



Carol's Club

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

 CAROL GRAY
SOCIAL STORIES

I'M FIRST!

Solutions and a Social Story for the
Most Coveted Position in Childhood

The Project

I am writing from 36,000 feet on a flight from Detroit to Salt Lake City. My husband, Brian, and I are on the second of three flights to our final destination of Sun Valley, Idaho, to visit our daughter, Joanna, and her family for the holidays. I fly frequently. I'm never among the

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mature passengers seated comfortably in the gate area, waiting for their boarding zone announcement. To the contrary, I remain a few steps from the boarding gate with ten or so other people just like me. I believe I can speak for all of us who stand: we *can't* sit because if we do, we won't be first.

J.G., a Carol's Club member, initiated this project with a request for feedback on a story about taking turns as the first student in line. This project explores why "being first" may be exponentially critical to some students with autism, lists a few line strategies from my work in the schools with students with autism, and closes with an accompanying Social Story. In two weeks, the project will continue with several Stories about lines, including J.G.'s Story and my feedback. If you have any comments or Stories about lines, please feel free to contact me at TakeThisToCarol@gmail.com.

What It Means to Be First

When I was working as a consultant to students with autism in the schools, issues surrounding lines, specifically moving lines that transition students from one area of the building to another, were a frequent concern. Situations were as unique as each student. Some students had difficulty with following directions to line up, while others struggled with walking in a line (instead of three or so feet to the right or left of it), or maintaining another classmate's personal space. Despite the various concerns, being first - a fervent need to be number one every time - outnumbered them all by a wide margin.

In a school setting, being first is a linear position of prestige and honor; leadership bestowed at random with no work, practice, effort, or references required. It's like finishing first in a race, only better because there is no similar distinction anywhere else in the line-up. In



other words, two hierarchical categories apply to lines that transport students from one area of a school building to another: *First* and *Not First*.

Autism is not responsible for a child's desire to be first in line. Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to talk with several children - with and without autism - about why so many kids want to be first in line. Answers have ranged from, "I don't know... it's just better" to "because I have something that everyone wants." Tim, one of my first-grade students with autism (about six to seven years of age), had an explanation that was similar to many of his peers. Tim wanted to be first because "...it means you are the best." Does it mean that you are the best at walking in line? According to Tim, "Oh no... everybody does that. But not everybody is first."

Lines and Autism

Even though the majority of children like being first, they readily assume their position in line when they are not. Acknowledging that there are many children with autism who respond to not being first similar to their peers, for others it is a severe and recurring setback.

What we often *can* attribute to autism is the *intensity* of a child's determination to be first and severe disappointment when delegated to a less desirable position. I will never forget Bert, a kindergarten student (about five years of age). Upon learning that he was not first, Bert became quiet and still with eyes downcast, stoically unresponsive to all efforts to encourage him to join the line; an intense but silent response. In contrast, I've worked with students whose expression of disappointment is beyond description as tears or a tantrum. It's much more than that. These students are traumatized by their assigned line position and demonstrate extreme, resilient responses. Angie, age nine, would cry for an extended period, struggling to catch her breath, with the same degree of loss and upset with each line, every day.

Consider the observation of the child without autism two paragraphs back, that being first is better "...because I have something that everyone wants." The knowledge of what others observe, know, think, or feel is helpful in tempering feelings. As a case in point, when I fly I often observe the maneuvers of my airborne peers as we jockey to be the first in our boarding class, there's a covert quality to our efforts that is rooted in an awareness of the thoughts of those around us. We don't want anyone to notice or form a negative opinion of us - but we do want to be first. I've never seen a fellow passenger shout, "I WANT TO BE FIRST!"

In the same way, aware that every student wants to be first, the rationale behind any system that a teacher may devise to bring fairness and equality to being first in line is readily understood, respected, and appreciated by the majority of students. There is a recognition that becoming too upset over the loss of being first in line is "socially expensive," it may cost potential friendships. Children with autism may not have the quick, "intuitive" access to the thoughts of their classmates or teacher, leaving them with the same desire to be first as any

other child minus the mitigation of the social considerations and factors that surround them. Negative feelings may zoom to unbridled expression, unaltered by the social context.

Three Solutions

In the fall of 2000, I had two students on my caseload who were stressed by issues related to “lining up.” I completed several observations - so many that I collectively referred to them as the “Lines Study.” My Lines Study led me to develop some surprisingly effective Story-based solutions, and to discover a third! I can only take credit for the first two. The third solution is not mine, but I wish that it was!

#1. The teacher is usually first in line; not the students.

Most of the time, an adult leads a line of students from one part of a school building to another. In fact, in all of my line observations, a teacher or instructional assistant was first in line 100% of the time. Teachers do not send students into a school hallway unescorted. This means that an adult is almost always first in line. I developed a Social Story on the topic. My first thought was that the Story might be regarded as “bad news” by my students. It seemed to be a genuine relief on the two occasions that I used it. I’ve included a draft of a Social Story similar to the original, “My Teacher is Almost Always First in Line,” to this project.

#2. Kids wiggle in a standing line before it moves.

In the course of my “lines study,” I stood in several student lines to update my experience. It’s provided a fast and definitive reminder that there isn’t a “STILL” setting on children. They are in perpetual motion. A stray hand, elbow, or knee arrives without warning or

“excuse me.” Admittedly, at times this sort of contact with peers in a line is intentional and pre-meditated. I am convinced, though, that a good percentage of the time the subtle shoves that occur when children share a small space are accidental. The second half of this project will contain a Social Story on this topic.

#3. Is it a line or a team of children?

While I was working on the line challenges of two of my students, another one of my students with autism, Chad (about nine years old), was doing very well! I contacted Chad's third grade teacher, Mr. Jeff, and asked if I could schedule three observations that would include lines. I was about to be amazed. In Mr. Jeff's room, lines are a team sport. To this day, I have never seen twenty-four kids walk down a hall as perfectly - or as uniquely - as Mr. Jeff's self-named “Team 24.”

Mr. Jeff's philosophy was to teach - every second - and fill in the blanks of a school day with fun, team-building activities. His first initiative was to replace the “first in line” phenomenon with a team sport. Mr. Jeff and the physical education teacher taught his class a basic line-up order, their default format. Each student was assigned a specific place in one of two parallel lines for the entire year. They learned to walk in silent unison and to rotate to the front automatically with each new line-up opportunity. After being first in line, a student would be last the next time. Using two shorter lines meant that each student was “first” twice as often. It also required performance-quality straight lines, control, and teamwork.

Mr. Jeff didn't stop there. On his request, the class would assume any one of a growing number of “variations” as they moved through the halls. As examples:

- Too (Two) Slow Snakes. Sounds easy, two lines slithering just a little to the left, then the right. They practiced with the gym teacher before their hallway debut.

- Shhhhhhh! The class walks in their two standard and perfectly silent lines. When a person passes going the opposite direction, a subtle cue from Mr. Jeff signals his students to simultaneously raise their right index finger to their lips with the Shhhhhh! gesture. This was especially fun to do as two or more adults approached engrossed in conversation.
- The Switch. Same two lines with additional space between students, creating two elongated lines. On Mr. Jeff's cue, the lines switch - left moves to the right, right moves to left - without so much as a stumble. Also practiced in physical education class prior to their first hallway performance.

Students in Mr. Jeff's class had an open invitation to suggest other line formation ideas in writing. The class created a lines notebook containing all suggestions and final formations.



With a team sport like this one, each member is equally important. The praise and second-glances of others in the hallway served to reinforce Team 24, as they earned a reputation and worked to maintain it. Being first in line took a back seat to never missing a cue and delivering a perfect performance.

Closing Comments and a Social Story

I really enjoyed working on this project!

My Story, “An Adult/Teacher/Proper Name is Almost Always First in Line” is on the following page. It is intended as a sample to provide a point of departure to develop a more personalized Story for someone in your care.

I have a general open audience for this Story. As I developed it, my goal was to keep the Story short, to the point, and to mention that the teacher is first in line as many times as possible!

This is a very descriptive Story. For those of you familiar with Social Stories 10.2 and Criterion 8: A GReight Formula, the Story contains 9 Descriptive Sentences and 0 Coaching Sentences, yielding a Social Story Rating of 9.

Have a wonderful, safe, productive, effective, and happy new year.



Mrs. Woods is Almost Always First in Line

This is a picture of my teacher, Mrs. Woods, and some of the kids in my class. We're standing in a line. Soon we will walk in a line and follow Mrs. Woods. When my class walks to another part of the building, Mrs. Woods is almost always first in line.

When we go to music, gym, or art class, Mrs. Woods is almost always first in line.

Sometimes, Mrs. Woods is sick at home or at a conference. When this happens, a substitute teacher or another adult is first in line. All other times, Mrs. Woods leads our line.

Almost always, Mrs. Woods is first in line when we walk to other parts of our school.

