

# Early Education



Volume 68 Autumn 2023

- *Reo Rua Pukapuka Pikitia: Strategies for developing Te Reo Rangatira*
- *Talanoa, vā and picturebook pedagogy to support Pacific identities in a kindergarten setting*
- *Using social stories as an intentional teaching strategy*
- *Children's mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic*
- *Exploring the current climate of mathematics in early childhood education*
- *A data-informed look at sustained shared thinking*





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*Early Education* welcomes:

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- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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# Using social stories as an intentional teaching strategy

Vicki Gifkins and Tara McLaughlin

## Abstract

*Social stories are a useful teaching strategy to support all children's learning. Social stories support children to better understand specific concepts, skills, or situations and are intended to help children apply that knowledge in their everyday interactions. Most empirical research has focused on the use of social stories as an intervention for disabled or neurodiverse children with mixed results. When used well, social stories can support the learning of children with and without disabilities. Social stories do not appear to be widely used in Aotearoa New Zealand early learning services, particularly for children without disabilities. This article is designed to share the first author's personal journey with social stories and provide early learning kaiako<sup>1</sup> with more information to use social stories as a teaching strategy to promote learning.*

## Introduction

Social stories are short, personalised stories or books that can be a powerful strategy to support intentional teaching and bring about learning for children (Gray, 2010). Social stories support children to deepen their learning of specific concepts, skills, or situations usually related to social situations, social skills, or behavioural expectations. Social stories are not designed to change a child's behaviour but instead give the child the knowledge needed to understand an expectation or situation by

making the implicit explicit. Stories can be written for individual children or groups of children and are always tailored to the needs of learners. In this article, the first author shares some of her experiences using social stories in a kindergarten setting. In conversations with colleagues, the author realised that social stories do not appear to be well-known or widely used in Aotearoa. In fact, social stories sometimes get confused as another term for learning stories. However, learning stories and social stories are distinctly different as will be made clear in this article.

Notably, there is a significant international literature base exploring the impact of social stories with very mixed results. The article will explore some of the literature and provide practical support for kaiako to write and use social stories. There is an art to structuring and writing social stories to promote learning most effectively and stories do take time to write, but once the skills of writing social stories are mastered, they can be a quick and effective teaching strategy.

## Social stories definition and origin

Social stories are short narratives or stories designed to help children understand specific concepts, and skills, or navigate situations (Gray, 2010). They are usually presented as a short, personalised book and read to young children with an aim of promoting learning

through shared social story reading. In *He Māpuna te Tamaiti*, a resource early learning kaiako utilise to promote social and emotional learning, social stories are cited as a possible strategy to teach social interaction skills and are defined as “a short narrative that describes how a child can successfully navigate a social situation” (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 54). However, *He Māpuna te Tamaiti* does not provide a more explicit explanation of what social stories are or how to use them.

Social stories were developed by American teacher Carol Gray in the early 1990s as an informal experiment to support a child with autism who kept interrupting her in class (Bezark, 2003; Gray & Garand, 1993). Gray found the strategy worked so trialled social stories with other students with autism. The strategy was a success, so Gray continued exploring the potential of social stories and refining her approach to writing them. In the 1990s, Gray began to publish literature about social stories and her publications have expanded and been revised over the years (e.g., Gray, 1994, 2010, 2015, 2020; Gray & White, 2001). Nowadays, social stories are widely used internationally to support children with and without learning disabilities, including neurotypical children. There are multiple terms for social stories, including social narratives, scripted stories, and personalised stories. Social stories is the term coined by Gray and includes specific principles and guidelines for writing stories. The term social narratives have the same meaning as social stories (Zimmerman & Ledford, 2017). Scripted stories is a slightly less rule-bound term for the same concept. Personalised stories is a term preferred by some in the autism community because it shifts the language emphasis away from “social” to the personal, to ensure stories are meeting individual needs as opposed to promoting neurotypical social norms. Whilst the terms differ, the underpinning concepts are very similar.

## Why use social stories

*Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, states that “Kaiako are the key resource in any ECE service. Their primary responsibility is to facilitate children’s learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 59). Social stories are a strategy that help kaiako to support children’s learning thoughtfully and intentionally to promote children’s learning of specific concepts, skills, or situations. Social stories are commonly used to promote children’s learning relating to social and emotional concepts, skills, and situations. Social and emotional competence encompasses a broad set of skills children learn to use over time, including forming secure relationships, engaging in positive interactions, developing and maintaining friendships, problem-solving, understanding and regulating emotions, and resolving conflicts (McLaughlin et al., 2017; Ulloa et al., 2010). Social-emotional skills are a key curriculum area in early childhood, and early learning services are spaces where children have many opportunities to practice and develop these skills (Ulloa et al., 2010). Having social and emotional skills supports children not only in their immediate learning but also increases positive life outcomes and higher levels of life-long well-being (Denham et al., 2003; McLaughlin et al., 2017). Social-emotional learning cannot be left to chance because it is simply too important.

*He Pikorua*, the Ministry of Education (2022) learning support framework uses the notion of flexible support models, referred to as *Te Tuapapa*, to recognise that while most children learn social skills and behavioural expectations through the everyday curriculum, some children need targeted and individualised supports through planful and intentional teaching. The amount of support each child needs is different, and some children may need more planned adult-guided experiences, alongside their child-led and peer-supported learning opportunities, for optimal learning (McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018). *He Māpuna te Tamaiti* places a strong emphasis on kaiako

planning for social-emotional teaching to occur and not solely relying on responding to spontaneous situations or conflicts (Ministry of Education, 2019). Some children may require explicit teaching of social-emotional skills and knowledge, such as using puppets (Duly, 2016) or modelling (McLaughlin et al., 2017) within everyday activities and routines, and social stories are another such strategy that kaiako can utilise to promote children's learning.

## **A journey to discovering them**

The first author discovered social stories when a Ministry of Education resource teacher suggested using social stories to support a child with autism at the kindergarten she taught at. She had no idea what the resource teacher was talking about! Fortunately for this kaiako (and the child) a quick run-down was given and some social stories readings were provided and the kaiako gave them a go. The kaiako had been teaching for about five years and was surprised she hadn't encountered social stories previously. It was some months later that she decided to try using social stories again with a nearly five-year-old who was about to start school. The child was finding it hard (almost impossible) to wait for their turn to speak. The teaching team noticed the child was frequently talking over other children despite the use of consistent language and giving of visual cues. Waiting to talk was just so hard for the child and the kaiako knew extra help was needed for the child to understand the concept of waiting. The kaiako remembered social stories and how Gray had used them for this exact situation. She decided to give another one a go. A story was written explaining how people feel when they are interrupted and what could be done instead. The child helped capture photos to illustrate their special book, and copies were printed for the service and home. The book was read daily for about a week, and it worked. It really worked. It felt like magic that the child started waiting for their turn to speak and stopped interrupting conversations. This child went to school confident with their knowledge about this concept and with their transition made a little smoother. A simple, relatively

quick strategy made a huge difference for this child and likely supported their transition to school. From this moment on, the kaiako has seen the potential of social stories to support children's learning and used them successfully. In interactions with early learning teams more recently, the kaiako has been informally asking whether teams have heard of social stories. The common answer is no, or they wonder if she is asking about a type of learning story. It doesn't appear uncommon for kaiako and teams to come across social stories almost by accident. In her recent study as a post-graduate student, the first author has been exploring social stories and wants to share some of her learning with others.

## **Insights from research on social stories**

Social stories have been widely used internationally in early learning settings since the 1990s, yet the research exploring their effectiveness is mixed. Anecdotally they work well for many children, as I have experienced, yet the literature does not always reflect this. To better understand the research base for social stories, I undertook a literature review to identify empirical studies focused on the use of social stories with young children in education settings. The studies sourced came from Discover, which searches four databases: ERIC, Education Source, PsycINFO, and Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre. The search was limited to literature from 2010 to 2021, published in English, and focused on children from birth to eight years of age in education settings. The search terms included social stories and the discussed limiters. The initial search returned 103 results, all of which were screened for inclusion by abstract and title to identify social stories empirical research. This resulted in seven outputs/studies. All seven studies focused their research on using social stories with particular groups of children, including children with autism, hearing impairments, developmental difficulties, behavioural challenges, and children with and without disabilities. The only New Zealand social stories study identified in the 103 results

was a survey of 34 Ministry of Education speech language therapists (Smith & Gillon, 2004). Smith and Gillon (2004) found visually based interventions, including social stories, were the most commonly used interventions by speech language therapists to support children with autism. Overall, the lack of New Zealand literature suggests social stories are not widely used by kaiako here.

Four of the seven studies found social stories to be an effective teaching strategy and three found them to be ineffective. Social stories were effective in supporting three children with autism to develop self-regulation (Thompson & Johnston, 2013) but ineffective in supporting three children with autism to develop social skills (Kassardjian et al., 2014). They were effective in supporting three children at risk of, or showing signs of, clinically significant aggressive behaviour to reduce aggression and improve peer relationships (Benish & Bramlett, 2011) and supporting one child with developmental difficulties to reduce verbal aggression and non-compliant behaviour (Benton & DiCarlo, 2018). Yet, they were ineffective in supporting five children at risk of emotional or behavioural disorders to extend their engagement in learning (Zimmerman et al., 2020). They were effective in supporting four children with hearing loss to improve their communicative and social skills (Raver et al., 2014). The largest study, involving 32 children with and without disabilities, did not find social stories to be effective in supporting children's social skills (More et al., 2013). Some of this variability could be due to the lack of fidelity across the studies and the subjective nature of social stories. Taken together, a review of the research suggests that social stories appear to work better for some children in some situations than others but the conditions which make the difference are unknown and require further research.

Following the completion of the literature review in 2021, a systematic review and meta-analysis examining the effects of social stories on challenging behaviour and prosocial skills in young children was published by Wahman and colleagues in 2022. Their review identified 12

single-case studies and also reported mixed findings. All 12 studies focused on increasing prosocial skills and/or decreasing challenging behaviours with variability in the effectiveness, rigour, and intervention dosage across the studies. The authors reported the mixed findings were also offset by anecdotal evidence from educators, families, and early intervention staff who found social stories an effective strategy.

Understanding the research evidence is an important part of using evidence-based practice, however, it is not the only consideration (Snyder, 2006). Evidence-based practice is a term describing practices that encompass three possible sources of evidence: Firstly, current and credible research (although seminal research may also be informative); secondly, kaiako experience and expertise about practices that work in their local context; and finally, values and aspirations that align with families and children's ways of being and preferences (Bourke & Loveridge, 2013; Snyder, 2006). Within Aotearoa, Macfarlane (2012) reframed these concepts through the lens of He Ritenga Whaimōhio, or "informed practice," and highlighted the importance of a cultural responsiveness evidence base that values indigenous (Māori) research and knowledge (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013). When making decisions about the use of different practices, kaiako should consider all three sources of evidence and their cultural relevance to inform their decisions.

In the case of social stories, there is ample anecdotal evidence that social stories are an effective teaching strategy, including the author's own experiences, however, it is important to consider that the literature base surrounding social story use is variable. The extent to which social stories are a good fit for various contexts, children, and families must be decided locally. When implemented as intended by Gray (2004), social stories are unlikely to cause harm but kaiako should consider whether another teaching strategy may be more effective, efficient, or culturally appropriate for their particular context and situation.

## How to write social stories

Social stories are usually written by kaiako with input from the child and their whānau<sup>2</sup>. He Māpuna te Tamaiti (Ministry of Education, 2019) recommends social stories be used to foster peer-friendships and social interactions, and to support children to engage in activities. Kaiako can sometimes involve children in the writing of their social story through agreeing on the text together and taking photos or drawing pictures to support the text. It takes intention to write a social story as the author must carefully consider the topic, perspective of the learner, and context. Stories can be written for an individual child, small group or whole group depending on the focus of the story, the children involved, and the philosophy of the service. For example, in some contexts, the well-being of the collective is a key aspect of their philosophy so group stories may be more appropriate, but in other services, a priority may be meeting individual needs so personal stories are the right fit. Kaiako familiar with the Incredible Years programmes will have encountered Tucker the Turtle, which is an example of a group version of a social story.

Gray's (2010) principles for writing a social story begin with determining the focus or topic for the story. This needs to be specific and kept to a single focus, for example, how to greet someone on arrival to the service as opposed to communication skills or crossing the road as opposed to going on a walk or how to join play over social skills. Common story topics include self-help skills, such as toileting; health and safety knowledge, such as emergency drills; and engaging in appropriate social skills, such as greeting people. It may be useful to consider how the skill or skills being targeted in the social story align with learning outlined in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) goals and learning outcomes and valued learning for your local setting.

After the primary focus for the story is determined, Gray (2010) recommends that kaiako begin gathering the information required to write the story and make decisions about writing style. This could include

observations, formal or informal assessment information, conversations with whānau, taking photos, gathering images, and talking with the child. It is useful to note that whilst assessment data, including conversations with whānau, are often needed to write a social story, social stories are not considered a form of assessment and serve a different purpose than learning stories. Once information about the supports or understanding a child needs help with is gathered, the writing can begin. A social story always has a clear title; a body that answers the where, what, when, how, and why questions of the situation or interaction; and a summary (Gray, 2010). Stories should be tailored to the abilities, attention span, interests and culture of the target learner(s). Social stories can be written in first-person (I/we) or third-person (she, her, they) narrative, but never second-person (you) narrative. Consistently using first- or third-person narratives connects the learner to the story, whereas the use of second-person (you) can disconnect the child from the story. The story tone should always be patient, supportive, honest, and optimistic, and use a range of descriptive, perspective, and coaching or instructional sentences (Gray, 2010). Ideally, there are at least four descriptive sentences to every instructional or coaching sentence. Authors should aim to be as literal and specific as possible.

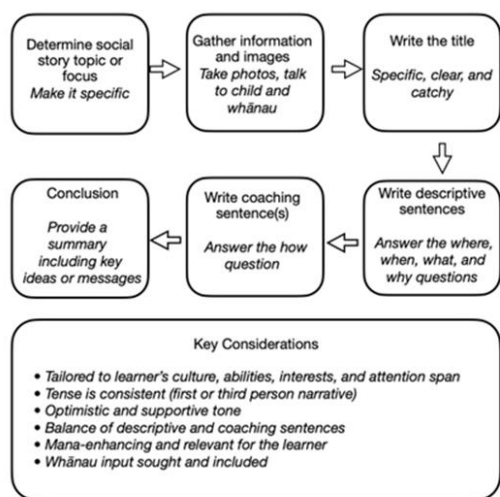
Every story written must be mana<sup>3</sup> - enhancing, relevant, supportive, and place the child at the heart of the story. According to Timmins (2016), a social story should never be written with the intention of changing a person's behaviour by highlighting something they are doing wrong. Rather, the aim is to provide information to help a child better understand a concept, skill, or situation. It is crucial story drafts are shared with parents and whānau to ensure the story aligns with their values and supports the child's language, culture, and identity. Story content needs to be underpinned by the principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and build on children's strengths, interests, and talents while



supporting them to learn new skills and expectations.

Writing a social story this way does involve a time commitment, but once a story is written, the format may be able to be tweaked to reuse with other children. Many kaiako find that with practice, social stories become much faster and less intensive to write. When starting out, it can be useful to use templates to guide your writing and there are lots available online (some are shared in the resources table below), but it is important to tweak them to fit the learner and cultural context. Whilst it is important to know about Gray's principles, there is room to make them work for you. Sometimes, kaiako can feel constrained or overwhelmed by the principles for writing. We encourage you not to worry too much about writing a perfect story but instead keep the principles in mind and simply give it a go and see how social stories work in your setting. Figure one provides an overview of the social story writing process and key considerations.

**Figure 1. Key Elements of Social Story Writing**



### How/when to use social stories

Once written, social stories are easy to use. It is simply a case of reading them regularly with children or the focus child. Stories can be presented digitally or in print versions. Whichever option you choose, we suggest ensuring copies are easily accessible for

children and recommend printing multiple copies for home and early learning service. It is a good idea to laminate paper stories or place them into clear files. Remember to read the story often. Reading once is not enough. Children's understandings often deepen with repeated readings. It is important to note that social stories are a prevention teaching strategy (something that provides the child with information or skills before they need them). With this in mind, you should read during times when the child is calm and peaceful or read to pre-empt the story focus or event occurring (e.g., read a book on greeting new people before a visitor arrives). When something does occur and you see a child has heightened emotions, you might remind the child of the skills they've learned through the social story but reading a social story at this emotional time is not a good idea, unless requested by the child. When children are actively upset, the social story is not recommended as a de-escalation or calming down strategy, rather focus on positive guidance and support. It is possible to read the story after the event or situation has occurred or de-escalated and the child is calm again to focus on what to do next time. Remember, reading a social story should always be learning-focused, positive, and supportive.

### Conclusion

Social stories are a powerful strategy to support intentional teaching. This article has outlined many suggestions and tips for writing social stories, but the most important thing is to simply give them a go, experiment thoughtfully, and adapt to ensure they work for your learners and community. Stories take time to write initially, but with practice, the writing becomes much faster. They work extremely well for some children and less well for others, but more research is needed to find out why the effectiveness varies. Social stories are more likely to be effective when used in conjunction with other evidence-based teaching strategies. Social stories always need to be used in mana-enhancing ways which support and reflect the identity and culture of the learner and the

philosophy of the early learning service as well as honouring the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*.

## Footnotes

1. Kaiako is the term used for teacher in Te Whāriki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum. Kaiako includes all adults, including teachers, who support the care and learning of children in early learning settings (Ministry of Education, 2017). The term reflects the reciprocal nature of teaching with the teacher as both a learner and a teacher.
2. Whānau is the Māori word for family encompassing immediate family, extended family, and groups of people who work together for a common purpose (Ministry of Education, 2017).
3. Mana is a term with complex and multiple meanings not easily translated into English. Mana encompasses the status, prestige, authority, spiritual power, and influence of an individual or group (Ministry of Education, 2017). Mana is inherently linked to identity.

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## Resources table

Resource source	What is it?	Access
ABA Educational Resources	Information about social stories and a range of story templates to support children with autism.	<a href="https://www.abaresources.com/social-stories/">https://www.abaresources.com/social-stories/</a>
Autism Speaks	Templates for personalised teaching stories for children with autism.	<a href="https://www.autismspeaks.org/templates-personalized-teaching-stories">https://www.autismspeaks.org/templates-personalized-teaching-stories</a>
Carol Gray	Website developed by Carol Gray including publications, information, and exemplar social stories.	<a href="https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/social-story-sampler/">https://carolgraysocialstories.com/social-stories/social-story-sampler/</a>
Disability Connect	Social stories and visuals for COVID-19	<a href="https://disabilityconnect.org.nz/social-stories-and-visuals-during-covid-19/">https://disabilityconnect.org.nz/social-stories-and-visuals-during-covid-19/</a>
Education Hub	Webinar with Tara McLaughlin and Karen MacKay about social-emotional TLIF project. Social stories discussed 27–39 minutes	<a href="https://theeducationhub.org.nz/promoting-childrens-social-emotional-learning-and-development/">https://theeducationhub.org.nz/promoting-childrens-social-emotional-learning-and-development/</a>
Ministry of Education	<i>He Pikorua</i> website. This website contains information about <i>He Pikorua</i> as a flexible, tailored model of support within inclusive education that benefits all mokopuna.	<a href="https://hepikorua.education.govt.nz/how-we-work/flexible-tailored-model-of-support/">https://hepikorua.education.govt.nz/how-we-work/flexible-tailored-model-of-support/</a>
Ministry of Education	Short video explaining <i>Te Tuapapa</i> as a foundation for allowing all mokopuna to flourish through tailored support and planning for strengths and needs. This model is part of <i>He Pikorua</i> , the flexible tailored model of support for inclusive education.	<a href="https://vimeo.com/showcase/2950799/video/708844141">https://vimeo.com/showcase/2950799/video/708844141</a>
Te Kete Ipurangi	A PDF social stories learning module for kaiako to use.	<a href="https://seonline.tki.org.nz/Media/Files/A-K/ASD/Social-stories-learning-module">https://seonline.tki.org.nz/Media/Files/A-K/ASD/Social-stories-learning-module</a>
NCPMI	Guidelines for writing scripted stories	<a href="https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/ScriptedStories_School.pdf">https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/ScriptedStories_School.pdf</a>
NCPMI	Resource Library of Social Story exemplars	<a href="https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/resources/index.html">https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/resources/index.html</a>
Social Story Creator and Library App	An iOS app for creating, recording, and storing social stories.	App produced by Touch Autism and available in the App store.