

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Social Stories: A Positive Behavior Intervention for Typically Developing Preschoolers

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The purpose of this research-to-practice summary is to discuss the impact that social stories can have on challenging behavior within preschool classrooms. Past research has focused on social stories as an intervention for children with disabilities. The current study extended the research to look at the effect of social stories on children who are typically developing. Results showed that the children experienced a decrease in challenging behavior (e.g., hitting, biting) and an increase in prosocial skills (e.g., sharing, expressing emotions). The participating teachers reported that social stories were easily embedded in preschool classrooms, were positive supports for children with challenging behaviors, and were easy to implement. Social stories are a small investment with a big return; reducing challenging behavior in the classroom helps to provide a better learning environment for all of the children in the class.

Challenging behavior is a prevalent issue in child care centers today. Children who are preschool aged are still developing social-emotional skills; sharing, taking turns, expressing emotions, as well as many other skills that are needed for children to interact appropriately in group settings. Children who have not yet acquired these skills may become frustrated and exhibit challenging behaviors. They may not be able to engage in play with other children, but rather play on their own. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network found that length of time children spend in child care is related to more problem behaviors and lower ratings of social skills (2006). Over time, these behaviors can turn into patterns of challenging behavior (Ostrov & Crick, 2007). Once established, these patterns are likely to continue into elementary school. They can affect a child's ability to participate in learning and have negative effects on the development of academic skills and language (Bulotsky-Shearer & Fantuzzo, 2010). Patterns of challenging behaviors are also associated with peer rejection and student-teacher conflict during the elementary years (Ostrov & Crick, 2007). It is the teacher's job to help the children learn how to interact with their peers appropriately. Interventions and positive behavior supports (PBS), such as Social Stories, are needed to prevent these patterns of challenging behaviors from forming.

POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORTS AND SOCIAL STORIES

The Teaching Pyramid offers early childhood educators, administrators, and therapists PBS strategies, which can be used to help children overcome challenging behaviors (Hemmeter & Fox, 2009). One such strategy that has been used to intervene in instances of challenging behaviors and teach social skills is social stories.

Social stories are short stories that explain a social situation and teach social strategies. They are created based on the individual child's behavior and can be written by teachers, parents, and therapists who are close to the child and have observed the behavior. They focus on the appropriate behaviors, or target behaviors, which the child needs to learn. Social stories can discuss a variety of situations, from how to initiate play to separating from parents in the morning. They are positive interventions, written from the perspective of the child (Gray & Garand, 1993). A social story is usually accompanied by clip art or photography (Crozier & Tincani, 2007). The length of a social story can vary, depending on the attention span of the child but sentence structure and language used should be easy for the child to understand. The stories used in this study were twelve sentences long and included photographs that showed each of the target social skills (e.g., a picture depicting the target child sharing with a peer). Three comprehension questions were included in the story (e.g., what can you do if a friend has the toy you want?). Social stories can be used in the classroom, at home, or to teach social skills in other settings.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study found that social stories may reduce challenging behavior and increase prosocial behaviors for preschoolers who are considered to be typically developing. The children participating in this study had not been formally identified as having developmental delay or disability. Researchers also found that the type of play children engage in may also be affected by the intervention. Children who received the social stories intervention decreased in solitary play and increased in cooperative play. One child also experienced a decrease in temper tantrums after the introduction of the social stories. Finally, the teachers who used the social stories in their classrooms during this study found that they were easily embedded into preschool classroom routines. In the social validity questionnaire, Mrs. Smith stated, *"This was easy to implement in the classroom. It only took 5-10 minutes at the beginning of centers, but helped Caleb a lot."* All three teachers stated that social stories were effective in reducing challenging behavior. Mrs. Baker stated, *"We saw that Ian made huge strides in social skills. He began to engage in play with his peers and the tantrums began to occur less and less."* Finally, all three teachers commented that they would use social stories in the classroom again.

IMPLICATIONS

Research has shown that social stories may impact a child's challenging behaviors. Teachers who have used social stories found them to be useful in reducing challenging behavior in the classroom and building social skills (Crozier & Tincani, 2007). Social stories are easily embedded into classroom routines (Crozier & Tincani, 2005). Stories, reading centers, and story

time are integral parts of preschool classrooms. The intervention used in this study took less than five minutes to implement daily. Early childhood educators, therapists, parents, and other professionals that work with young children can learn more about social stories through workshops and can write their own social stories.

Social stories are positive interventions that can fit with a school's positive behavior support plan. It could be helpful and beneficial for administrators to explore options for training teachers on assessing behavior through observation and writing social stories that fit the individual needs of the target child.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the positive impact that social stories can have on a child's challenging behavior. By targeting the behavioral needs of the individual child, they can help children engage in positive social interactions. Social stories are a small investment with a huge return; studies have shown that they can reduce challenging behavior and increase prosocial skills. Reducing challenging behavior in the classroom could give teachers more time and opportunities to meet the educational needs of all the children in the classroom.

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