



Carol's Club

*Custom Social Stories™ Resources
Created by Carol Gray for Members*

● CAROL GRAY
● SOCIAL STORIES

Behind Every Great Social Story There's a Concept

Note: I recently had the privilege to conduct a Social Stories 10.2 workshop for a talented and dedicated group of people at the Region IV Education Service Center in Houston, Texas. They had such great questions! That continues to be the case! A new Carol's Club member from Region IV has submitted this question: *I keep thinking about the McDonalds'® example in your workshop. Despite a grandson's insistence on sitting at a specific table - even if someone was already sitting there - our Story simply described a concept. I want to be able to write Stories like that, but I don't know where to start! Can you give me more information or another example?* Thanks, Pink Pickup

The Project

Most of the Stories that I write (if not all of them) in one way or another include explanations of - and an effort to teach - concepts. I'd like to think that I do so because it's a sound practice. Practically speaking it also saves writing time and effort. Identifying the concepts that are at play in any situation or topic makes it easier to determine what to write *about* as well. I guess it shouldn't come as any real surprise. Just as concepts organize our experiences, in turn, they help Social Story authors structure their descriptions of life's activities, events, and interactions for those in our care. Pink Pickup mentioned The McDonald's Story in her email. We'll begin our discussion there and close with a Story about toothpaste - and teach concepts with each!

The McDonald's Story

My ophthalmologist asked me if I would write a Social Story for two of his patients, grandparents of Ethan, a six-year-old boy with autism. Eating out with Ethan was challenging. At McDonald's Ethan would quickly select and insist on

sitting at a specific table, even if someone was already sitting there. He had been known to clear a table of food as people occupying the table watched in amazement. On my way home, I stopped at McDonald's to take photos.

As I mentioned to my ophthalmologist and have a responsibility to emphasize here, the current Social Stories 10.2 criteria require that I gather more information than I did for this Story. Collecting information from a blank slate, regarding a situation without bias or assumption, is critical to the quality and integrity of every Social Story. It helps us to discover the "best" topic, the concepts or understandings that may be missing or misunderstood. Sometimes, the best Story is no Story, when an alternate solution becomes apparent and writing a Story is a needless trip on an unnecessary route. Minimally I should have interviewed Ethan if possible, his parents and grandparents, as well as observing a few times. In fact, consulting with a child's caregivers is required by the second criterion of the most recent Social Stories 10.2 criteria. I was aware that I was on shaky Social Story ground as I wrote the McDonald's Story. Odds of success diminish with skipped criteria. Skip just one criterion and by definition it's not a Social Story.

As I took the photos at McDonald's that day, I tried to imagine the situation from Ethan's point of view. For years I've encouraged authors of Social Stories to abandon all assumptions. I have to admit that there may be one helpful assumption. It was a part of my mom's philosophy. I can still hear her saying, "Everyone is doing the best they can... it's just that sometimes their best is disappointing or confusing." Assuming that Ethan is doing his best, what accounts for the difference in our responses? Is it information? What prevents me from choosing a table like Ethan does?

I've always been fascinated by universal truths. This may be one of them: People can't always sit where they want in a restaurant. The fifth criterion prevents me from writing, "Ethan, you can't sit where you want at a restaurant every time." Instead, the story encourages Ethan to discover the concept for himself. What follows is the text for "Places to Sit and Eat at McDonald's":

Sometimes my family eats at McDonald's. We usually sit and eat at a table.

We may eat at a table that looks like this.

We may eat at a table that looks like this.

Or we may eat at another kind of table.

Sometimes my family eats at McDonald's. We usually sit and eat at a table.

The original Story is on the following page (Figure 1). It is illustrated with photos of tables that are clear of food and free of seated people. The text doesn't mention clear tables, only that they "look like this." In this way, the Story encourages Ethan to look at tables without directing him to do so. There is also the unstated suggestion that these tables have something in common. In the first two examples, the text is placed on the table, fading to a more traditional placement of the words in the third example. Each table is different to support generalization and to demonstrate that tables don't have to look *exactly* like any of these, they need to be clear - as all of these are - to be considered available.

A couple of weeks after receiving the story, Ethan's grandparents called to thank me. Ethan reviewed the Story a few times before the next visit to McDonald's. After getting their food at the counter, Ethan led their search for a place to sit and eat. He happily tapped vacant tables as they passed, each time repeating the phrase from his Story, "...we may eat at a table that looks like this!" Subsequent visits were much the same. After one fifty-seven-word Story with hard-working illustrations, Ethan had discovered a new response to table selection.

Figure 1: The McDonald's Story from the PowerPoint® presentation for the current Social Stories 10.2 workshop



I was thrilled to hear that Ethan had learned how to select tables at McDonald's. There was more work to do, however. Using similar text and corresponding photos, I suggested that his grandparents write stories for a variety of other restaurants, like Burger King, Olive Garden, and locally owned establishments. They did. Their final Story, "Places to Sit and Eat at Restaurants" used several photos from each of the previous stories on each page. The McDonald's story was the first in a series to demonstrate a concept across contexts: You can't always sit where you want at a restaurant.

A Toothpaste Concept?

When I was working as a consultant in the schools, the parents of one of my students, Trevor, age seven, approached me with a concern. Trevor had made significant gains in self-care and personal hygiene. Tooth brushing remained an issue. Mom and Dad had tried discussions of the benefits of good oral hygiene and charts with rewards. All to no avail. It wasn't the taste of the toothpaste or any problems with sensitivity. As his mom said, "He's just not motivated to brush his teeth." In Trevor's mind, one quick swipe of the toothbrush was enough.

At this point, I had been writing Social Stories and conducting workshops for about ten years. It was the early 2000s. If I had been presented with Trevor and the tooth brushing concerns *before* this time, for example in the early 1990s when we first started writing Social Stories, I would have written a Story about the importance and health benefits of brushing teeth. I don't think it would have had much of an impact. Health benefits are an un-inspiring hard sell to most healthy seven-year olds. Perhaps that's why we have character toothbrushes and toothpaste that tastes like bubble gum. Writing a story for Trevor about fighting tartar and killing bacteria might have been informative, but not likely to increase his enthusiasm for - or most importantly his attention to - daily dental hygiene.

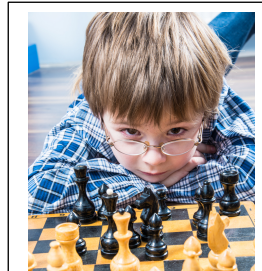
Social Stories were going through a bit of a renaissance. We were placing increasing emphasis on using personal interests to make Social Stories fun and interesting to their audience. Trevor liked relay races. Trevor *loved* relay races. We had helped Trevor discover motivation for a variety of tasks via relay races - but tooth brushing? There didn't seem to be any connection between relays and brushing teeth. I continued to gather information and look for a way to tie relay races to tooth brushing. Along with Trevor, I was about to discover a concept that not only tied the two together but led to a series of high-interest Stories for Trevor: teamwork. Teamwork is behind every product, process, and (even personal) activity - like tooth brushing.

Trevor's Story begins on the following page (Figure 2). The Story uses a fictional character, George, to describe the Toothpaste Team, a group of people working together with relay-style teamwork to make a tube of toothpaste and get it to George's bathroom in time for it to be put to important use. Trevor has long believed and enthusiastically reported to anyone who will listen that the absolutely most important person in a relay is the "final guy" - the person who carries that baton over the finish line. In fact, ask Trevor what he wants to be when he grows up and that's it - the final guy in a relay race. He hopes to be a professional relay-racer, but only if he can be the anchor. A relay race baton is useless without a team to pass it. The same goes for toothbrushes and toothpaste. There's an unseen but very real team at work to get the tools of tooth brushing to George. And they all need George to do his part for their efforts to be worthwhile and successful. (Please note that I'm re-creating the Story from memory for our purposes here. In practice, I'd illustrate the Story with photos depicting the people described at each step and include additional steps and details.)

Figure 2: “The Toothpaste Team” is written in reverse sequence to recruit Trevor’s attention early in the Story with mention of the main character as the coveted anchor man on the Toothpaste Team.

The Toothpaste Team

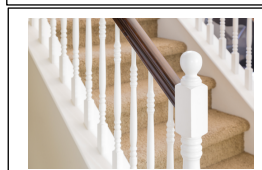
This is a picture of George. George is the anchor of his Toothpaste Team. He’s the anchor in an important toothpaste relay.



Tooth brushing begins with squeezing a tube of toothpaste. Toothpaste comes out of a tube onto a toothbrush. George has toothpaste because...



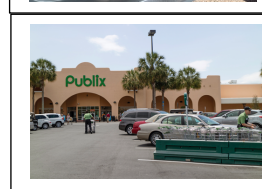
George’s sister, Jenny, carried it from the kitchen up the stairs to the bathroom. The toothpaste was in the kitchen because...



Mom carried the groceries into the kitchen from the car. The groceries were in the car because ...



Dad bought the toothpaste at the grocery store. The Toothpaste was in the grocery store because...



Many people hundreds of miles away made the toothpaste and put it on trucks that brought it to the store.



George is the anchor of a relay with hundreds of people working working together as part of George’s Toothpaste Team.



The success of “The Toothbrush Team” was moderate in meeting its first goal to improve Trevor’s tooth brushing skills. His parents reported an initial huge success that gradually dwindled. The time and effort invested in tooth brushing leveled off - far better than when the Story was first introduced but below the initial fever-pitch excitement of the first week.

The real benefit of Trevor’s Story is one that neither his parents or I could have predicted. Trevor had a new interest in teamwork - the sort of teamwork where the development of an item, or the completion of a service, is dependent upon people completing a task so the next person can pick up from where the previous person left off. He wanted to know where French fries come from and how they are made. I wrote, “Before the Fries Were Mine.” I wrote about the people behind popcorn and the manufacture of relay batons. It’s as if a whole new world had opened up for Trevor - a discovery that every item is the result of people working together.

The teamwork series stands out for me personally as the most fun I’ve ever had writing Social Stories. It was my first time writing Stories initiated by nothing more than a child’s curiosity. I followed Trevor’s lead from one Story to the next. He seemed to be ‘testing’ a new-found theory that nothing is manufactured without teamwork. Beginning with toothpaste, Trevor gained an understanding of the human cooperation behind everything from his favorite shoes to shampoo. A valuable concept for any child!

In my experience, writing Social Stories with an awareness of the concepts adds depth and detail, supports generalization, and “connects’ to subsequent unforeseen Story topics. Just as concepts help us to connect our day to day experiences, they create important bridges between the Stories that we write on behalf of any audience.