



Carol's Club

Custom Social Stories™ Resources
Requested by Members and Created
by Carol Gray



The Requests

Season's Greetings! I have three requests from parents of young children with autism for ideas about gift-giving and gatherings with family and friends. There are several faiths and cultures where family celebrations and gifts are customary. And though there are variations from one faith or culture - and even within a religious group or community - to the next, these events raise similar issues for children, adolescents, and adults with autism.

You'll find many suggestions online to help include everyone in holiday festivities. This project shares three simple strategies to add to your holiday "toolbox" to make gifts and gatherings more comfortable and fun for children with autism, beginning with the idea that I developed years ago with a mom a few days before Christmas. It has stood the test of time. Happy Holidays!

GIFTS & GATHERINGS: Three Ideas That Work

It's 1977, my first year of teaching - late on a December afternoon as I straighten the classroom and get ready to leave for vacation. Thinking I'm alone - possibly the only person in the school - I'm startled to hear, "May I just stay here with Mandy until January?" Standing in the doorway is Andrea, Mandy's mom, and she is dreading Christmas which is just days away.

For a person with autism, the holidays may intensify anything and everything that is already uncomfortable: sights and sounds, people, confusion, travel, altered routines, emotional demands, unfamiliar foods, no school, social expectations, and fatigue. That which is exciting and fun for most of us can result in distress or disruption for families with autism. Parents harbor fears from holidays-past, as well as a general apprehension of the potential for an unanticipated "event" this year.

Andrea was haunted by the distribution of gifts on Christmas morning last year. Mandy was five years old with limited verbal communication. She didn't understand that only a *portion* of the gifts was for her and she was upset by the family tradition of opening gifts one-at-a-time. According to Mandy's mom, "Christmas exploded."

If there had been an Internet in December of 1977, Andrea and I might have consulted a few websites. I have reviewed many of them in preparation for this project, and I am impressed by the wealth of insight and information! If you are concerned about the impact of the holidays on a family member with autism, there are many practical ideas on several websites. Even if you are confident that all will go well, you may discover ways to reduce stress and increase comfort and fun for everyone involved!

In contrast to the wealth of online recommendations, this project shares three specific activities that I find myself reaching for every December, as well as during other times of the year. The first one, *Photo Gift I.D. Cards*, I developed with Andrea in hopes of a smoother gift exchange on Christmas morning. It's followed by two additional activities that may help to make celebrations with family and friends comfortable and fun for everyone!

#1. Photo Gift I.D. Cards

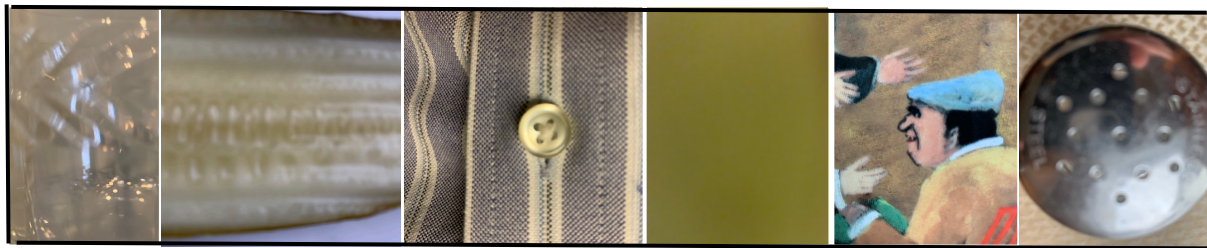


This idea is easier today than it was for Andrea in 1977! The goal - give Mandy a structured role in the distribution of gifts by replacing the traditional to-from cards with a small photo of the gift recipient. Mandy's mom had wallet-size photos made at the local photo shop, cut them apart, and pasted them on top of each gift to identify the recipient. She encouraged extended family members to do the same. It was Mandy's job to pick up each gift, check the photo "to" card and deliver the gift. Whoever had brought the gift, would

announce, "It's from me!" From-photos may also be used, but that places two photos on each gift which may be confusing without a special sticker or border to indicate the recipient.

Mandy's mom was ecstatic with the result! Mandy enjoyed her role in delivering gifts, which created short positive interactions with each family member. One younger cousin joined Mandy, with Mandy teaching him the ropes and double checking his deliveries. It's amazing what a photo and a little structure can do!

#2. Dinner Up Close



Adults don't realize how very boring their conversation is at the dinner table. Because of this, children with *and* without autism get restless. In a restaurant, the pressure increases for children to keep their behavior within expected boundaries. What to do? At conference dinners, I've been seated next to children several times. It's always an interesting place to be at the table. I learn so much there! Where some parents allow tablets and electronic games during dinner to keep children happy; I prefer interaction. It was at an on-the-road dinner several years that I discovered the fun of *Dinner Up Close* with Beth, a wiggly and unhappy five-year-old. Dinner Up Close resulted in predictable short interactions between Beth and everyone at dinner, with the two of us the last to leave the table. I've used it many times since.

This activity works at any dinner - and really well in a nice restaurant where there are interesting items and artwork. Here's what you do: Take close-up pictures with your phone. Really close. You may snap a few ahead of time, and during dinner with children closing their eyes for a moment. Take pictures of anything within the immediate area that can be seen from a seat at the table - a fork, the edge of a placemat, or a folded paper napkin, or anything in the immediate vicinity.

Ask children to identify the pictured item. As dinner proceeds and food is introduced and eaten, the “photo-ops” multiply! You may take turns, with a child taking the photos and adults guessing - or create scorekeeping to make it more of a game - or just play. As the activity proceeds, photo subjects seem to progress from still objects to parts-of-people, like someone’s eyeglasses or wedding ring. One seven-year-old boy created a book of the dinner photos with his dad to share with his classmates at school.

It’s easy to involve children of different ability levels. If you don’t know where a child’s ability lies with this activity, begin with general photos (i.e., take a photo of an entire plate or centerpiece) and ask, “Where’s this?” I suggest that you start simple and move to more difficult images. As a general rule, the closer you are to the subject the more difficult the item will be to identify. As a child’s turn to guess the item comes up, you can select an image that is easier or more difficult based on ability.

Answers for the six photos on page 3, left to right are: 1) a patterned glass, 2) a pickle, 3) a shirt, or a button on a shirt (at a dinner a good follow-up question would be, “Whose shirt?”), 4) a green grape, 5) an image from a salad plate, and 6) top of a salt shaker.

#3. Candy Land (altered, so I lose first)

The family is getting together. Board games will likely be a part of the entertainment. Christopher is young, has autism, and hasn’t played board games before - but he is very interested. Christopher also hates to fail or lose in any way - whether making a mistake when drawing or missing the ball when playing catch. What if Christopher plays a board game and loses?

Introduce Christopher to the concept of luck and board games before the party. Learning about factors like chance and unpredictability may not be entirely comfortable for children, especially those with autism, but many of my students seemed to like the idea that there’s really nothing a person can do to win or lose in games that are solely based on luck. It’s luck that determines the outcome of each play of the game. Develop and review a Social Story about luck a few times before introducing how to play a board game.

Board games for very young children share similar elements. Many of them have a game board, a token or marker for each player to represent a player's place on the board, and cards or pictured or numerical dice that determine movement on the playing surface. Some cards send tokens backward or require a player to stay on the current square until a specific card is drawn. It's the disappointing luck-or-the-draw can cause severe distress for a child with autism.

As a consultant to students with autism, I had a Candy Land game on my shelf that I reserved for teaching the concepts of luck and loss to my younger students. It wasn't just *any* Candy Land game. It was altered to ensure that I would lose first.

Altered Candy Land



Candy Land is a classic board game for young children, first developed by Milton Bradley in 1949. It's in the National Toy Hall of Fame in Rochester, New York. Candy Land is not available worldwide. If you are not familiar with it, you will undoubtedly note similarities with board games for young children in your area. To play, players move tokens along a path of colorful squares. The goal of Candy Land is to reach the castle before your opponents. The board at left is from the 2014 version by Hasbro Australia Ltd.

Players take turns drawing cards to determine where to move their tokens. For example, if you draw a card with a blue square on it, you move your token to the next blue square. Two purple squares on a card will send you to the second purple square that you encounter. Two players landing on the same square are required to share it. Some cards picture sugary destinations - like the *Peppermint Forest* or *Nana Nutt's*

House. If you haven't passed that point on the path yet, it's a gain that results in moderate to extremely fortunate board placement. The problem lies in cards picturing destinations that you have already passed. Whatever progress you've made on the path so far is lost, gone, and you've got to go back and "do it again." A setback for some players; a severe and irreversible turn of events for others.

In *Altered Candy Land*, the cards were arranged to ensure that I would encounter every kind of game-related setback first. I'd start with minor misfortunes that gradually increased in intensity. Whenever it was my turn, I'd describe what the card required me to do and how I felt about it. If it was a setback, I'd close with a few words about how I would cope. I'd exaggerate my affect to varying degrees depending upon the student, and say, for example: "Peppermint Forest? *Oh oh!* That's back by the *beginning!* I don't want to go *there!* Oh well, it's okay. I may be luckier next time!" Moments later, my student would experience a similar setback. The game proceeded similarly to the end of the game. I always lost the first round of *Altered Candy Land*. My student always won.

Several years ago, I was playing *Altered Candy Land* frequently and decided to use two games: one that was altered, and another that was not. If after playing the game the first time, a student needed more practice with setbacks, we'd play the altered version again. If the student seemed to understand luck and was beginning to model or use calming strategies of her own, we'd play the unaltered version. When *Candy Land* was mastered, we invited a caregiver or sibling to join us for a final round in my office before the game was played at home.

What works well with *Altered Candy Land* is that the adult experiences losses first with an opportunity to model a response that acknowledges and at the same time models what to do with negative feelings. Any board game based on luck can be used with this strategy.

Closing Thoughts

Carol's Club has provided me with a unique opportunity. I developed it to continue my work on behalf of people with autism and those who work on their behalf in a new way. I've been genuinely taken by surprise by requests that have heightened my awareness of ideas that I use so routinely that I take them for granted. I enjoy passing them on. Thank you for being a part of Carol's Club.

