How to Use Social Stories to Teach Your Child New Skills and Expectations

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Children love to listen to stories. Not only are stories used to entertain children, they can also be used as tools to teach new skills and expectations. Many parents read books to teach their children the alphabet or numbers, but stories can also be used to:

- Teach social skills, such as how to take turns.
- Teach clear behavior expectations for a time of day (e.g., quiet time) or event (e.g., road trip).
- Reinforce routines, such as getting ready for bed.
- Prepare for new experiences, such as the first day of school.
- Address a challenging behavior, such as hitting.

Social stories™, developed by Carol Gray of the Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding, can be used to help children and adolescents understand social situations and expectations. Social stories are brief, simple stories that are created to show your child what to expect, and what is expected of him, during a specific activity. Social stories can include pictures of your child and are written in a way that he can understand. They also use positive language to show your child what he can do and provide healthy ways to deal with strong emotions. For example, a social story that teaches a new skill to replace hitting might say, “If my friend tries to take my toy, I can say ‘Stop. This toy is busy.’” Social stories validate how your child feels, but also can show him how others feel. For example, “My friend feels sad when I hit him.” When used for specific situations, social stories help children to make wise choices and give them the confidence to try new experiences.

Try This at Home

- Choose a situation that has been challenging for your child. For example, if your child and her friend Ben have been having problems with sharing when they play, you can write a simple social story to teach her how to share with him.

Page 1: I feel excited when I go to Ben’s house!
Page 2: We play with trains, do puzzles and build towers.
Page 3: Sometimes, we both want to play with the same train.
Page 4: If we both want the same toy, I have choices!
Page 5: I can find another train and ask Ben to trade.
Page 6: I can get a timer and we can take turns.
Page 7: I can ask my mommy for help.

Page 8: I can choose to play with something else.
Page 9: I feel proud when I make wise choices!

This type of social story helps your child to see that her problem is normal, teaches her words to help her express her feelings and gives her choices by telling her what she can do. In addition to helping her share with Ben, it will also help her to understand that she can make choices in other difficult situations.

- Social stories are very helpful to children when they go into a new situation. For example, if your child is going on an airplane for the first time, you can create a social story to provide him with clear expectations and help him understand all the things he can do at the airport and on the plane.

There are many social stories already created that address issues such as hitting, safety, going to school, emotions and more. For a book list and free downloadable scripted stories for social situations, you can go to http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html#scriptedstories.

Practice at School

Teachers create social stories to help children:

- Adjust to new experiences, such as saying goodbye to a parent at drop-off.
- Understand expectations, such as what we can do on our new playground.
- Learn social skills, such as how to share.
Teachers work together with families, and often read the same book at home and at school, to reinforce the skill or expectation.

The Bottom Line

Reading stories to your child provides a time for everyone to relax. These moments are a perfect time to teach your child or talk to her about feelings. Social stories are a great tool you can use to teach your child expectations or new skills before she is expected to use them. When you read a book with your child again and again, she feels confident about making choices that help her to have a positive experience.
How to Teach Your Child to Appropriately Get Your Attention

It is difficult to have a conversation with someone if you do not have their attention—this is true for both children and adults. The ability to successfully capture someone’s attention is a fundamental social skill and provides the foundation for future success in social settings and relationships.

Children use a variety of ways to get attention and will often resort to techniques they find most effective, such as yelling or whining. For example, think about a child who wants to get Mom’s attention when she is on the phone. He knows that if he continues to yell loudly, Mom will eventually pause her phone conversation and ask what is needed. If yelling and whining gets a child what he needs, he will continue to yell and whine until he learns a new way to get attention.

How can you change this pattern? You can teach your child the way that you want him to get your attention (such as tapping you on the shoulder) and then reward him when that behavior occurs. When you take the time at home to build on the skills your child is learning at school, you reinforce these positive skills and create a solid social foundation for your child which will help to reduce challenging behaviors.

Try This at Home

- Model the behavior you are teaching and do it often! If you need your child’s attention, tap her on the shoulder, move to her eye level and begin your communication from there!
- Practice, practice, practice! Play with this new skill. Practice with both parents, siblings and friends. Your child can teach her grandmother or teddy bear how to tap on someone’s shoulder to get their attention.
- Remind your child of your expectation. If you are on the computer and she whines or begins to cry for attention, remind her, “It looks like you need something. I will respond if you tap on my shoulder and ask me.”
- Celebrate when your child displays this new skill. “Wow, you tapped me on the shoulder because you wanted some milk. I am super happy to get you some. What a great way to get my attention!”

Practice at School

Most peer interactions are initiated when a child wants to give or get something from a friend. Rather than grab or yell across the room, your child is learning to gain a friend’s attention before beginning a conversation by:

1. Moving to stand next to the person
2. Tapping the person on the shoulder
3. Looking at the person’s eyes to see if they have their attention

The Bottom Line

Behavior is meaningful and communicates a message. If a child does not have an appropriate way to communicate, he will often use challenging behavior (e.g., hitting, screaming, whining) to communicate his needs. If his needs are then met, the behavior is reinforced and he will continue to use the challenging behavior to communicate. When parents teach their child how to appropriately get attention, the child will be less likely use the challenging behavior to communicate.