Social Stories™, Comic Strip Conversations and Social Scripts

Social Stories™, comic strip conversations and social scripts are strategies used to support social interactions for children and young people with autism spectrum disorder. While these strategies have much in common, there are differences between them which mean that each may be recommended for different types of situations:

- A Social Story™ is a short story that uses an explicit format and guidelines to describe a person, skill, event, concept, or social situation.
- A comic strip conversation provides an illustrated recollection of a conversation, including what was done, said, thought and felt by the participants.
- A social script is written text that provides words, phrases, and/or questions to be said in a specific type of situation, to increase effective communication with others.

Social Stories™

Carol Gray developed the Social Story™ as a behavioural intervention strategy for children and young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), in particular those on the high-functioning end of the spectrum. Gray[1] describes Social Stories™ as 'a short story that adheres to a specific format and guidelines to objectively describe a person, skill, event, concept, or social situation… designed to bring predictability to a situation that from the perspective of the student with high-functioning autism / Asperger Syndrome (HFA/AS) is confusing, frightening, and/or difficult to 'read'…' (p. 171). It is also suggested[2] that Social Stories™ define the what, when, who, and why aspects of social situations. Important features of Social Stories™ are descriptions of situations, skills or concepts along with information about relevant social cues, perspectives, and common responses[3].

The intention of a Social Story™ is to develop an understanding of the social context and conventions of 'everyday' situations and in doing so provide a level of predictability to decrease confusion, fear and stress in the same or similar situations in the future. While the goal of a Social Story™ is not to change behaviour, an individual's improved understanding of events and expectations may lead to more effective responses[3].

Comic Strip Conversations

Comic Strip Conversations (CSC) were also developed by Carol Gray[4] to provide an illustrated recollection of a conversation including what was done, said, and thought by the participants, as well as their emotions. Using stick figures or simple drawings with speech and thought bubbles, a CSC can 'playback' all the relevant details, such as what each person said, thought or felt in a specific interaction[2]. This technique aims to turn abstract situations such as social interactions into a concrete representation that can be used for discussion and reflection[5].

Use of a CSC, while capitalising on the visual learning strengths of individuals with ASD, provides an opportunity to dissect a social situation in a structured way and helps the student with ASD reflect on confusing or stressful social interactions.

Social Scripts

The terms Social Stories™ and social scripts are sometimes used interchangeably, however, a Social Script is a written text for individuals with autism that provides the exact words, phrases and/or questions to be said in a particular situation[6].

What does the research say?

Social Stories™

Social Stories™ have become increasingly popular[2,7,8] and are often suggested as an intervention tool to support the development of appropriate classroom and social interactions for individuals with autism spectrum disorders[9].

Early writing on Social Stories™[10] suggested that Social Stories™ may match some of the theoretical perspectives on autism, including difficulties with Theory of Mind, the need for predictability, weak central coherence and social difficulties. There are single-subject research studies and anecdotal articles supporting their use, however the research evidence base regarding their effectiveness is limited[11] and further research is needed. A review of 16 studies[8] found small participant numbers, variable and occasional inappropriate use of the stories in the research along with low effectiveness, though with individual variability. Interestingly, there was no evidence that Social Stories™ that were inconsistent with Gray's original formula were any less effective than those adhering to the prescribed ratio.

A 2010 review[10] also found low effectiveness, but with considerable variability, which means that they were useful for some (but not all) students in the study. Further analysis suggested that particular characteristics were related to greater effectiveness, including stories targeting simple, single behaviours, stories targeting reduction of inappropriate behaviours, use in general education settings, use with children with higher functioning autism and using the story immediately prior to the target situation. A recent study that reviewed a large number of small studies[12] also found that while there was considerable variation, the effectiveness of social stories on changing behaviour was limited and that they were often used with other supports (such as visual supports and verbal prompts) which may also impact on effectiveness. Further, this study found that social stories were most effective for children who did not have a diagnosis of autism.

Comic Strip Conversations

There is very little research about any aspect of Comic Strip Conversations, beyond descriptions of their use and a very small number of case studies[5,13,14]. A small study of two children[15] using comic strip conversations and social stories suggested that language levels, severity of autism and age may impact on efficacy. It is possible that the subject matter of CSCs may

also impact on their efficacy and that CSCs need to be meaningful for the student.

Social Scripts

There is limited research on the use of social scripts and students with ASD. A number of small case studies suggest that social scripts may be effective in increasing communicative speech in targeted situations[16,17]. While these three studies support the use of social scripts, the lack of a substantial evidence base suggests the need for further research.

In summary

While Social Stories™, Comic Strip Conversations and Social Scripts are popular and easy to implement interventions that are widely acceptable and classroom-friendly[18], the evidence suggests that their effectiveness is variable[19].

Research[20] suggests that Social Stories™ may be more effective if:

- stories target a single behaviour
- the target behaviour is concrete (e.g. simple positive behaviours or communication goals rather than subtle or complex social skills)
- they are matched to the child's language and cognitive skills
- they are used in general education settings
- stories are presented on multiple occasions – an average of 8 presentations were necessary before behaviour changes were seen in one study[20]

The effectiveness of Social Stories™ may not necessarily depend on cognitive and communication skills but it is important to match the language and style of the story to the skills and interests of the individual student.

Practitioners and parents/carers can find detailed information and instructions for creating and using Social Stories™ in Gray's (2004) *Social Stories™ 10.0: The new defining criteria and guidelines.*

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