

Social Stories: A guide for families

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A “social story” is a tool used by families and teachers to help young children understand, prepare for, and navigate big events or transitions in their lives, such as a medical procedure, a wedding of a loved one, moving to a new house, starting at a new school, and so on. This document is a guide for families on making and effectively using social stories to support their children.

Is your child navigating big life transitions and events? [I can help!](#)

What is a social story?

A social story is, essentially, a book custom-made for a situation a particular child is encountering. The book tells the story of what’s happening in clear, straightforward language, and highlights a simple message about how to navigate it.

Social stories are most helpful for kids of the ages that you generally read picture books to—two through six or seven—but older and younger kids may still get some benefit from them.

Why are social stories helpful?

There are a few reasons a social story can be more impactful for a young child than simply talking to them about it:

- Even very verbally-competent children can find spoken communication a little bit abstract, especially when processing big ideas and feelings. Writing things down in a book with illustrations can make the information feel more solid and dependable.
- Children have a different relationship with books than with their parents and caregivers. Even the most dependable adult’s authority and trustworthiness is always shifting slightly as relationships shift and evolve a little bit every day. A book, on the other hand, always says exactly the same thing, and isn’t impacted at all by negotiations or whining or any other behavior a child might try when a child doesn’t like what you say. A book never ever changes its mind. The words in a book, therefore, can feel more believable and dependable than the words spoken by an adult. (Yes, even if the child knows that the adult wrote the book!)
- Young children learn a lot by repetition—they like to sing the same songs, play the same games, read the same books over and over again—because they build up their understanding bit by bit over time. Even if you tell a child about something many times, you change how you say it on different days, and that can make it feel a little fuzzier.

Reading a book and hearing the same words many times helps a child solidify and integrate their understanding.

What makes a good social story?

An effective social story is not quite the same as a good picture book. **A good social story...**

- ... **tells the story in clear, simple language**—No need to offer lots of details. Instead, pare down the story to its simplest components.
- ... **is specific**—It's not a story about some hypothetical kid with a fictitious family, this is a true story about specific, real people. Use your kid's name! Name the school or the neighborhood or the relative you're talking about.
- ... **emphasizes what will change and what will be different**—When there are big changes in a child's life, they can often worry that *everything* will change. Along with describing the change, it's important to include things in the dependable things in the child's life, things that will stay the same.
- ... **includes a few details that are most relevant to the child**—Is the child in love with the family dog? Include the dog in the story of moving to a new house. Does the child love flowers? Mention the flowers that will be at their dad's wedding. Is the child cheered up by treats? Mention the great ice cream place you'll visit on the vacation.

How do I make a social story?

First, figure out what you want to say. I like to write out a draft of the book first, trying to make the language as simple as possible. Use short sentences.

I also think about what I want the takeaway of the story to be. For instance, in a story about moving to a new house, I might want the main message to be something like "No matter where we live, our family will always love each other, no matter what." In a story about the death of a loved one, I might want the story to end with "Even though we miss them, we will always hold them in our hearts" or "Even though they are gone, there will always be people who take care of you."

Then make the book itself! You can do this however you want; I usually fold a few sheets of 8½-x-11 in half like a book and staple them along the edge, but you could also use a 3-ring binder or buy a blank little book at the store or whatever you want.

Pro-tip: Make sure you plan how many pages you'll need! Look at your draft, plan one or two sentences per page, and count them up, making sure to include a front cover and a blank page inside the cover. Double check; it's hard to add pages later. Better to include too many pages than too few.

Put the title on the cover—something very simple and clear. Don't forget to name the author and illustrator! (For instance, THE BEDTIME BOOK, by Daddy, illustrated by Mama.)

Write your story into the book. Again, one or maybe two sentences per page. Your terrible handwriting will do just fine, but you can type it or have your good-handwriting friend do it if you want.

Illustrate your book. Nothing fancy, just draw the thing the text says. It's okay if the illustrations are repetitive or simple. (If the thought of illustrating a whole book freaks you out, keep reading!)

Pro-tip: Don't try to fill up the space on each page; leave some empty space. You may think of a sentence or two you want to add later, or something to add to an illustration. Leave yourself some wiggle room.

But I can't draw! How can I illustrate a book?

Your kid does not care how bad your art is. Really, your kid does not care at all. And remember, no one else will see this, you are making a book for an audience of one.

Stick figures will work fine. Cut out photos from magazines will work fine. Clip art from the internet will work fine. As long as the illustrations can be understood, it won't change the impact of the social story for your kiddo.

That doesn't mean you can be careless about it. But putting in just a little time and effort will pay off, regardless of how "good" the finished product looks to adult eyes.

Or hey, you could ask a friend to draw it. You could have AI draw it. Those are fine options too.

The important thing is not to stress about it. Getting it done is what's important; making it look good, for adult definitions of "good," is simply not a factor.

How do I use a social story with my kiddo?

"Hey bud, I got you a new book. Want to see? It's a special book, because it's written just for you, and it's a true story."

Read the book with them at least once a day, ideally more, starting at least a few days before whatever the thing is, and going at least a few days after whatever it is. (Though maybe you didn't get it together to make the book until the thing already happened. Don't worry, it'll still help!) Repetition helps. Reviewing the story before, during, and after helps.

If your kid wants to talk about what you're reading, that's great! Talk about it! If they don't but they're listening, that's terrific. Even if they don't seem to be paying much attention, consider reading it aloud once or twice a day anyway, even while they're doing something else. Most kids are listening to you more than you think they are.

When things in the book start to happen in real life, it can help to say, "Hey, that's just like the book said!" or "Hey, the book is saying what happened yesterday! Isn't that neat?"

If the book turns out to have factual errors (hey, life happens), talk about it explicitly with your kid. "Huh, it turns out this page isn't right. It said we'd fly on an airplane to Chicago, but we ended up taking the train instead. Should we fix the book so it's right?" Many kids will be thrilled to choose what words you should put in or change, or help make a new illustration. And it will give them a feeling of ownership over the story.

When the need for the book has passed (you'll usually know when the event is over and your kiddo's interest in the book is dropping), put it away somewhere, but hold onto it. It can be surprisingly meaningful to pull it out a year later and remember together.

Coming soon: Sample Social Story Text for common situations; Sample Photos of real-life social stories

Do you have something coming up in your family's life that might benefit from a social story, but you could use some guidance making it? Or perhaps you'd like some guidance more broadly with parenting when things are complicated at home? I provide individualized coaching for parents and families of young children, and I offer support with a wide range of challenges. Find out more at coaching.jarrodgreen.net.