

Carol's Club CAROL GRAY SOCIAL STORIES

Custom Social Stories™ Resources Created by Carol Gray for Members - July 2, 2019



We've Found Another Home!

When We Move, the Words That We Use Matter

Introduction

According to the United States Census Bureau, Americans move 11.7 times in their lifetime. In the United States and the United Kingdom, most people move during the summer months of June, July, and August, with August at the top of that list. This may explain why I recently received four project requests related to moving, each at a different point

in the moving process. Moving introduces a variety of changes and unforeseen twists and turns. I'm devoting the next couple of projects to the topic; starting with the words that we use when talking to children about moving.

In this series of projects, we'll focus on moving from one home to another. The concepts and ideas are likely to be applicable for any sort of childhood location move – for example, one school to another, or to another classroom within a school. Children may also be impacted when family members move, like grandparents moving away (or closer) or when one parent is moving due to a divorce.

It's a home.

What's helpful about the term "home" is its consistency over time. The words "house," "apartment," "condominium," "duplex," and "mobile home" refer to types of shelter. A "home" is a residence. It's where someone lives. A family may move from an apartment, to a duplex, and then to a house... and refer to each as "home." The homes that we live in connect our past, present, and future – times change, yet we always return "home."

You're not "moving"...yet.

Parents often ask me for help in minimizing the stress and anxiety of a move for their children with autism. I start with vocabulary. Vocabulary is powerful and pervasive. Used effectively, it has the potential to serve as a reliable and reassuring backdrop among an inevitable list of altered activities, routines, schedules, and expectations over the next few months (or year if a new home is being built). My first advice is to 1) consistently use a set of words and phrases that are accurate, descriptive, and reassuring, and 2) provide information about the traditional terms that we use (like "moving" and its many forms) that children will likely hear in the coming months.

In my opinion, the word "moving" doesn't provide a lot of helpful information for children, especially those who may have a tendency to interpret terms and phrases literally, or misunderstand the concepts that they represent. At best, "moving" is descriptive of the day or days spent in a vehicle on the route from one home to another. On those days, yes, we will be moving. Unfortunately, we tend to begin using the term "moving" months before we load our belongings into a truck. We use it as a noun to refer to our upcoming "move," and as a verb to refer to the process that it represents, as in "moving." Do we move? No. We're still in the same place. Day after day, a child hears the words "move" and "moving" and they're right where they were yesterday, and will be tomorrow. Do our things move? No. For the next 90 days or so we're all in the same place but... we're moving! No. We're not. To a child with autism, we keep saying we're going to move but we don't. More importantly, we miss an opportunity to build meaning into the current events, what we *are doing*. And, we're losing credibility for the day when we do move – sort of the like the boy who cried "wolf" too many times. "Moving" is best reserved for when we *are* moving.

Give “packing” a purpose.

What about “packing?” The problem that I have with “packing” is this: to a child with social-communication differences – or even a child who is typical – “packing” is scary. These are my things! Why are we putting things in boxes? We’re taking items that we use every day, like socks, toys, and crayons – and putting them where they cannot be easily retrieved. In very short order everything looks the same. Whether it’s dad’s tools or mom’s shoes or your brother’s video games – they’re all brown and corrugated. Maybe labeled – but, what if you can’t read? What used to be tools, shoes, or games is now a corrugated brown wall with magic marker scribbles. We’ve accomplished one of the meanings of “pack” according to Dictionary.com, to arrange things “into a compact mass.” A brown corrugated mass is not the goal of packing, nor is it why we are placing things that we need and use into boxes.

The problem is that families often have to pack quickly. There’s a lot to do in an amount of time that is often defined by a contracted and inflexible deadline. When we move fast and are tired and under pressure ourselves, we’re at risk for using words without thinking. With all of our good intentions to be patient, understanding, and supportive, our typical “default” words can raise a child’s anxiety. To a child with social-communication differences, the use of the verb “pack” or “packing” without reference to a destination or point of “unpacking” may mean that items are being placed into boxes. Period; “full stop” in the United Kingdom. Without translation, our intended message remains at large.

There’s another meaning of the verb “pack” that includes its purpose “to pack goods into compact form, as for transportation or storage (often followed by up)” (Dictionary.com). The verb “pack” is often followed by “for” as in “packing for” a vacation or putting supplies in a bookbag “for school.” In this case, when “packing” is a part of a request, it arrives with its corresponding rationale.

You’re “...shopping for your family’s next home.”

In place of “move,” “moving,” “pack,” and “packing,” there are other words and phrases that can help to minimize confusion when you speak to your child, or circumvent misunderstanding when your child happens to overhear a conversation related to the move. In general, we’re looking for words and phrases that mean-what-they-mean, even if interpreted at face value. There’s no need to be restricted to my suggestions. The important thing is to select a few clear and descriptive words or phrases to use throughout the time that is involved in relocating the family.

Consider this sentence: “We’re moving and looking for a new home.” The sequence is wrong – chances are we’re looking for the new home *before* we move. There is a strong tendency to use the phrase “new home” (even when it

is just new to us, but 100 years old). To a child, “new” may be associated with that which is unfamiliar, and fuel anxiety as a result. The word “looking” as in “looking for a new home” may also backfire if associated with loss, and the possibility of not finding the desired item. Rephrased as, “We’re going to find another (or our next) home...” may help to minimize these issues. The word “next” connects the current home to the one that will follow and works to reinforce their similarities. “Going to find” is an accurate description of what is occurring, with the goal mentioned at the same time.

In a similar fashion, “pack” and “packing” may be replaced with phrases that work to inform, while minimizing the risk of misunderstanding. Consider using “packing for our next home,” “putting things in boxes to keep them safe,” or “let’s place it here until we take it out at our next home.” If a child uses a backpack or bookbag for school, it may serve as a helpful frame of reference in a Social Story, as in, “I use a backpack to take my things to school. I will be (or “we are” or “I am”) using boxes to take my things to my next home.”

Sometimes people will say words like “moving” and “packing.” This is okay.

Admittedly, the world does not consistently talk in literally accurate, descriptive, and reassuring phrases. We may steadily employ a meaningful and undeviating vocabulary, only to encounter someone who exclaims, “I heard that you’re moving!” On occasion, that person may be us. As hard as we try to select our words carefully, we slip into default terminology. The specific meanings of these phrases will vary greatly depending upon the context in which they are used. I often suggest to parents that, if possible, they provide their child with a brief on-the-spot explanation of what “moving” or “packing” means on case by case basis.

Coming soon...

In my experience, Social Stories about moving work well. It’s where they have historically demonstrated some of their most immediate and disarmingly positive outcomes! I have written several Stories on a variety of moving sub-topics, from describing the reasons a family has to move, to why some items may not make the move, to a detailed comparison of the make, model, features, and efficiency ratings of the furnace in the current home with the one in the next. I look forward to the opportunity to respond to the details of the Carol’s Club members who have requested help with the various stages of moving, while sharing case examples along the way.

If you are a parent in a family that is considering or currently involved in moving, please feel free to contact me if I may be of any assistance in answering a question, brainstorming ideas, or providing suggestions for a Social Story at TakeThisToCarol@gmail.com. Have a safe move your new home and community.

