Supporting Social Communication Difficulties in School

The following provides a summary of ideas. For further information or advice on specific intervention for your child, please speak to your Speech and Language Therapist.

**Social stories** are short descriptions of situations, events or activities, which help a person know what to expect in those situations. They can be illustrated with pictures or photos. Social stories could be used to:

- help understand how others might behave in different school situations
- help cope with changes to routine / unexpected events
- give strategies for behaviour (eg. What to do when angry, upset etc)
- give positive feedback on her areas of strength – improved self-esteem

An example of a social story to help cope with change at school:

At school my teacher is Mrs X.
There are lots of other teachers too.
Sometimes Mrs X can’t come to teach my class. A different teacher will come and teach us instead.
The other teachers are friendly, and it is ok for them to teach us instead of Mrs X.
They might do things in a different way. This is ok too.
I will try to stay calm when another teacher comes and listen to what they are saying.
The other teachers can tell me why Mrs X is not here.

(more information on social stories is available on the National Autistic Society website – [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk) – or The Gray Centre for Social Learning and Understanding website - [http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories](http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories)

**Comic strip conversations** are ‘simple visual representations’ to show what happens at different levels during a conversation, eg. what is actually said, what people might be feeling, intentions. Symbols and stick figures are used to represent social and abstract elements of a conversation, while colours represent emotions, feelings and ideas. Visual representations make the more abstract aspects of a conversation easier to understand.
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Comic strip conversations are created through people drawing as they talk – in response to prompts by a therapist or teacher about a specific situation or type of social interaction. Comic strip conversations can help plan for future events or situations when the child feels anxious about, for example; starting school.

(more information on Comic Strip conversations is available on the National Autistic Society website)

Social Use of Language Program (SULP Rinaldi 2004) The SULP (Rinaldi 2004) is a direct teaching approach with a clear curriculum that uses stories, group activities and games. Social and communication skills that are covered include eye contact, listening, turn taking, proxemics and prosody. The SULP encourages children to understand the relevance of the skills they learn about to help improve generalisation of the skills to other contexts.

Social scripts are scripts used to help organise knowledge about how the world works. Scripts can help development of shared meaning, communication, and social behaviour. Children with autism have been found to have difficulty in generating scripts for familiar social routine e.g. greetings and conversation.

LEGO Therapy (LeGoff 2004)

LEGO therapy is a social skills intervention for school-age children based around collaborative LEGO play. It is based on the idea of using the child’s natural interests to motivate learning and behaviour change. A typical LEGO therapy project would aim to build a LEGO set, importantly with a social division of roles. In a group of three people (which could include children with autism, peers and/or adults), the child has to communicate and follow social rules to complete the LEGO build. Each activity requires verbal and non-verbal communication, collaboration, joint problem solving, joint creativity and joint attention to the task.

Method: One child acts as the “engineer” (describes the instructions), one is the “supplier” (finds the correct pieces) and the other is the “builder” (puts the pieces together). Children would play their role for a certain length of time, or a certain number of steps in the instructions and then swap around. This can help joint attention, turn taking, sharing, joint problem solving, listening and general social communication skills.
SPELL is a framework that can be used to underlie interventions for people with autism, as well as any work involved in identifying issues, supporting progress and training people who work in the area. SPELL stands for:

**Structure** – recognition of the importance of structure in making the world a ‘more predictable, accessible and safer place’ for people with autism. Focusing on this aspect helps an individual know what to expect and what is expected of them.

**Positive** (approaches and expectations) – interventions should build on an individual’s natural strengths, interests and abilities. A positive approach can help to reduce anxiety and build self-esteem.

**Empathy** – anyone working with an individual with autism should seek to understand, respect and relate to their experience. Emphasises the quality of the relationship between individual and supporter.

**Low arousal** – approaches and environment need to be calm and ordered, to reduce anxiety and support concentration. Allow extra processing time. Try to remove distractions. Exposure to experiences should be done in a planned and sensitive way.

**Links** – highlights the importance of strong and open links and communication between all the people involved in an individual’s life

(developed by the National Autistic Society – more information available on website)