



# Carol's Club

Custom Social Stories™ Resources  
Created by Carol Gray for Members

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SOCIAL STORIES



## THE REQUEST

*Is When I Am Feeling Upset a Social Story?*

Kenzie, a teacher, is asking for feedback on a story that she wrote for Adler, one of her students. The story, *When I Am Feeling Upset*, describes emotion regulation strategies and when to use them. Kenzie would like to know if this is a Social Story, and if not, where changes need to be made for it to meet all of the Social Stories 10.2 criteria. This is one of two stories that Kenzie submitted; the other one about a trip to the bowling alley. To protect confidentiality, the name of the teacher and student have been changed and photo illustrations have been removed. Kenzie's original draft appears below and is followed by my line-by-line discussion.

### *When I Am Feeling Upset*

*My name is Adler and I am in kindergarten.*

*I like to do many things with my friends at school. I play games, eat in the cafeteria, go to the playground, and walk in line.*

*Sometimes I get upset at school. When I am feeling upset at school, it's important to find a way to feel calm. .*

*If I don't like what I have for lunch, I could tell a teacher or a friend how I feel using a number 3 voice.*

*If I am last, I can take a deep breath and be flexible. All of us are going to get to the same place.*

*If I don't win a game I can say I had fun playing with my friends.*

*If I forget what I can do I can ask my teachers for help.*

*If I feel like I am going to be upset knowing what to do may help. With practice I may be able to feel calm.*

### Feedback on *When I Am Feeling Upset*

Hi Kenzie,

Thank you for sharing two stories with me. You write great stories! The story about the bowling outing is one for the *Social Story Hall of Fame*. The fact that you went to the bowling alley to get the perfect illustrations, and that the Story is in the shape of a bowling ball – PINK, of course, the favorite color – is, well, the state of the art and science of Social Stories. Imagine moving from being frightened of bowling, to loving it, and doing so via a story! To this day, I am fascinated by the positive impact of Social Stories. I do understand how and why they work, of course, but they still hold me in awe. Social Stories showcase the flexibility of people with autism to accept new information and 'give it a go' – even when it doesn't match their initial perception.

Your bowling ball story took me back to the early 1990s when I was writing the first Social Stories. I had a girl, about 3-4 years of age, on my caseload. I'll call her Stephanie. Stephanie did not want new shoes, and did not want to go to the shoe store! Her mom was concerned because Stephanie was quickly outgrowing her current footwear! Mom and I wrote two Stories. The first was pretty standard – it explained how children grow, and the rationale for having shoes and clothes that fit.

The second Story described the upcoming trip to the shoe store. To gather information, mom went to the store and selected four possible pairs of shoes, taking a photo of each. The store manager agreed to set the shoes aside until Stephanie came two days later to

buy shoes. We glued the Story on the lid of the box and placed the photos of the shoes inside. Stephanie loved the box story and took it with her to the store. As described in the story, she handed each photo one at a time to the store clerk, who retrieved each pair of shoes for her to try on. Stephanie selected her shoes by placing the corresponding photo in the box as she tossed the other photos into the wastebasket.

I think the Story worked so well because it gave Stephanie a tangible outline of what would happen at the shoe store, as well as some control of the process. The only downside was that the following week Stephanie asked if they could buy more shoes. That led to a Story about how often children get new shoes, complete with a paper link-chain to count the days with a photo of the shoe store at the end. It was a long chain supported by a short Story.

I apologize for getting off track – let's get back to the task at hand.

In *When I Am Feeling Upset*, you have tackled one of the most difficult topics with a lot of Social Story 'class'. Stories about negative emotions are tricky to write. You've avoided some of the most classic and frequent mistakes. In my opinion, what is most important is that I can tell that you like Adler *and* that you have confidence in him. It comes through loud and clear between the lines. I've often said that if an Author does not like the Audience, they have no business writing the story – their dislike of the Audience will be there, and will be felt by the Audience.

The most frequent mistake in the development of a Social Story occurs before placing words on paper. Social Story Authors often do not realize the importance of gathering information (second criterion). It increases the likelihood that we will write a genuine Social Story, one that 'hits the nail on the head.' Or, an alternate solution is discovered, and a Story is not needed. In fact, before we can identify a story as a Social Story, we have to know how the topic was identified. I'm so impressed that you use teacher observation, data, parent and student interviews, team meetings and more to select your topics and determine their focus. In doing so, you improve story quality and save valuable time – yours, and that of your Audience.

I do have some ideas for you. It's the third and fifth criteria that are keeping your story document from being a Social Story by definition. No worries – it's a simple fix because your story is so darn good. I am also going to share other ideas with you as well – just

for fun – tricks of the trade that might add meaning, build concepts, or support generalization of skills to other contexts. I have copied your text and placed it in bold italics below, with my comments indented after each sentence.

### ***When I Am Feeling Upset***

The fifth criterion prevents us – in most cases – from using the Audience voice when referring to negative emotions. We can still write about negative emotions if we use a third person voice. The fifth criterion requires us to state information positively. A substitute title might be – *Learning to Stay Calm*. Better yet, *Learning to Be in Control*. (A good Social Story strategy – If you are ever stuck for a title, put the word *Learning...* as the first word and see what comes next.)

There's often a problem with the word *calm* in a Social Story. Dictionary.com defines calm as: *without rough motion; still or nearly still*. If a child tends to interpret information literally, he or she may be calm at the wrong time. For example, in the gymnasium, being calm isn't usually a good fit for most games and activities. The same goes for many classroom activities. Teaching the meaning of the phrase *in control* – perhaps in a separate Social Story - is what we want to get across - i.e., play, have fun, get excited, work well, but use restraint to keep it safe and comfortable for everyone involved.

### ***My name is Adler and I am in kindergarten.***

This is a great opening sentence, especially for a young child. It uses Adler's name to recruit his attention, and you've set the context at the same time (in kindergarten). If *in kindergarten* isn't needed, eliminating it may help with generalization of the information in the Story. We need a second sentence (third criterion) to identify what the Story is about, as in: *I am learning how to keep myself in good control*.

***I like to do many things with my friends at school. I play games, eat in the cafeteria, go to the playground, and walk in line. (In these photos I look calm and happy. I'm friendly. When I am calm and in control, it helps my friends and teachers, too.)***

You're a genius, Kenzie! In every case, the photos accompanying this text show Adler in good control of his feelings – his affect is in line with the context, similar to his peers, etc. In other words – you've demonstrated the goal – to be in good control. And, Adler

is the model. He is the BEST model for this Story. In parentheses, I added text to the paragraph to take full advantage of the opportunity you've created here - with praise for acquired skills and information about the benefit of those skills for Adler as well and his peers and teachers. Now all we need to do is expand that concept to situations where being 'in control' is harder, more challenging. To do that, use the third person voice as the story continues.

***Sometimes I get upset at school. When I am feeling upset at school, it's important to find a way to feel calm.***

The fifth criterion requires us to go to the third person here; we can't use the Audience voice to refer to negative behavior, especially Adler's own negative behavior. Using the third person voice is emotionally safer and better for self-esteem, especially with a population of people who often find it difficult to make mistakes. Also, we don't want to model the use of self-deprecating statements, which can often be a problem with those with autism. We can still cover the topic territory from a safer vantage point. As examples:

*Sometimes, children feel sad or uncomfortable. With practice, they (or As they grow, children...) learn how to stay in good control until they feel better (again). Staying in good control is important.*

I admit, the above sentence may be a little long and we may need to edit it back. Using the word *again* is a good reminder that, "...you were doing quite well, happy, etc., and you can get there once again." And, the earlier text describing Adler in control, etc. makes it even easier to use. In other words, we can make the point that *happy* isn't as far away as it feels right now.

As the story continues below, I LOVE how you've applied the skill of being in control to a variety of situations. Great for building and generalizing the concept of *in control*.

I've re-written the following sentences according to my comments thus far. In almost every case, I've over-written - in other words, it's longer than it should be, or even needs to be, but I am sharing as many ideas as I can without writing something that rivals the length of *War and Peace*. Editing back is needed!

***If I don't like what I have for lunch, I could tell a teacher or a friend how I feel using***

**a number 3 voice.**

*Children don't always like their lunch. Using good control is important. With practice, they learn to tell a teacher or friend about their feelings. Using a #3 voice is a smart choice.*

Watch for Adler to 'get it right', at which point we can add this sentence to the paragraph above:

*Yesterday, there was an orange in my lunch. I used a #3 voice to tell Andy how I feel about oranges in my lunch.*

If the Story is getting too long, we can read just the new segment, or write a very short second, related Story.

***If I am last, I can take a deep breath and be flexible. All of us are going to get to the same place.***

Some theory of mind information may help with this one, as well as a thought-based solution: *Most children want to be first in line. Thinking, "Someday I may have a turn to be first" helps many children feel better. It helps them stay in good control.*

***If I don't win a game I can say I had fun playing with my friends.***

*Sometimes children play games. No one on this planet wins every game every time. When children lose, staying in good control is friendly. Saying something like, "That's a fun game" is a smart choice. (Note: The fifth criterion prevents us from using 'can' if the Audience has not demonstrated the behavior; we could replace it with 'may'.)*

***If I forget what I can do I can ask my teachers for help.***

*My teachers are children that got older. They know what to do with sad and uncomfortable feelings. They can help me and everyone else stay in good control.*

***If I feel like I am going to be upset knowing what to do may help. With practice I may be able to feel calm.***

*If I begin to feel upset, thinking about my story may help. I will try to stay in good control.*

Thank you, Kenzie, for this opportunity to review Adler's Story. You have a knack for this! Keep Writing! All the Best, Carol