

# Carol's Club

Custom Social Stories™ Resources  
Created by Carol Gray for Members

● CAROL GRAY  
● SOCIAL STORIES



Writing for the Holidays

## THE REQUEST

Many people look forward to the traditions and activities of the holiday season. It's fun... and potentially stressful! Daily routines make way for celebration with family and friends. The pace changes. The smells change. There's a lot going on. A planned gathering in one home often involves preparation – and perhaps packing for travel – in many homes. Children may feel overwhelmed in the flurry of activity. Advance preparation can reduce anxiety and help everyone find a place among the action.

This Project was initiated by parents of students on my former caseload. In my work as a teacher with children with autism, parents would ask me to write Social Stories about classic as well as unique topics associated with various aspects of the season. This Project uses a case example of gift-giving to share an important discovery I made while writing for them. A good Story or two often has a “domino-effect”: all we may need is thoughtful groundwork and fewer Stories than we think!

## THE PROJECT

### Think Ahead

It's a simple truth. The time available to think about writing a Social Story or modifications to increase a child's comfort during the holidays decreases accordingly as a celebration date grows closer. There is more time to prepare and write today than there will be tomorrow. The other truth is that a little time invested in a child's comfort and sense of control today is likely to save huge time and stress later. You're smart to plan and write now, even if it will be a few weeks until whatever you create is needed.

Think back to think ahead. Look through last year's holiday photos. Note what went well, and what didn't. What didn't go well last year, may not be an issue this year. And, what went well last year may not work this year. Fear of the past or the future increases our *own* anxiety – which isn't helpful at all. What we are ultimately looking for are simple ways build logic, predictability, and comfortable participation into this year's events.

### Abandon the Writing Assumption

Social Stories work; they are an evidence based practice. This leads us to believe that we need to write them about everything, especially as we anticipate the holiday season. Altered schedules. New foods. Lots of people. Santa (for help with him, see the *Tooth Fairy Project* in the Clubhouse). Traditions. Overwhelmed by all of the Stories that we feel we *should* write, we may decide that it is an impossible task and abandon the effort altogether. This is a mistake.

The truth is that we shouldn't write all of those Stories. What child wants to sit through a parade of 87 documents, illustrated or not? I admit, a Story or two may be helpful. I've discovered though, that the holidays require us to adhere to the Social Story process to the last letter, while also taking a bit of additional time to sit and think. A little creative social logic and wisdom, and perhaps a few Social Stories, helps to pave a practical route through this festive time of the year. You don't have to write 100 Stories. Thinking first saves huge time.

Abandon the writing assumption in favor of gathering information. This is a more detailed version of thinking ahead. Fears aside, consider the basic activities that lay ahead. You and I see the sequence and adapt to changing contexts and the unexpected as we navigate each gathering. Many children may not be as well equipped to predict what's next or respond effectively to surprises in routine, or even that which lies on the other side of the gift wrapping around a present. What do we know about this child and these events that will make them comfortably compatible?

### Gifts

There has to be a reason why gifts receive so much attention from authors of Social Stories. In *The New Social Story Book: Revised and Expanded 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Gray, C. 2015. Future Horizons, Arlington, Texas) and *Successful Social Stories for Young Children: Growing Up with Social Stories* (Timmins, S. 2016. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London), there is a combined total of at least ten Stories about gifts. I say "...at least" because the count is potentially higher if Stories related to - but not directly about - gifts are included. Titles range from *What is a Gift?* to *What to Think, Do, and Say if a Gift is Disappointing* to *Why do I write thank-you letters?* There are also many other children's books about gift giving. You certainly don't need to rush out (or online) and purchase books – my point is only that historically gifts have received some disproportionate attention. There must be something about gifts. There is.

Gifts wrap surprises. I have worked with several students who felt that it would be better if all gifts were unwrapped. If you have something for me, why hide it? Gift wrap only adds anxiety to what is already unknown, creating an open-ended situation. That, and gifts are unwrapped among the scrutiny of aunts, uncles, and grandparents who are watching for a reaction that *they* are hoping to see, and words that *they* anticipate hearing. No social pressure here? There's more, of course – a lot more. Where do we start with gifts?

Beginning at an early age, involve your child in all of the steps involved in selecting, purchasing, wrapping, and giving a gift. My eyes were opened to the importance of this

in Siobhan Timmins book, mentioned above. As a part of gathering information for a Story about gifts, Siobhan ensured that her son, Mark, had first-hand experience deciding upon a gift for someone else, shopping for it, wrapping it, and sending it. This helped Mark understand all that is involved in the process, laying important groundwork for a subsequent Story to summarize what he had learned.

In my experience, teaching a concept is more effective than teaching a skill. There's value in including children in a start to finish, step by step experience – in this case, those involved in giving a gift. It lays important groundwork and is preferable to involving a child in one or two, but not all, of those steps. And it's *much* better than the classic last-minute parental reminder – among the flurry of guests coming in the door – to “...remember to say ‘thank you’ for each gift.”

### Simplifying Gift Exchange

I close with one of my favorite holiday strategies. Years ago, I had a student, Andrew, on my caseload. Andrew's parents asked me for help. In years past, when the family gathered for the annual gift exchange, Andrew would, in their words, “...disappear.” He would retreat to bedroom while everyone else exchanged and opened gifts. Later, Andrew would open his gifts at home. Concerned that Andrew was missing an important holiday tradition and limiting time with his extended family, his parents wondered if there was anything they could do to increase his comfort and participation in the gift exchange.

We came up with a solution that placed Andrew in the center of the action – with the help of some very clear to and from gift tags. Andrew's parents called after vacation, thrilled with the result. Just between you and me, I was surprised by how well this worked initially, and its positive ‘domino effect’ on subsequent activities that day.

I suggested that we structure Andrew's participation in gift-giving, one that would give him an opportunity to move around. We decided he could be the person who delivers each gift to its recipient. There was an obstacle. Andrew was just learning to read. His parents offered to help him read the tags, of course. I didn't think that would work well. Our goal is not to teach Andrew how to sound out the names of family members... as

they watch! Our goal is to make gift distribution predictable and fun. For that to happen, Andrew needs to feel competent and comfortable. What we needed were gift tags with no reading required; tags in the spirit of universal design.

Andrew's parents created unique photo gift tags. They simply placed a small photo of the recipient on each gift. If a gift was for two or more people, all of their photos appeared together. A short Story described the activity. Andrew had a choice this year. One choice was that he could be the person who delivers gifts. It's also okay if someone else delivers the gifts. The Story went on to describe the photo gift tags, and how distribution would be accomplished. Andrew chose to distribute gifts.

As to the domino effect:

1. Excited about his new role, Andrew talked about the gift exchange with his parents for the week prior to the event.
2. His mother had an idea – instead of opening gifts last, as was tradition (and would increase anxiety), it might be better to open gifts first. She contacted the host. It was agreed to alter the traditional schedule and open gifts as soon as everyone arrived.
3. Andrew distributed the gifts with ease. Each recipient was happy as he approached. For Andrew, it was a predictable social exchange: “This one is for you.” “THANK YOU, Andrew!”
4. Andrew saw what the others received. This proved to be helpful as the day progressed. For example, one of Andrew's cousins received a remote-control car. When that cousin invited Andrew if he wanted to play, Andrew asked if they could play with the car. In a similar fashion, knowing what people received proved to be a social support for activities and short conversations throughout the day.
5. Andrew and his cousin were playing with the remote-control car when dinner was announced. They walked together to the table, sat next to each other, and made plans for what they would do after dinner.

My belief has always been that thoughtful groundwork leads to the most far-reaching social solutions. The Story describing the photo-tag gift distribution built familiarity into

that which was unfamiliar. It was the activity itself, however, that yielded far reaching social and emotional benefits for Andrew.

On the following pages are two Social Stories. The first one, *Matching Gifts to People*, is a re-creation of Andrew's original Story about photo gift tags and the upcoming family gift exchange. The second Story is the one by Siobhan Timmins mentioned earlier, *Why do I write thank-you letters*, with appreciation for her permission to share it with you.

I wish you the very best this season and in the coming year. Thank you for being a member of Carol's Club.

## Matching Gifts to People

Each year my bigger family gets together for a holiday party. My bigger family is the one with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Everyone brings gifts.



When everyone has arrived, they sit in the room with the gifts. One person is *The Distributor*.

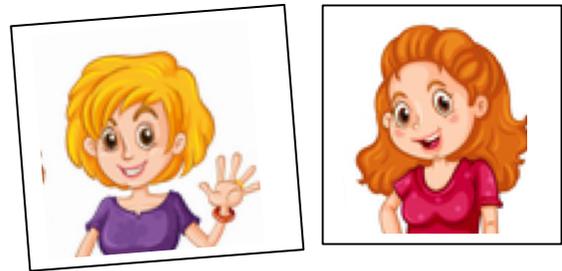
The Distributor walks  
around a lot,  
matching gifts  
to people.



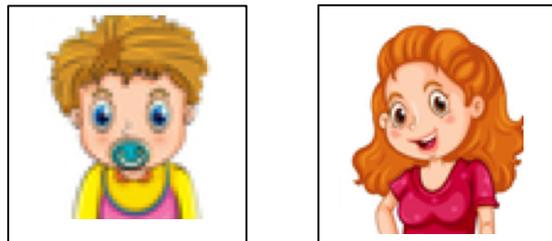
There are photos of faces  
on all of the gifts.



Sometimes there is  
one photo. Sometimes  
there are more. The gift  
goes to the person or  
people in the photos.



Sometimes the photo  
will be Harry. Harry  
is a baby. He can't  
open gifts yet. Sheila



is Harry's mom. Sheila's photo will be on all of  
Harry's gifts. She will open Harry's gifts.

Being the Distributor is like a matching game. The Distributor delivers the gifts. It's an important job.

This year it's my turn to be The Distributor. I don't have to be The Distributor. It's my choice.

Mom and Dad have each had a turn as *The Distributor*. They can answer my *Distributor* questions.

Each year my bigger family gets together for a holiday party. Everyone brings gifts. One person is *The Distributor*. This year *The Distributor* may be me!

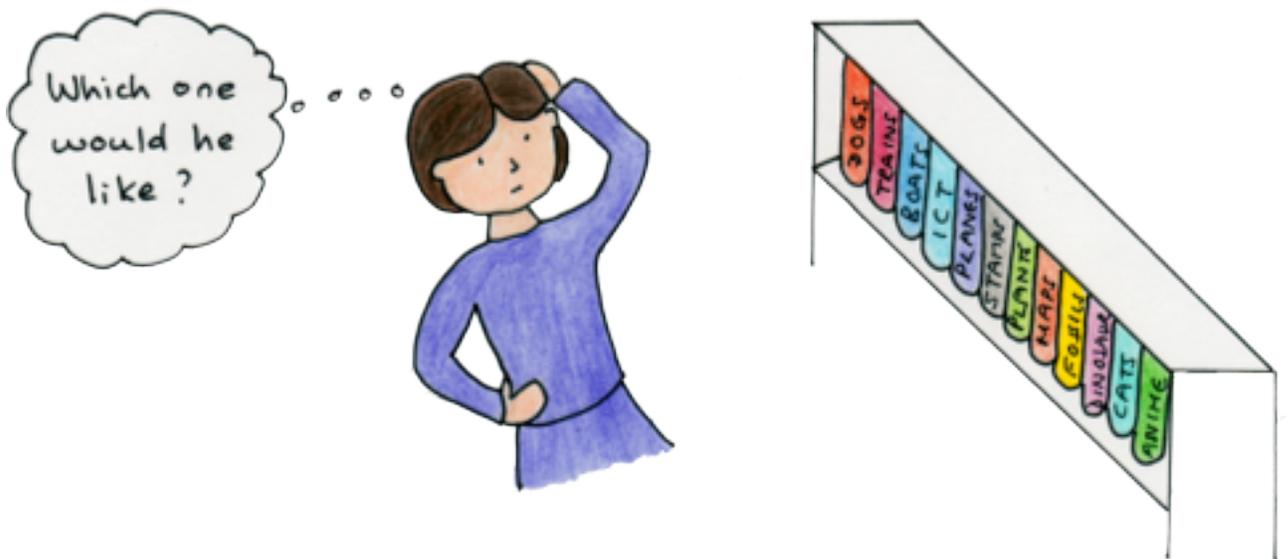


Why do I write thank you letters?

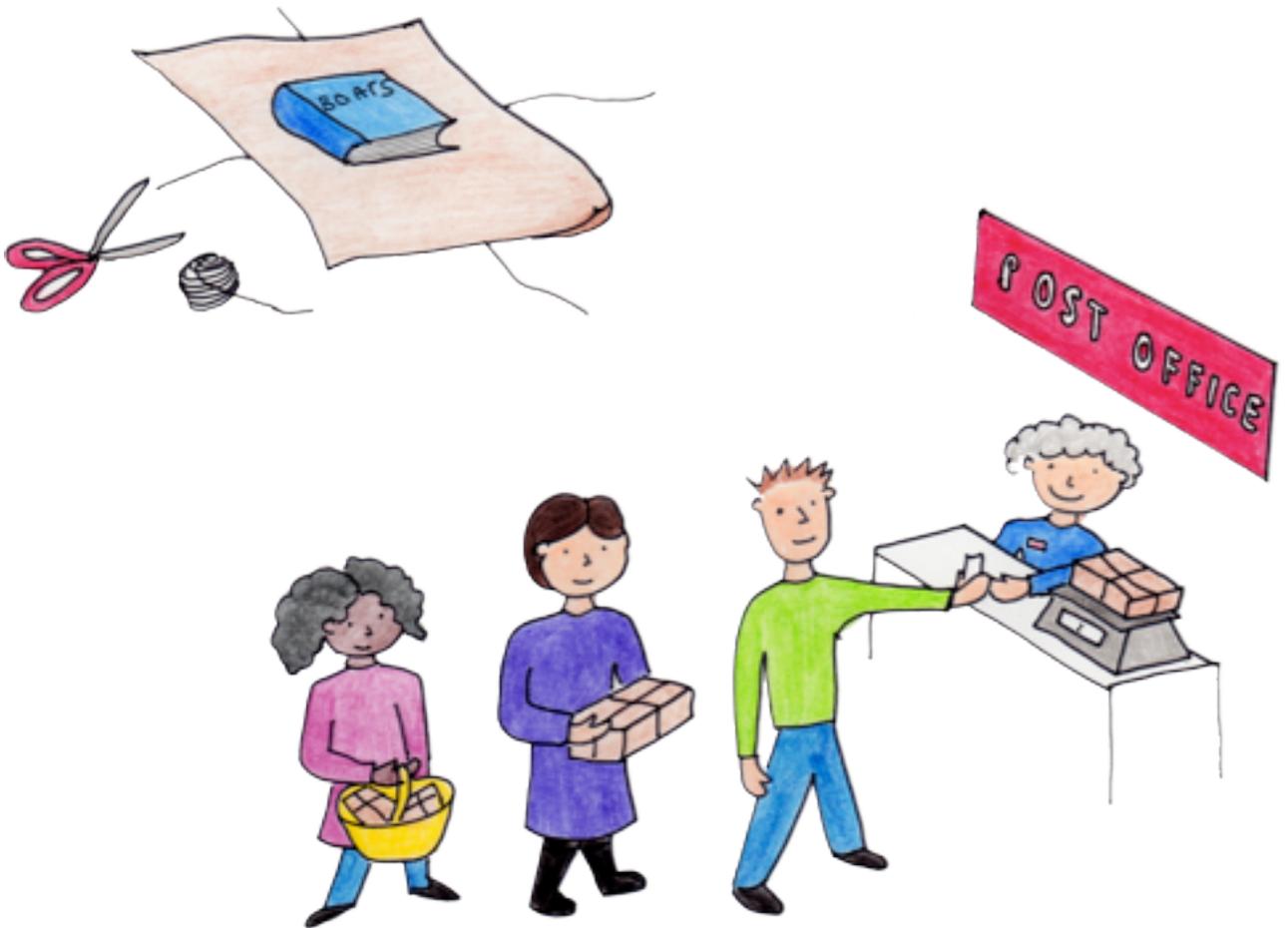
Sometimes people send me a present in the post. My Granny and Grandad sometimes send me a present in the post. Sometimes for my birthday and at Christmas people in my family send me a present in the post.



To send a present in the post usually takes a lot of time. First the person goes to the shops. The person tries hard to choose the kind of present I like. When they find a present they queue at the cashier to pay for it.



Then the person takes the present home and wraps it in a parcel. Next the person takes the parcel to the Post Office. Usually there is a queue at the Post Office to send a parcel.



Doing all these things takes a lot of time and effort!

Usually people like to know if I have received the parcel safely. Sending a 'thank you' letter is a way of telling the person that I have received the parcel.



Sometimes the present makes me happy, sometimes it disappoints me. This is okay, this happens with presents sometimes. It is easy to choose a present for myself, it is usually more tricky to choose the right present for another person.



Sending a thank you letter shows the person that I am pleased they TRIED to find the right present for me.

Sending a thank you letter shows the person I appreciate the effort they have made in going to the shops, choosing me a present, buying it, wrapping it and sending it to me.

Sending a thank you letter usually makes the person feel happy. When writing a thank you letter many people say something like 'it was very kind of you to send me a present'. I will try to remember to write 'thank you' letters when people send me presents.