



Empower Autism

Using Written Explanations

Many people on the autism spectrum prefer to receive information in a visual format. This preference is not unique to people on the spectrum. Consider the people you know: There are some people who can remember their entire grocery list without writing it down, while others have to write a list for only two items. Some folks can remember their to-do list, while others like email reminders, phone planners, or lists. Most people on the autism spectrum tend towards needing written or visual information (instead of just verbal reminders) especially about confusing ideas.

The purpose of a written explanation is to describe ideas or situations in a way that makes sense to the person who is reading them. Sometimes written explanations are called social stories.

Some common reasons to use a written explanation:

- To prepare someone for an upcoming change in their schedule
- To explain a new set of rules or expectations
- To describe a complicated task
- To explain a confusing situation
- To outline a series of options or choices
- To support a difficult conversation

A written explanation should be clear and concise. It should be written neutrally and factually (instead of saying “you can’t pick your nose”, a good explanation will say “People can choose to pick their nose when others can see them, or people can choose to pick their nose when they are alone. Most people think nose-picking is gross, and don’t want to be near kids who pick their nose. If you choose to pick your nose only when you are alone, people might want to be near you”). A good explanation is fun to look at and has pictures of high-interest characters, or is written in a fun format.

Several formats for written explanations:

- Written paragraphs
- Emails
- Official Memos from interesting places
- Cards or letters in the mail
- TOP SECRET documents
- Pretty notes tied up in ribbon
- Clues leading to an envelope
- Signs on the door/wall/mirror
- Cartoons or comic strips
- Decisions trees (see examples)

- Written on a puzzle that needs to be put together
- Anything else that would be fun to open/look at/read/find

What to avoid:

- Explanations that sound like the person is getting in trouble “Every time you____, you will have to _____”.
- Explanations that are one sided “You are never allowed to_____”
- The use of the words always, never, nobody, everybody
- Explanations that are fictional “your nose grows every time you lie”

Keep Written Explanations Interesting

As kids get older, or their interests change, they may be more receptive to different types of explanations. A 5-year-old might be entertained to look at a cartoon drawing of Thomas the Train saying “Big boys use the potty! Tell mom and dad when you have to pee”, but a 12-year-old might want to get an Official Memo from the Autism Society saying “Please Be Aware: Everyone in the family has work to do at home. Mom cooks food, Dad mows the lawn, and Johnny is going to start cleaning his room.”

A Note about Pronouns

Some people get confused when they are reading an explanation that refers to them, but uses the word ‘you’. Some social stories are written from the child’s perspective, and use the pronoun ‘I’ (“Sometimes, I have to do errands with mom after school”), while others are written with the pronoun ‘you’ (“Sometimes, you have to do errands with mom after school”). If your child has trouble with pronouns in this way, just use their name instead of saying ‘you’ or ‘I’ (Sometimes, Ted has to do errands with mom after school).

Repetition

Written explanations can be really refreshing for people on the autism spectrum. They can be comforting to read over and over again, and sometimes the lessons sink in better if you read them or go over them multiple times. You can go over a written explanation or series of explanations every day if you want.

Staying Organized

You can get really fancy with written explanations and make comics or signs or memos. Sometimes you just might scribble something down in a notebook. In order to save your work, and make it possible to go over the written explanations more than once, you will need an organizational system. Some people get a 3 ring binder and keep them all in there. The binder might have a designated spot in the house so your child can get it out when they want. Other folks keep a file on their computer in addition to the binder. Some people have a bulletin board with multiple explanations tacked onto it. You can use a system that will work for you.

On the following pages, you will find various examples of written explanations.

Dear T****,

Samantha and I are really impressed with you. You are such a smart and kind person, and we are happy to help your family find a few new ways of interacting. We made up two plans to help the day run smoothly. Here is what we planned:

Plan 1: Chores and earning money

1. Mom will write a big list of chores that sometimes need to get done
2. Mom will write out step-by-step directions for chores in a notebook
3. T will do 3 chores on Saturday: clean the rabbit cage, clean the fish tank, and clean the kitchen.
4. T will use the chore notebook to know how to do each chore.
5. Mom will consider paying T for the chores when T can do all 3 chores without help.

Plan 2: Asking questions

1. Mom will give T a notebook that is just for questions and answers
2. If Mom can't answer a question that T asks, she will tell him to write it in the book, so she can answer it later
3. Mom and T will meet every night to answer questions from the book
4. T can google his questions if mom can't answer them right away

What do you think about this plan?

Write down your thoughts here:

Independence

What is independence?

Doing things independently means doing things by yourself, without an adult watching or telling you what to do.

What can you do independently?

I can:

- get dressed
- read books
- brush teeth
- use the computer
- other: _____

What do you want to be able to do independently in the future?

- cook dinner
- take a shower
- wash hair
- pick your own after-school activities
- write your own schedule
- other: _____

Showing independence in chores, keeping clean, and school work means that Nic does these things by himself without arguments or bribes. Showing this kind of independence proves to adults that Nic is responsible and ready for the **freedom** of making more choices. Having freedom in choices means being able to independently (by yourself) decide what tv shows to watch, when to go to bed, and what after-school activities to attend. When you get older you will want to make many other life choices independently like where to live and what job to have. You earn the right to make these choices for yourself when you prove you can do chores, keep yourself clean, and do homework by yourself without help.



OFFICIAL MEMORANDUM

To: D*****

From: Sylvia

Subject: Congratulations!

D****:

Congratulations! You are now old enough to start taking a shower on your own! Starting on Monday, March 6th, you will use a shower list to take a shower without your mom.

Look at the shower list and tell me if you understand what to do. You are getting this important memo, because taking a shower on your own (without mom) is an important job. I know you can do it!

Shower List

Take off clothes

Put clothes in hamper

Turn on water

Adjust to red temperature label tape

Test the water with your hand

Get in shower

Wash hair

Wash body

Rinse hair and body

Turn off water

Get out of shower

Get towel and dry off

Go into bedroom to get dressed

Thanks D****. I am proud of how grown up you are! You are ready to take a shower without mom!

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My friend wants to do something different than me.

Friends choose to do activities together sometimes. Sometimes my friend I want to do different things. I have a choice. I can choose to do the activity they want, or I can choose to do the activity that I want. I could also choose to do a little bit of both of our ideas. Doing a little bit of both people's ideas is called compromise.

Compromise is not easy. It is not always fun to do an activity that someone else chooses.

If I never let my friends what we do, they might get tired of hanging out with me. I like to hang out with friends. I also like to be in charge of what my friends and I do together.

My friends probably want to choose the activities sometimes, just like I do. Almost everyone wants to be in charge for part of the time while they are with friends.

If I sometimes let my friends choose what we do together, they might let me choose what we do sometimes.

Do friends have to like the same things?

Question:

My friend and Jon and I like a lot of the same things. We hang out a lot and we have fun eating snacks and playing Nintendo Wii. I really like Pokemon, but my friend Jon doesn't like Pokemon. I am angry at Jon because he doesn't like Pokemon and I do. Aren't friends supposed to like the same things as each other?

Answer:

Nope. Friends usually do NOT like *all* the same things as each other. Usually, friends enjoy *some* of the same things, just like you and Jon both like snacks and Nintendo Wii.

Hardly anyone is exactly like anyone else. Most people have different interests (that means they like different things) than other people, even their friends. Friends can have fun doing stuff they both like doing, and they can disagree about other topics, such as Pokemon. People can disagree with their friends and still have fun together. You can Jon can disagree about Pokemon, and still have fun playing Nintendo Wii and eating snacks.