



# Carol's Club

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SOCIAL STORIES

## She's Strict and All About Skills: How to Survive the New Gym Teacher

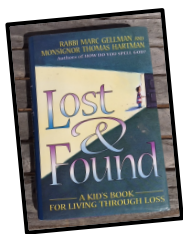
A new physical education teacher is hired and it's a whole new ball game. Gone is the freedom to fool around a little; enter skill building and practice. Some students readily adapt, decide to do their best, try their hardest, and leave it at that. For others, New Teacher is a reason to dread Monday and a source of varied levels and forms of stress and distress throughout the week. This request is from HJ who is seeking ideas to teach her son, Oliver, soon to be eight years old, an important life skill: How to work with a less-than-favorite teacher...or coach, instructional assistant, or ultimately colleague or boss. This project is about getting along with the difficult people that all of us encounter.

### The Project

*Note: All of my ideas in this project are based on a prerequisite determination that the new physical education teacher is competent, that she tailors her instruction to individual needs and learning styles, and is physically, socially, and emotionally safe for students. I had the opportunity to talk with HJ who has assured me this is the case. The issue is: New Teacher's personality and instructional style is a dramatic switch from her predecessor.*

Oliver is experiencing significant stress. Gym class is for one-hour Monday through Wednesday. There's no real relief! On completing the Wednesday's class, Oliver begins to dread what the coming Monday and the two days that follow. In fact, the impending doom of gym class can "...consume each weekend" with the anticipation is as stressful as the class itself. Something else has occurred during this same period of time. A friend has announced that he is moving soon. Oliver is currently surrounded by undesirable events that are outside of his control. His previous gym teacher has left, a friend is moving, and three days a week he's required to endure a teaching style that is far more restrictive than anything he has known in his educational past. Oliver has even discussed his disgust with the school

principal. My guess is that he feels emotionally surrounded with uncomfortable things. I've some thoughts for Oliver and his mom: a brainstormed list of pick and choose ideas and a Social Story for Oliver (Appendix A).



1. "Lost and Found: A Kid's Book for Living Through Loss" (Gellman & Hartman, 1999). I run for this book often because it sensitively covers so many losses with words that children understand. The chapter, "Losing a Friend" (p.35) describes why friends move, acknowledges that it can be more difficult to remain friends, and lists ideas (how to keep in touch, consider new playmates) to keep moving forward. That's a common theme in the book - regardless of the loss, don't stop, keep moving to a more comfortable place.

2. It's the Teacher's Decision. Bad news, but many times it is. As much fun as it is to call all of the shots, there is relief in having a practical understanding of that which you can't possibly control. You'll find the text for "It's My Teacher's Decision," from "The New Social Story Book: Revised and Expanded 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition" (Gray, 2015) in Appendix B. It may be used as a model for similar Stories. To a child, a strict teacher can *feel like* being subjected to an unstated but pervasive "no" all the time, especially when it's a first experience with drill and regimentation. Another Story, "If the Answer Is No: A Story of Hope for Children" may also be helpful as a model (Appendix B).

Another related idea: Whose Decision Is It? Write a series of common choices/decisions, one to a card, to create a stack. Make a few of them funny or ridiculous - humor dissolves anxiety. With your child sort the cards into two, maybe three piles: Teacher Decision / My Decision / and (optional) Parent Decision. For example, cards may read, "Gym activity for today," "Whether to try Peanut Butter Toothpaste or not," or "Who to sit with at lunch." What's interesting about this activity is that it raises kids' awareness of the many decisions that they *do* make throughout the day. At the close of this project, that's what Oliver's Story is all about.



3. Make a ReThink IT! Chain. I used to work with Stephanie, age nine. Sometimes we'd have to miss a week due to my travel schedule. Stephanie's parents reported that the missed sessions were stressful. To give Stephanie a sense of control over our time apart, we created a chain out of strips of paper. A date was written on the outside of each link to indicate when it may be removed. On the inside of each link, Stephanie wrote a positive thought about our upcoming missed session, a "happier thought" for the day. Initially her "happier" thoughts had a bit of a negative quality. For example, "At least I *probably* won't be eaten by an alligator today" (we live in Michigan). What impressed me though was that with each link her positive phrases improved, as in, "Just three days until Mrs. Gray!" The completed links were stapled into a chain.

Each day Stephanie ripped off a link and read her "feel better" phrase. Stephanie's parents reported that she could tangibly "see" the time shorten until our next appointment. They also felt that writing the sentences on each link herself increased her willingness to use them.

4. Practice. Learning a new skill requires practice. To children, the small improvements we make from one practice trial to the next isn't always readily apparent. At face value practice doesn't make any sense: *I just did what I was asked to do and I did it right. Why am I required to do it again?* Skill building requires practice. There's a Storymovie on YouTube to explain that. Here's the online address:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qzopv2ReUPw>

5. Respect. Experience suggests that it's easier for us to demonstrate respect for someone that we like compared to someone that we don't. As children grow, they learn that when mustering respect for an individual is difficult, it's important to be respectful if for nothing else than the person's position. For example, when rank indicates that the person in question is "higher" on the chain of command. There's a Storymovie to introduce and broaden a child's understanding respect. It's on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHMmmh-7afU>

I am planning to continue to keep in touch with HJ regarding Oliver's adjustment to New Teacher in the coming weeks. I do hope the ideas above may be helpful or lead to others that will. As mentioned earlier, I've written a Social Story for Oliver that touches upon many of the concepts mentioned in this project (Appendix A). I wish the very best for HJ and Oliver!

## Appendix A: A Story for Oliver: About Teachers



As students grow they learn more about teachers. Teachers are children who got older and became adults. Each teacher is *unique* or different from others. This is okay because it has never been any other way.

Teachers are people. All of them have a unique personality. They teach groups of children. Each child has a one of a kind personality, too. That's why some children will like a teacher and others will not like that same teacher as much. This is also okay.



It takes four to six years of work at a university to become a teacher. There's a lot that teachers have to know about students and the subjects that they are going to teach. A lot of time is spent in classes and studying. University students have many teachers, some that they like and others that they don't like. There are many tests. Every teacher has earned a teaching certificate that means that they may make decisions as a teacher.



Every teacher has a *philosophy*. A philosophy helps a teacher decide what to teach and how to teach it. One teacher may decide to teach math one way, and another teacher may teach math another way. It's because of their philosophies. This is okay.

Most of the time, students can't pick their teachers. This is disappointing at times, but okay. Feelings are important. Adults can help. Adults remember the teachers that they liked and those that were frustrating. Many children find it helpful to talk to their parents or grandparents about their feelings about teachers. An adult may say that having a not-favorite teacher is a part of growing up. That's because it is, but it may feel as though they are not listening. Most of the time, adults cannot make a teacher disappear or go away, but they often have helpful ideas.



There are things that students can always do, no matter who is teaching. Many students know that feeling sad about a teacher is okay, but thinking happier thoughts is more comfortable and makes time with that teacher pass by faster. Sometimes, writing down happier thoughts, like, "It's only one hour" helps. Choosing to try calm and in good control thoughts is a smart and healthy decision.

I am learning about teachers. Each teacher will be different than the one before. This is okay. It's one more thing to know about life on Planet Earth.

## Appendix B: "It's My Teacher's Decision"

Gray, C. (2010). *The New Social Story Book: Revised and Expanded 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. Arlington: Future Horizons.

Teachers make many decisions for their class. A decision is a firm - and usually final - choice. Teachers make a lot of decisions, like who collects the lunch money and how to care for classroom pets. It's their job.

Teachers often make decisions about ideas from students. Asia has an idea. She wants to collect the lunch money today. Asia's teacher, Miss Capel, decides who collects the lunch money. Asia asks Miss Capel, "May I collect the lunch money today?"

"That would be fine," says Miss Capel. "That would be fine" is a *yes decision*. This *yes decision* means that Asia may collect the lunch money today.

Christopher has an idea. He wants to get Angel, the hamster, out of her cage. Miss Capel decides when Angel is out of her cage. Christopher asks Miss Capel, "May I let Angel out of her cage?"

"Not right now, Christopher," says Miss Capel. "Not right now" is a *no decision*. This *no decision* means that Angel, the hamster, will be in her cage.

Teachers make many decisions each day. My teacher makes decisions, too. Sometimes my teacher may make a *yes decision*. Other times my teacher may make a *no decision*. Making decisions is part of my teacher's job.

## "If the Answer is "No": A Story of Hope for Children"

Gray, C. (2010). *The New Social Story Book: Revised and Expanded 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. Arlington: Future Horizons.

I have many ideas. I have ideas about things I would like to do. My idea may be an adult's decision to make. When this happens, it's important for me to try to ask for permission. Sometimes the adult will say "no." If the answer is no, there may be hope.

Sometimes, when an adult says "no," it also means, *I'm too tired to do that now*. There's hope! Maybe tomorrow it will be okay.

Sometimes, when an adult says "no," it also means, *That isn't safe*. There's hope! Maybe it can be made safer for me.

Sometimes, when an adult says "no," it also means, *Later the answer will be yes*. There's hope! Later almost always comes.

Sometimes, when an adult says "no," it also means *We don't have enough money to buy that*. There's hope! May we can save some money to buy it someday.

Sometimes, when an adult says “no,” it means, *No, I will never allow that.* There’s hope! The world is full of other things to do.

When adults have to say “no,” they really love it when children try to stay calm. That way, the answer is “no” but everything else is still okay. And, they are more likely to say “yes” to another idea.

I have many ideas. Sometimes the answer will be “no.” I will try to think, *There’s hope!* and stay calm.