



SAINT CATHERINE CENTER FOR *Special Needs*

A Tool for Learning: Social Stories

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For many with autism, engaging in a social interaction is like playing a game without knowing the rules. Some individuals report that the social demands of making small talk or walking into a party can create stress, anxiety, and panic; they may feel as if everyone else knows the secrets necessary for success and they do not.

For many of us, learning social rules is easy and we do it without thinking much about it. Others, however, are routinely puzzled by the expectations and standards of the world around them. And it makes sense that some folks would struggle. Social norms change from place to place, from person to person, and from day to day. So understanding them involves not only gathering information about situations, events, and places but realizing that context matters. For instance, individuals who struggle to understand the subtle norms of something as simple as a birthday party could be easily confused by traveling just a few blocks in my town. In my neighborhood, for instance, it is common to host the party at your home, invite all the children from the block, play a few games, enjoy a birthday cake, and watch as the birthday boy or girl opens gifts from his or her guests. In my friend's neighborhood (only miles away), however, it is common to host a party at a restaurant or activity center, serve a meal (usually pizza), and have the kids make a craft or project.

While most people can navigate these changing expectations, some individuals with autism and Asperger syndrome struggle with them constantly. These individuals may have difficulties reading social situations or knowing what type of behavior is expected in certain circumstances. For these reasons, it can be helpful to explicitly share "social secrets" with these individuals. A social secret is a norm, expectation, or standard that is often unspoken but known and understood by most people. For instance, most of us know that when you pass a colleague in the hallway at work and they yell, "How are you?", the expected response is "Fine. How about you?" We know that it isn't typically expected or appropriate to stop and share a ten-minute account of exactly how you are feeling at that moment. In other words, most folks know that this type of "How are you?" is a greeting, not an invitation to have a conversation. If you don't understand this, however, life can be very frustrating. You might be wondering why your colleague continues to wander down the hallway while you begin to share some of the highlights and difficulties of your day.

Sharing secrets may be as simple as giving students information as situations arise. For instance, if a student is at a school dance and seems confused about the expectations of the events, the teacher might approach her and suggest that she get a snack, approach some friends to talk, or join other students on the dance floor. Some students may even want these options in writing. One fifth grade student, Mario, kept a notebook of all of the social secrets of the playground he had collected over the years in elementary school. Some of the secrets included:

- You have to take turns on the swing
- Older kids don't want to be pushed on the swings
- If you want to play basketball, you should practice because the kids like it better if you know the rules
- If you want to jump rope, then you should offer to turn the jump rope for other people
- When the bell rings you need to get ready to go inside but you don't need to run as fast as you can because you have five minutes to get in line

Mario reviewed his list often. He often paged through the notebook before recess and during other times when he craved order and information.

Teachers can also be proactive and share social secrets before their students run into difficulties. One middle school teacher, Ms. Right, decided to share the social secrets of her classroom with all students early in the year. She had students work in groups to develop individual lists and then the class compiled that information into a master list. She thought that sharing the social secrets of her room would help her two students with Autism syndrome but she was surprised to learn that many of her other students responded positively as well. She reported fewer behavior and beginning-of-the-year adjustment problems after sharing the following secrets:

- Kids can get up and sharpen pencils any time, but Ms. Right gets crabby when we do it when she is giving directions
- If she stands near your desk it means you should stop talking and listen
- If you give an answer then you should let someone else give the next answer; don't be a know-it-all
- If everyone works hard on Friday afternoons, Ms. Right will sometimes give us free time at the end of the day

- You can't always be the line leader; give everyone a chance to be in front of the line

Keep these strategies in mind when you are working with a student who is acting oddly or inappropriately in a social situation. Too often students are reprimanded or punished for "bad behavior" when they are actually confused, naïve, or misinformed. Providing social secrets to these students can help them avoid embarrassment, angst, and anxiety.

And, remember, sharing social secrets is important even for students who do not have reliable communication. Just because a student cannot express confusion related to social situations, does not mean he does not feel confused. To error on the side of caution, teachers should provide information about social secrets to all.

References

Willey, L.H. (1999). *Pretending to be normal*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.