



# Carol's Club CAROL GRAY SOCIAL STORIES

Custom Social Stories™ Resources Created by Carol Gray for Members - June 4, 2019

My thanks to guest contributor, Dr. Siobhan Timmins.

## The Request

I received a request from Danielle, a Carol's Club mom who lives in New Jersey with her husband and two children, a daughter and a son, both diagnosed with autism. Alison is eight, and Trevor is four. Alison and Trevor are sensitive to some sounds - and while they are not distressed by the same noises, they share a sensitivity to the sound of fireworks. Danielle asked if there is a Social Story that might help. This project is an answer to that question, with a discussion of things to consider when writing about fireworks, a sample Story for Alison and Trevor, and more from a variety of sources. My thanks to Dr. Siobhan Timmins for her significant contribution to this project, including a list of fireworks strategies and four Social Stories.



*Pictured above: Hank (left) in a photo taken last week, and Emma Grace (right) in a photo taken in our back yard, July 2018.*

Fireworks are frightening and uncomfortable for many people, as well as animals. I spent one evening of this past Memorial Day weekend laying on the floor of our cottage bedroom holding Emma, one of our two basset hounds. For dogs, fireworks activate the “fight or flight” response - which is why here in the United States, more dogs go missing on the Fourth of July than any other day. If we allow Emma, to pace, Hank our male basset, becomes equally upset. If I help Emma, then Hank is okay. The question is, how to help Emma? We’ve tried medication in the past - but ended up with an upset dog that couldn’t move well but continued to try. What works best with Emma is to hold her very tight - even though her body tries to bolt (it’s hard to hold back 72 determined pounds). She buries her head in my shoulder at the same time.

Laying together on the cottage bedroom floor, Emma and I endured a series of fireworks - they would seem to end, silence, are they done? Nope - after a break of twenty minutes or more, a boom and crack. They were back. It rendered both of us on “high alert” for several hours - Emma shaking with the anticipation of another explosion while I stayed on alert, ready to restrain without notice. I’m not afraid of fireworks - but I felt the nervous tension along with Emma. After one night of fireworks at our cottage, we headed home where the celebration is farther away, and less upsetting for Emma.

The reason I share this dog story is that by holding Emma and feeling every fiber in her body tighten, I came to appreciate how her response is outside of her control. Each firework is a direct and real threat, and she is responding accordingly. I am not comparing my dog’s experience with fireworks to that of a child. My point is that after my experience with Emma - where at times I wondered if she might have a heart attack - I have a new respect

for the fear and discomfort generated by fireworks. I couldn't tell Emma she was okay because she wasn't! I kept telling her, "I'm here."

## Gathering Information

Every Social Story begins with gathering information. Without the opportunity to work directly with Alison and Trevor, and wanting to create a sample Story that may also be helpful for a wider audience, I began with an email to Dr. Siobhan Timmins to inquire about fireworks in the United Kingdom. I also visited our library and completed an online search to learn about the history of fireworks, how they work, why they elicit fear in children, and how parents and professionals can help.

Fireworks are used worldwide, for example, to celebrate the new year. Siobhan Timmins lives in England. She mentioned Bonfire Night. I have never heard of that, so I looked it up. Bonfire Night is a name given to a variety of celebrations that use bonfires and fireworks. (For example, in many parts of the United Kingdom on November 5<sup>th</sup> of each year, Bonfire Night celebrates the arrest of Guy Fawkes in 1605. Mr. Fawkes was a member of the Gunpowder Plot and was discovered guarding explosives that had been placed under the House of Lords). Siobhan explains:

*Fireworks used to be set off once a year just on Bonfire night, but they are now also commonly used in the U.K. as a celebration on someone's birthday, a wedding, a New Year celebration and even at a funeral (using the deceased person's ashes within the firework!). Because people choose to set off fireworks in the week before November 5th, on November 5th itself and at the weekends on either side of November 5th, the loud bangs and sudden noises happen randomly for almost two weeks in November and also for about a week around the New Year. Even if we are able to make the child more comfortable for a short while ( ear defenders, music, blinds down etc.) we are unable to reassure them about when the fireworks will end, the uncertainty of which amplifies their discomfort.*

Siobhan has extensive experience with fireworks and writing Social Stories about them. From the introduction to her [list of fireworks strategies](#):

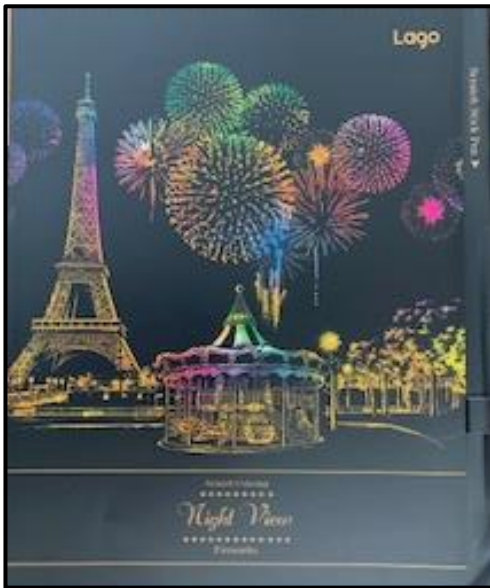
*Every aspect of a firework display was uncomfortable for my son, Mark, from the unexpected noises and bright lights to the crowds and their random 'oohs' and 'aahs' as well as the unusual foods offered for family and friends to eat outdoors while watching the display. He wanted to be involved, the whole evening was just too overwhelming for him.*



Siobhan has graciously shared [four fireworks Stories](#). Interestingly, her Stories are a part of a series about traditions. For more information about writing about traditions, see [“Understanding the Tooth Fairy and Other Similar Traditions: Ideas for Parents and Professionals.”](#) from the Carol’s Club Welcome Packet.

For me, gathering information for a Social Story is genuinely fun because I never fail to discover something that I didn’t expect. I often come across ideas and resources that - though are not directly helpful in developing the Story at hand, may be useful to someone nonetheless. And other ideas often launch new, related Social Story topics that I may have otherwise missed. Here are descriptions of a few of them (listed and linked in the references of this project):

- A helpful article by Lisa titled, “Fireworks and Autism: How to Make the 4th of July Enjoyable.” Lisa is a mom of a child with autism, with ideas like planning ahead, resting between picnics and other activities and the fireworks display, introducing fireworks by watching them first on youtube.com, using noise-cancelling headphones or watching fireworks from a distance or at home on television.
- There’s an “Amazing Fireworks Show in Japan” (2016) on YouTube. Check it out.
- Speaking of noise-cancelling headphones, I did not realize how inexpensive some of them are - and tailor-made for very young children. I linked to an example on Amazon - there are many options.
- “Fireworks” is a one-minute musical video for kids by the Laurie Berkner Band. It’s free for those with Amazon Prime. It is about fireworks on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, which limits its international relevance and applicability to other celebrations, like the arrival of the new year.
- “Daniel’s First Fireworks” (Hamburg & Friedman), is about Daniel and Margaret’s (tiger siblings) first experience with fireworks. The fear of fireworks is addressed by the family holding hands. It would have been nice to see headphones on Daniel or Margaret!
- “Fourth of July Show” (Smith, 2017) is a book with rhyming text for very young children. It’s a positive description of fireworks, but some passages that may be unhelpful or confusing for a child with autism. In many of the illustrations, the fireworks touch the characters (all are animals), and in one picture the words “BOOM” and “POP” are placed on the dog’s ears.
- The calming effect of coloring uniquely addresses the issues surrounding fireworks with the scratch-coloring book titled, “Night View: Fireworks” (Lago Design, 2015, pictured at the top of the following page). I ordered a copy from Amazon to check it out (at this writing they have 10 left.). This is fun! The lines are provided for you to follow as you scratch off the black with an enclosed plastic stylus to reveal bright colors beneath. That’s the cover of the book at left, and a page that I started to “color” at right. It’s not as easy as it looks - but may be a perfect match for those with patience for detail. A “stray” mark will also reveal color below - making mistaken or unplanned lines colorful and noticeable.



## Writing Social Stories About Fireworks

Developing a Social Story in response to a sound sensitivity - or any sensory issue for that matter - requires a genuine respect for a perceptual experience that is unlike that of the author. As parents or professionals, we may be absolutely puzzled by a child's response - if not totally taken off guard - because it is so different from how the situation looks, sounds, or feels to us. Our brain tends to process that which it doesn't understand through its own bank of experiences first - with autism, it's important to understand we may not find many useful answers in that process. A review of *our* past experiences doesn't help us much if at all; a curiosity of the internal experience of the person with autism does.

A Social Story about a sensory issue also requires heightened attention to detail, or the inclusion of details not typically found in Social Stories. This requires an author to proceed with caution, first to acknowledge and understand the nature of a response that is unfamiliar or intense, and second to identify a Story format, content, and illustration that will "fit" or address the audience's uncomfortable perception or fear. In other words, Stories about sensory issues that respectfully and unassumingly "hit the nail on the head" are, in my opinion, most likely to be beneficial. Keep in mind, too, that other strategies and accommodations may be indicated to complement - or in place of - a Story. Siobhan Timmins' list of fireworks strategies and Social Stories serve as an excellent example.

By definition, a Social Story is researched, developed, and implemented with safety as a primary concern, with every word and illustration scrutinized for how it may be interpreted by a person with autism. Fireworks is a topic in a category with other topics-with-risks, like crossing the street, or how to cook or drive. In a story about crossing the street, for example, an author may be tempted to write, "A crosswalk is a safe place to cross the street." No, it isn't. The phrase is inaccurate, dangerous, and misleading if interpreted literally, at face value. A crosswalk isn't inherently safe - that's why it's identified with bright paint on the road, lights, and timers. Pedestrians have to pay attention, watch for any drivers who aren't doing that, understand and abide by the safety measures provided, and proceed with caution.

As I began writing the Stories about fireworks for this project, I considered including a description of how they work. I have often done that with sensory issues in the past. I've written Stories about how air hand dryers, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and washing machines work. Fireworks, though, are different. Including information about how fireworks work is possible but tricky, coming very close to an explanation of how they are made. I certainly do not want to describe in detail how to make fireworks to a young audience (although I admit, an unsupervised child may be able to readily access that information online). I know Siobhan had the same concern as she developed the Story, "What is a firework?" and included this text:

*It is important that only adults who understand about lighting fireworks safely are in charge of fireworks.  
Adults and children watching usually stand a safe distance away from the fireworks.*

Topics-with-risks require authors to harness each Social Story criterion very seriously, with safety at the forefront of every decision related to format, layout, selection of vocabulary, and all aspects of illustration. They arrive with a "heads up!" for authors.

Some general thoughts for writing about fireworks:

- If the sound is uncomfortable, refrain from calling it "okay." It's not okay. It's even a little difficult to call it "safe" when it is so painful or upsetting. I prefer something like, "Adults (Mom/Dad/Grandma) have ideas that may make the sound of fireworks more comfortable for me. I may have ideas, too."
- Consider including mention that other people and many animals are sensitive to the sound of fireworks.
- A list of strategies, presented as choices that are agreeable to all in the family or group, may help to increase a child's sense of control and comfort. For example, "My family has a choice. Mom may watch the fireworks on television, visit the fireworks with headphones for as long as we like, or decide to do something else together."

- I write many paper chain Stories for topics like fireworks, where there is an uncomfortable or undesirable agent of some kind. Create a paper chain - for example, it might be 16 links long for the two weeks plus celebration of November 5<sup>th</sup> described by Siobhan! - with a link removed for each day. (Paper chain Stories are equally effective when used to describe a positive or much-anticipated event.)
- Acknowledge the sensory discomfort and accurately identify the approximate duration of each fireworks event. At our cottage, laws restrict the days and times when fireworks may be legally displayed.
- Use a visual to accompany the information. If the law indicates that fireworks must end by eleven o'clock at night, mention the use of a sand timer for the final hour in the Story.
- To keep the Story accurate, it may be helpful to mention that sometimes people may make a mistake and not abide by the law. Fireworks may continue past the designated stop time.
- Consider asking the child, adolescent, or adult who will be reading and using the Social Story to create/color its illustrations. This may also help to increase the child's sense of control while pairing a calming activity with an anxiety-producing topic.
- Fireworks are quite easy to draw once a curved line is mastered. To increase a child's involvement and - as mentioned several times previously - a sense of control, consider writing a simple, easy to understand, repetitive Story for a very young child with blank areas for his or her drawings.

As mentioned in the introduction to this project, Carol's Club member, Danielle, has asked for a Story about firework sounds for her children. Danielle and I talked and exchanged several emails. Both Alison and Trevor are intrigued by fireworks and like to watch them on the computer with the sound muted. Danielle and her husband would like for their family to see them in person, but understand that may be a few years away.

I've created a sample Story for them titled, ["Our Fireworks Story and Plan."](#) It is a starting point, with text and illustration that Danielle and her husband may revise or replace. I kept the focus on the sounds of the fireworks and did not mention the sounds of the crowd that gathers. Danielle felt that it was not needed. Information about crowd sounds could be added to the Story, following the discussion of fireworks sounds. For example:

*There are also crowd noises at a fireworks display. People often talk, laugh, shout, cheer, sneeze, and clap. Sometimes, a baby may cry, or a dog may bark. Many times, if there is a firework that is really big or spectacular, many people may cheer or clap at the same time.*

*It's important to let Mom or Dad know if the people sounds are uncomfortable. They may have helpful ideas.*

I wish Danielle and her family the very best this 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Labor Day and send wishes for fireworks with increasing comfort to every Carol's Club member and those in their care.

P.S. The children's book, "Taming Fire" (Scholastic Voyages of Discovery, 1994) arrived just prior to my final "SAVE" before posting this project online. There isn't much about fireworks, just a page about how people have used fire in celebrations for many years (for example, birthday cakes). It's a colorful and interactive book that could build an understanding of a bigger concept - the uses, and dangers, of fire. I quickly added it to the reference section below.

#### References (with links where possible)

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