What Will Charlie Be for Halloween?

A Sample Social Story to Use as a Model

Carol's Club

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SOCIAL STORIES

Custom Social Stories™ Resources Created by Carol Gray for Members

The Project

Welcome to Carol's Club! It's time to think about Halloween and children and adolescents with autism. Within a week or two - and quite possibly already - kids are thinking and talking about Halloween. In the *MailChimp email announcing this project, I listed a few of many online resources for parents and professionals who may be concerned

If you do not receive a MailChimp email announcing each project, you may have missed the invitation to join the mailing list that you received shortly after signing up for Carol's Club. It may be in your spam folder. All that is required is a few clicks to join. Let me know if I can help you with that by sending me an email at TakeThisToCarol@gmail.com.

about Halloween and its costumes, candy, and spooky encounters. There are many websites with helpful suggestions. Many of them require us to think ahead, to lay the essential groundwork to build familiarity into a day that often defies routines and predictability. I encourage you to explore the sites I've identified. Many of the ideas that you will find, of course, are general, and require tailoring to meet the needs of those in our care. With that in mind, I've decided to be specific and provide you with a sample Story to use in a variety of ways to address a common issue for those with autism at Halloween: "What am I going to be?" In the process, I hope that you will discover new ways to use an existing Story to create the perfect, individualized Story on any topic.

In this project's MailChimp announcement, I included the following apology:

> *I want to correct a mistake in the last project posted August 27th. Fiona's Story, "Who helps me in the classroom?" is modeled from a Story by Dr. Siobhan Timmins in her book, "*Successful Social Stories for School and College Students with Autism*" (2017, p. 76), in the "Growing Up with Social Stories" series. Siobhan has shared her son's Stories with the intent that others may use them as inspiration or as models. There is nothing more helpful, especially to those new to writing Social Stories, to have something to use as a starting point, to 'write over' while making additions or modifications to make it relevant for a specific audience. My mistake was failing to cite the source of Fiona's Story. Siobhan's Stories are an excellent support for parents and professionals, and I want to sincerely apologize for not referencing her work. It was an oversight and was not intentional, nonetheless the apology is heartfelt.*

This editing error is the inspiration for the Story in this project. Siobhan and I have published many Stories. We want people to use them as models. What occurred to me is that to date I have never provided any specific direction on how to *do* that. Thus this project…with a timely Halloween topic. And, of course, whenever you use a Story as inspiration for one of your own, be sure to credit the author.


Many children look forward to the sights, sounds, experiences, and candy associated with Halloween. They embrace the opportunity to assume another identity, whether animate (a dog, monster, or superhero) or inanimate (a toaster, rainbow, or crayon). The sounds are fun, the goblins are scary - but not really. And of course, there's the candy - more sugar is consumed on this one day than perhaps the entire year combined. The class party is nice, tossing spelling and science aside for a parade of costumed children and games. Carve a pumpkin, go house to house in the rain and scream "trick or treat" at each neighbor's door, instead of being polite and using the doorbell - then sort and eat candy *just before bedtime*. It's an incredible day full of unprecedented parental permission to do that which is often forbidden or needs to be hidden. To these children, whoever came up with the idea of Halloween is a genuine hero with the needs of children at heart.

Halloween is not an incredible day for everyone. For many children with autism (as well as others, by the way) the appearance of witches in store displays are upsetting. The sounds are unexpected, too numerous, foreign, and too loud. The goblins, ghosts, changed behavior in classmates, and fractured routines are at best confusing, at worst downright upsetting. There are exceptions, however. Some children with autism love Halloween and plan weeks in advance to create a costume in line with a special interest or fascination. To them, Halloween is an opportunity to put their detailed knowledge on display without anyone regarding it as a difference or problem. That's why the first step to writing from a sample Story is to…

1. Gather information

Begin with detailed knowledge of who you are writing for and a clear understanding of the information that they need.
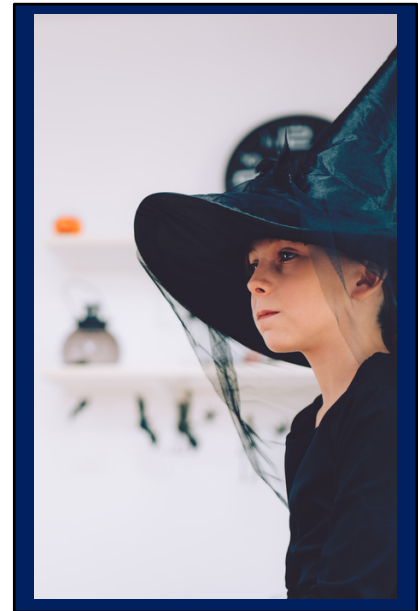
2. Select a sample Story

When using a sample Story to write about Halloween or any other topic, it's important to first abandon assumptions to ensure that your sample Story is close enough in terms of topic, focus, content, style, and ability level to the Story that your child or client needs. The only way to do that is to gather information *before* selecting your sample Story. The personalized data that you collect will help to reveal your best topic - and from there, you can search for the best previously created Story to use as your guide.

3. Select another sample Story

It's like getting a second opinion. A Story may seem great on the first review, but fail you in the long run. For example, as you work, you discover that there are concepts in the original Story that your audience will not understand. Explaining everything will yield a long and cumbersome document. The following Story, "What will Charlie be for Halloween?" assumes that Charlie knows what a costume is, what Halloween is, and that he can attend to a Story of this length. It also sets the expectation that the audience can follow the experiences of a fictional character, in this case, Charlie.

Selecting two or more sample Stories and choosing the one that is closest to what the audience needs saves frustration and valuable time - in addition to providing the foundation for a better final Story. Time and again, effort invested before writing creates a better final Social Story is less time.

It's an easy trap to fall into. Someone presents us with a great Story that describes the sounds that a child may hear at Halloween. It's a well-crafted Story with excellent illustrations. It distracts us from considering alternate formats; the sample is too much of a leader and we follow suit. Options that we would routinely consider if we were writing a Story from "scratch" don't even come to mind! Don't let a sample limit your choices. Keep thinking - maybe a Story on PowerPoint® with sound will be better, or a different font, etc. It all depends upon the audience - follow him (or her!) instead.

5. Practice - start here!

Our sample Story is, "What will Charlie be for Halloween?" I am going to work from the beginning to the end, discussing in italicized blue text the decisions made in writing the Story (much as Siobhan Timmins does in her books to introduce each Story), with ideas to tailor the text and illustrations meet the needs of your child or client.

Beginning with the title and the opening paragraph:

What will Charlie be for Halloween?

This is Charlie. Kids are starting to ask him, "Charlie, what are you going to be for Halloween?" Charlie is always Charlie. The kids want to know what Charlie *will wear* for Halloween.

Discussion

The opening paragraph of this Story describes a common mid-September question among kids. It's one of those seasonal inquiries that is "social currency." Understanding and responding effectively will help a child connect with his peers. I included the segment, "Charlie is always Charlie. The kids want to know what Charlie will wear…" to reassure the audience that even though it is Halloween, regardless of all of the costumes, the kids that wear them are still the same kids. A costume has never changed any child's name or identity. The final sentence in the paragraph explains what is meant when Charlie is asked what he is going to "be" for Halloween.

Charlie is a real person. I do not know him personally or anything about him. I found Charlie on the website, Deposit Photos. If a Story topic is stressful or upsetting, fictional characters can "go there first" to identify an issue and demonstrate its resolution. It's okay to use a person as a fictional character, as long as his experiences are representative and believable. For example, Charlie's desire for a comfortable Halloween costume comes right out

Almost all of the time, Charlie wears clothes like shirts, pants, and sweatshirts. This is a photo of Charlie helping with recycling. Almost every Tuesday, unless he is sick or not at home, Charlie helps with recycling. He's wearing one of his favorite shirts. He likes to wear it to school because it is comfortable.

Most of all, Charlie likes to be comfortable. He chooses comfortable costumes for Halloween. It makes Halloween easier.

Discussion

This segment uses a favorite piece of clothing as a tangible example of 'comfortable.' It also describes how a personally important factor, in this case, comfort, is a big part of deciding what to 'be.' The use of 'almost' appears twice, and is used to ensure Story accuracy as required by the fifth Social Story criterion.

There's another Story just waiting to be developed here. It includes a list of factors that help to narrow down the choices that make costume decisions easier. Illustrations could include charts or graphs, while emphasizing that each person makes a costume decision based on the factors that are most critical to them.

Halloween isn't every day. There are 364 days between one Halloween and the next one.

Most kids wear costumes on Halloween for a few hours for a party or to go trick or treating.

One year, Charlie wore a pirate costume. It was comfortable except for the hat. Charlie wore the hat for this photo. Then he took it off.

Discussion

Another year (364 days later), Charlie's Halloween costume did not have a hat. He wore his soccer uniform. It's very comfortable.

It's okay to wear a uniform as a Halloween costume. Wearing a sports uniform to a Halloween party or trick or treating makes it a costume.

Charlie had fun dressing like a soccer player for Halloween because he *is* a soccer player and loves the game, but he didn't like carrying the soccer ball around with him. Many kids choose to dress as something they love for Halloween.

Another year (364 days later), Charlie really liked superheroes. He decided to dress as a superhero, mainly because he could wear his blue "…most comfortable of all" t-shirts.

Charlie wanted to be a superhero without a mask until his best friend, Andrea, told him she was going to be a superhero, too. With a really cool black mask.

Charlie took his mask to school and wore it whenever Andrea was around.

Charlie has been thinking about what to wear for Halloween this year. His dad is helping him decide.

Charlie is playing baseball now. His baseball uniform is very comfortable except for the hat and helmet. His dad says he doesn't have to wear them, though. Charlie's baseball uniform could be his Halloween costume.

Charlie thinks the bat is essential for a baseball costume, but he doesn't want to carry it around.

Charlie has decided not to dress like a baseball player this Halloween. Instead, he's going to dress as…

Charlie, about 7,300 days from now.

Discussion

Never stick so closely to sample Story content that you miss an opportunity to provide the guidance that your audience needs. For example, for many audiences, a better final sentence (or paragraph) than the one above may describe Charlie answering the original question posed by his classmates, "What are you going to be for Halloween?" Or, the Story may change its focus and apply the information to the audience, as in, "My name is Trevor. I am thinking about maybe wearing a Halloween costume this year. Mom and Dad can help." That connects the current Story to an obvious sequel!

Writing a Social Story isn't easy. Using existing Stories as models can help. The many benefits of writing from a Story sample are apparent: ranging from a valuable guide that helps an author find the words to address a tricky topic to providing simple proof that it can be done! Gathering information before selecting a Story sample - or better

yet, two or more to choose from - and considering personalized options every step of the way, helps to avoid pitfalls. With practice, Story samples can serve as anytime-day-or-night coaches for authors who are working to master the art and science of Social Stories. All that is required in return is an acknowledgment of the original author and, if in print, publisher.

I wish you all the best as you learn to write Social Stories!