You can color the same or different pictures as your child. While coloring, talk about what is happening in the picture, and what steps came before or come after.

It's important to review with your child what not do in the situation as well, particularly if he or she needs to learn the skill as a replacement behavior for inappropriate behaviors (e.g. hitting someone to say “Hi”). However, keep the focus on the skills in the books, not the inappropriate behaviors.

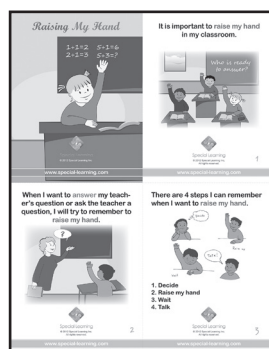
- After a picture is colored, cut the picture in 3-8 pieces, laminate, and use the picture as a puzzle. If your child can't do a puzzle, but can match, have him or her lay each piece on top of a corresponding copy of the picture.

- We encourage the utilization of this teaching tool repeatedly and in a variety of activities. Photocopying the pages of the coloring book to provide additional learning opportunities is permissible. If there is a step that is especially difficult for your child in real life situations, on the quizzes, in role play or any other activity, you can photocopy those specific pages so he or she can review the step by coloring the page as many times as needed. Have your child review the book and color that page afterward. This is not to be used as a punishment, but instead as an additional learning tool. Remember, it's important to keep the learning experience fun and reinforcing for your child, and all corresponding social story materials should be used in a positive manner.

## Social Rule Cards

The rule cards provide a quick teaching tool to use in the moment when your child encounters a specific social situation. The rules cards are easily transportable, making them an easily accessible tool for learning in any social situation.

- Read the rule card right before the situation and provide reinforcement for listening to the rules.
- Have your child read the rules prior to the situation and provide reinforcement for reading them.
- Have your child read the rules immediately prior to the social situation and provide reinforcement when he or she follows each rule separately.
- Have your child read the rules immediately prior to the situation and provide reinforcement for following all rules.
- If, during the social situation, your child breaks a rule, immediately review that rule.



## Social Story Supplemental Teaching Material

The supplemental teaching quizzes can be used in multiple ways to reinforce the skills taught in the social story. The basic level quizzes are designed for early learners, while the advanced level quizzes can be used with intermediate and advanced learners.

- Read a page of the story. Then use the quizzes to ask your child questions about each page of the story immediately after reading the corresponding page of the story.
- Read the entire story. Then ask the quiz questions. If a question is answered incorrectly, instead of just giving the correct response, go back to the corresponding page, read it and then ask the question again. Remember to keep reinforcement high. For example, when asking questions about Saying Goodbye, your child does not answer correctly, go back to the page of the story and review the social concept before asking the question again. If your child still has difficulty answering the question correctly, prompt the correct answer by calling the child's attention to the text from the page of the story.
- If your child is able to read and write, have him or her complete the quiz independently. After completion, review the answers with them. If a question is answered incorrectly, instead of just giving the correct response, have your child go to the corresponding page of the story, read it and answer the question again.
- Read the story. Then have your child engage in another activity, such as playing a game. This is called a *transfer task*. This makes the brain step away from the task at hand and then forces it to recall the information. Present the quiz questions. Gradually increase the number of activities or time between the story and the quiz. For example, read the story at night and present the quiz the next morning.
- Again, we encourage the utilization of this teaching tool repeatedly and in a variety of activities. Photocopying the pages of the supplemental teaching material booklet to provide additional learning opportunities is permissible. If there is a quiz that is especially difficult for your child, you can photocopy it so he or she can practice it as many times as needed. Have your child review the book and com-

plete the corresponding quiz after. This is not to be used as a punishment, but instead as an additional learning tool. Remember, it's important to keep the learning experience fun and reinforcing for your child, and all corresponding social story materials should be used in a positive manner.

## **Role Play**

Role playing can be an effective way to teach the skills that your child might need in a specific social situation. He or she might feel less anxiety acting these skills out with a familiar person than with other individuals in their social environment. Depending on the learning level and communicative ability, try these role playing activities.

- Engage your child in acting out the steps of the story with you.
- Engage your child in acting out the steps with you using dolls/figurines.
- Act out the story with a doll/figurine in the role of your child and yourself. Have your child tell you the next step.
- Act out the story incorrectly. Have your child state what is wrong with the scenario and state what the correct behavior/steps should be. For example, if you are teaching your child to say "Hi" to others, you can act this out by saying "Hi" and looking away from your child. When asked what is wrong with the scenario, the child should tell you that you didn't look at the person when saying "hi."
- Act out the story with dolls incorrectly. Have your child state what is wrong with the scenario and act it out correctly.

## **Unlocking Social Growth One Story at a Time**

Special Learning is proud to provide a complete solutions package designed to help your child attain greater independence and success in core skill areas. Our library of social stories products work together to teach a variety of skills, from basic social skills and school readiness skills to independent living skills, safety skills and more.

To learn more about Special Learning social stories, or to view all of our available products for teaching social skills, visit:

[www.special-learning.com](http://www.special-learning.com)

Thank you for allowing us to enrich your life and the life of your child.

## **References:**

### **More, Cori, C. (2008).**

Digital Stories Targeting Social Skills for Children with Disabilities: Multi-dimensional Learning. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 43(2), 168-177.

## **Special Learning Social Stories**

### **Unlocking Social Growth One Story at a Time**

Developed by Carol Grey, social stories are tools for teaching social skills to individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities. Written from the perspective of the student, these stories outline a set of “rules” the student should follow in various social settings to help him or her navigate situations which might otherwise prove difficult or cause discomfort.

The goal of Special Learning’s social stories is to prepare students to address common situations by understanding expected norms and appropriate responses, using repetitive examples, for specific situations that he or she might encounter. Although there has not been sufficient research to scientifically validate the effectiveness of social stories, anecdotal evidence suggests that these tools can be a very effective means of teaching social skills to a certain population of students with autism spectrum disorder.



**Special Learning**