



The Positive Power of a Praise Story

Social Stories that praise are half of all the Social Stories that we write and often the first that we read to a child. They are only briefly mentioned in a Social Story workshop. This is going to change.

Carol's Club CAROL GRAY SOCIAL STORIES

Custom Social Stories™ Resources Created by Carol Gray for Members - January 29, 2019

Introduction

Praise Stories are Social Stories that acknowledge, toast, congratulate, cheer, affirm, announce, support, applaud, celebrate, acclaim, honor, or commend. In a genuine Social Story workshop, Social Stories that applaud receive a strikingly insignificant amount of attention; they are covered by three, maybe four slides near the end of the discussion of the 2nd Criterion. This project is the first step in righting that wrong. What better place to start than by revising those same workshop slides with updated speaker notes followed by some new directions for Praise Stories and a case study?

Updating the Social Story Workshop

The book, "Revealing the Hidden Social Code," by Dr. Marie Howley and Eileen Arnold, S.L.P., contains one of the earliest discussions of Social Stories that "recognize achievements and celebrate success" (Howley & Arnold, 2005, p. 30). The book is based on the Social Stories 10.0 Criteria. It defined the *required* characteristics of Social Stories for the first time (Gray, 2004), including that half of all Social Stories must applaud the recipient, or Audience, of the Story. This "50% Rule" was a part of the 1st Criterion, the Social Story Goal. With Social Stories 10.1, the first revision of Social Stories 10.0, the 50% requirement moved to the 2nd Criterion, which prescribes how to gather information and identify a Social Story topic. In retrospect, I think Praise Stories may have been better served in their original 2004 location.

Praise Story topics are everywhere. The classic phrase from the movie "Field of Dreams," "If you build it, they will come" applies here. Increase your awareness of positive topics, however seemingly insignificant, and get ready to be overwhelmed by their ever-increasing numbers.

Writing from a positive perspective is different than devoting an entire Story to a description of an affirmative act, achievement or personal trait or behavior. For example, Henry, eight years old, has autism. His mom writes two Stories about starting a new school. The following week she writes another Story about the benefits of proper toothbrushing. Somewhere in those two weeks, or in the week before or after it, mom writes three praise Stories for Henry. If she doesn't, the Stories about the new school and toothbrushing are not Social Stories.

Seems easy enough. It's often overlooked, even in the research. A research project often focuses on a Story that addresses a child, adolescent, or adult's ineffective response or behavior. I have never seen a praise Story in a research article. It's important to include or at least mention them as evidence that the story being studied is a Social Story. Otherwise, time, effort, and money are wasted, and everyone loses an opportunity to learn more about genuine Social Stories.

Please let me know if I am wrong. If you are aware of a published Social Story research project where the focus of the study is a Praise Story or one is mentioned, please send the reference to me at TakeThisToCarol@gmail.com.

Why the 50% Rule?

Praise Stories help to keep our Audience engaged for the long run. Imagine being the recipient of several Social Stories, presented with a series of difficult topics, where there is often an expectation (though perhaps unstated) that you look at things differently, that you change, adopt a new, more effective response. I think that most of us would find the practice irritating at best. Praise Stories are a buffer, an emotional antidote-without-expectation, a compliment forever committed to a written page.

Praise Stories also add meaning and detail to our descriptions of “getting it right,” and the positive (often unobserved or unknown) impact that doing so has on others. If our praise connects, it builds confidence and self-esteem, which makes it easier to encounter and resolve setbacks and challenges. More on how to write a Praise Story that really hits the mark later.

Autism and Praise

To understand praise in autism, we must first redefine praise a bit, which is a little bit - but not exactly - like answering the question, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?” If we praise someone, and it has no or little meaning or impact to the recipient, is it praise? And, more importantly, can we really give ourselves credit for praising a child if the child in question doesn’t know or feel that we did? I vote no.

I remember Jeremy, age 7, who shared with me that “no one ever tells me I’m doing good.” I had observed his classroom several times. “Good job” danced like sunbeams in that room! Jeremy had an energetic and positively charged teacher and instructional assistant. For example, on one occasion Jeremy was drawing. The assistant walked by the table, noticed his colorful picture, paused at his chair, bent forward slightly, smiled and said, “Good job.” Jeremy kept coloring, as though she wasn’t there. A Comic Strip Conversation revealed the problem. Our drawing depicted Jeremy at the coloring table, and the assistant pausing to say “Good job.” “Yeah,” Jeremy sighed with a quiet afterthought, “My Dad has a good job. I hear that a lot.”

There is a difference between our traditional default praise and that which may be effective with a person with autism. I encourage you to read, “Rules of Engagement for Praising a Child with Autism” (Children’s Therapy T.E.A.M., 2015). To summarize, for all parents, the age-old advice of catching children when they are good is one of the most effective ways to encourage socially and emotionally healthy behavior. It works. “This is true for children with Autism, this is true for children without Autism and this is true for your spouse as well!” (p. 1). The difference is that due to the social communication issues in autism, what works “for most children can backfire for children on the Autism Spectrum.” Acknowledging that each child with autism is unique, the article proposes using consistency, repetition, and minimizing the number of words. In other words, selecting one or two short praise phrases, or singing the same song every evening to praise good tooth brushing, is far more effective than a praise paragraph containing too much information. It’s the stuff we all know, that we tend to catch ourselves forgetting now and then.

Recently, I encountered the term “descriptive praise:” “...when you tell your child exactly what you like about her behaviour...”. An example of using descriptive praise to encourage cooperation might be, ‘Anna, well done. You put your toys away’” (raisingchildren.net.au, paraphrased). I like the term so much we’re going to capitalize it from now

² What has held me in respectful awe since the introduction of Social Stories is the immediate flexibility and willingness to “give it a go” that children, adolescents, and adults with autism often demonstrate in response to reading a Social Story or Article. I honestly can’t imagine many typical people doing the same.

on and add it to the list of official Social Story terminology. Descriptive Praise works well with many children with autism because it identifies exactly what has been done well, leaving less to possible misinterpretation (as with Jeremy and his dad's good job) and increasing that chances that the message will be meaningful.

Carefully selecting the words that we use in those descriptions is essential. People tend to respond most enthusiastically to praise when it acknowledges or compliments something that they value in themselves. Typical children thrive on social connections and friendship, which makes socially and emotionally charged phrases like "nice work," "that was kind...", and "good work," excellent candidates for our praise. In contrast, people with autism struggle with communication skills and social connections with others, though they are often knowledgeable and excel at academic tasks. Replacing "good work" and "nice job" with words like "smart" or "intelligent," recruit the recipient's attention while affirming a valued talent or trait. It may feel a little awkward to say, "David, smart choice to finish that paper!" I used to follow the statements containing "smart" or "intelligent" with something more traditional, as with, "Amy, how smart! You loaned your pencil to Susan. What a friendly (kind, caring) thing to do."

Visual materials and routines that employ visual supports make it easier to build meaning into a message so that it works for our intended Audience. Examples include visual strategies, like Social Stories, a chart that records the completion of a routine task, or an award or certificate. It's praise that sticks around for a while, in contrast to verbal praise that's here one second and history the next.

Autism and Praise Stories

Social Stories are an evidence-based practice. The National Autism Center listed "story-based intervention package" (with Social Stories™ identified as the most well-known) as one of eleven established treatments for children on the autism spectrum ([National Autism Center, 2010](#)). They work. Not always, of course, but often enough to have gathered a base of objective evidence to warrant their use as an instructional tool. There are many different kinds of Social Stories. There are Praise Stories, the focus of this article, but offhand there are also Thinking Stories, Split-Section Stories, Social Articles, and Coloring Stories (currently in development). They each have a specific purpose: A Thinking Story is an accessible format for explaining idioms; a Split-Section Story the best choice for describing topics where characters may simultaneously be in different locations; and in the future Coloring Stories may help us address issues associated with fear or anxiety by quieting the amygdala while stimulating the cerebral cortex. Regardless of its Story Subtype or topic, every Social Story adheres to the same defining criteria as the one before it, and the one after. They aren't in competition, and none of them are off to the side. They are all an integral part of the whole. What this means is that Praise Stories benefit from the same philosophy and foundation as their counterparts.

Despite their common foundation, my theory is that each Social Story sub-type, depending upon its purpose, highlights or draws its strength from different criteria. As an example, the Social Story format is a natural fit for the Descriptive Praise that is showcased in a Praise Story, primarily due to the 2nd, 4th, and 5th Criteria. The 2nd Criterion requires us to gather information from relevant sources. Parents, professionals, and others are often consulted. The process requires us to shift our focus from a concern to a cause for celebration. If nothing else, it's healthy and anxiety-reducing for the Author. It's fun to interview team members about no-stress topics, and one study suggests that including information about the thoughts, feelings, or experience of others in a Story serves to enhance its impact (Okada, Ohtake, & Yanagihara, 2008).

The 4th Criterion, referred to as FOURmat, includes discussion of how to illustrate a Social Story. Illustrations may include charts, graphs, drawings, or anything that will enhance (while not distracting from) the intended meaning of

the text. For this reason, Authors typically research and write the text for a Story or Article first, selecting illustrations afterward. With Praise Stories, that process may frequently reverse, with the illustration initiating the Story and the text written to go with it. An adolescent returns home from high school with a completed painting, a photo is taken, details gathered, with text developed to describe the achievement. If I was a parent of a child with autism, I would try to raise my camera consciousness. Personally, I am horrible at keeping my phone within reach and my mind tuned into the fact that if I see something happen, I can get a picture of it. My point is, if I was more conscious of my ability to capture anything on film, as a parent of a child with autism I'd be able to quickly just snap! to catch images - of a gesture, my child straightening his room, or a new friend at the community playground - to use in a Praise Story.

The 5th Criterion works to ensure that the message that we send in a Social Story is safely and meaningfully received by the Audience. Acknowledging that one of the issues with traditional praise is that it doesn't "connect" with many people with autism, increases the importance of the 5th Criterion in a Praise Story. It keeps our phrasing positive and prevents us from placing any sort of negative spin on the information that we share. Thus, we're not allowed to open a Social Story with, "My name is Thomas. I am not nearly as aggressive as I used to be!" The 5th Criterion also requires us to consider connecting the related past, present, and future. In a Praise Story, that translates into text that reads like this, "I have practiced on the piano for 30 minutes most days. Tonight, everyone in the audience stood up and clapped after I played in the piano recital. Mom said, 'You practiced hard for that! I told her that next year I want to play, 'Circle of Life' from the Lion King movie."

A Case Study

We often think of writing a Praise Story after developing one that introduces a new concept or skill. Referring back to Henry's mom on page 2 in the third paragraph, and the toothbrushing Story that she wrote for him, one of the easiest and most efficient ways to meet the 50% rule is to save the Story about toothbrushing on the computer. When Henry is brushing his teeth like a pro, the original Story is revised to bring attention to his achievement.

Henry's mom is in step with good Social Story practice! Although, if she has attended a Social Story workshop in the past, we may have misled her a bit. On page 2, check out the third slide from the top: "If this is a Story teaching a new concept or skill, another is developed to praise a child's positive qualities, behaviors, or achievements." This implies that Praise Stories are exclusively for children *after* a traditional Story, and not before. This isn't true!

Praise Stories may lay pre-requisite groundwork for challenging topics. I had the opportunity to do just that on behalf of Ethan, who has Asperger's Syndrome, and his sister, Olivia. I was contacted by their mom, Lindsay, a Club member. Lindsay was concerned that Ethan's physical contact with others is occasionally too rough, hard, squishy,

³ Personally, I am horrible at keeping my phone within reach and my mind tuned in to the fact that if I see something happen, I can get a picture of it. This is a side note - okay, a total detour - but to this day I am kicking myself at missing the opportunity to get a photo that I know would have gone viral online. I was driving from our home in our neighborhood, headed to the main road. I had to stop for a perfect circle of about eight squirrels in the middle of the road. They were all sitting upright, on their hips with their front legs up, surrounding a squirrel that had been hit by a car. He must have been an essential squirrel, maybe a leader. I was so in awe of what I was looking at. Did I grab my camera? Nope. Didn't think of it. I sat in my car, watched it for a while (I mean, it's hard to drive through a funeral), and then slowly drove around them. As I did, they stayed motionless in position. My point is, if I were more conscious of my ability to capture anything on film, I'd be able to catch many more images, potential topics for Praise Stories (although, respectfully not about squirrel funerals, of course).

After exchanging additional information via email, I felt that we needed to teach the concept of *safe-careful-comfortable* first, before focusing on uncomfortable touching more directly. To do that, Lindsay and I gathered information about Ethan and Olivia and examples of their current *safe-careful-and comfortable* play activities.

Two Praise Stories (written in a first-person-plural voice) affirm all that goes well when Ethan and Olivia play. “How We Play” and “Other Ways We Play” describe how wonderfully Ethan and Olivia play together, with mention of specific activities. Lindsay and I reviewed and adjusted the text, and Lindsay illustrated the Stories with photos of Ethan and Olivia successfully at play.

For several reasons, the Praise Stories were a cinch to write compared to developing, “The 1-2 Story About Touching and Hugs.” First, it’s a tough topic. There’s judgment involved, a “comfort-to-discomfort spectrum” associated with touching and hugging. Second, I debated whether to drop Olivia as a joint voice in this Story, since she did not have difficulty in this area. After some consultation with Lindsay and Dr. Siobhan Timmins, it was decided that Lindsay should remain. It turned out to be a good call. Third, considering the possible sensory issues with a child with autism, how does a Social Story Author negotiate the differences? After much thought and several re-writes, I realized the Story - as well as Lindsay - were the best teachers for this one. We needed to provide Ethan with feedback on a case by case basis. I developed and described a 1-2 system, “That’s a 1!” means “Perfectly Done!” and “Oops! A TWO!” means “It’s too something.” Once that was in place, the Story almost wrote itself.

Did the Stories work? According to Lindsay, “Ethan was keen to go through them and excited that there were stories about him! The ‘in your face’ behaviour has definitely reduced now. It does happen occasionally, and I use the ‘Remember - number 1, perfectly done. Not number 2, too much’ and it clicks with him immediately, and he backs off. It’s just such a simple, straightforward way of explaining it and he understands it straightaway.”

Ethan and Olivia’s Stories are in Appendix A. Revisions have been made to the original Stories. Story text has been altered slightly in some cases, and the photos from all three Stories have been replaced with an alternate Ethan and Olivia from Depositphotos.com.

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[Click here for Appendix A.](#)