

## EMOTIONS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND ITS SOCIAL MEANING

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**Abstract:** The word emotion refers to a broad repertoire of perceptions, expressions of feelings and bodily changes. Emotion is a feeling that is private and subjective, a state of psychological arousal, an expression or display of distinctive somatic and autonomic responses and actions commonly “deemed”, such as defending or attacking in response to a threat. This paper focuses on selected social stories to be told to a group of children with Asperger’s syndrome in Malaysia. Social stories are a tool for teaching social skills to children with autism, Asperger’s syndrome and related disabilities. The selected social stories would be based on Malaysian culture and the children’s emotions and conversation were videotaped and analysed for its social meaning by using the content analysis approach. There are six basic emotions grouped in three pairs of opposites; joy and sadness, acceptance and disgust, and anger and fear. Four subjects with asperger’s syndrome from a school in Malaysia were chosen for the purpose of this study. Three social stories were read to them repeatedly for two hours a day for three weeks. Subsequently, the children were able to use the social stories in their everyday lives.

KEYWORDS: psychological, behaviours, syndrome, interactions

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### Introduction

Despite sharing its history with autism, Asperger’s syndrome (AS) is a relatively new category in autism spectrum disorders (ASD) that has come into more general use during the last 20 years. AS was named for a Viennese psychiatrist, Hans Asperger, who in 1944, published a paper in German describing a consistent pattern of abilities and behaviors that occurred primarily in boys. Currently, AS is a term used to describe the mildest and highest functioning end of ASD (Atwood, 1998). Similar to autism, AS is characterized by sustained impairments in the use of social skills necessary for meaningful social interactions, as well as the development of a range of restricted behaviors, activities, and social interests that dominate the child’s life (Volkmar & Klin, 2000). Despite such impairments, children with AS show no obvious delays in cognitive or language development, have generally good prognosis, and often display interests in the social world (Volkmar & Klin, 2000). Notably, these characteristics are not typically observed in children with autism. Although students with AS express interest in the social world, their lack of social skills creates lifelong challenges when interacting and communicating with peers and adults (Church, Alisanski, & Amanullah, 2000). According to Myles & Simpson (1998) individuals with AS may persevere on their topic of interest and offer detailed and highly specific, fact-based monologues with little awareness of whether the listener is interested. This lack of social reciprocity and inability to interpret the listener’s verbal and nonverbal social cues results in individuals perceiving the child with AS as self-absorbed and lacking empathy. Furthermore, children with AS may not understand the unwritten rules of social conduct and engage in inappropriate behavior. These characteristics distance the child with AS from the social world. Such inappropriate social skills and obsessive interests in obscure subjects may cause children with AS to be victims of continued ridicule and further alienation, despite their attempts at friendship (Myles & Simpson, 1998). Such ridicule, combined with the lack of social

skills necessary to interact with other students, may cause children with AS to be easily stressed and emotionally vulnerable during school and throughout life.

In addition, they may have difficulty understanding that their peers or classmates even have thoughts and emotions, and may therefore appear to be self-centered, or uncaring. Therefore the theory of mind was introduced to cater for this matter.

The term “theory of mind” was coined by Premack and Woodruff (1978) and is often used to refer to the ability to attribute mental states and to use these invisible postulates to explain behavior in everyday life especially for children with AS. Premack and Woodruff (1978) defined theory of mind as the ability to ascribe mental states to oneself and to others. The ability to ascribe these mental states was called a “theory” because mental states are not observable. Premack and Woodruff (1978) also used the term “theory” as mental constructs of states of mind are used to predict behaviour. Recently, the notion that those with AS may lack a theory of mind has circulated among those who study social impairments in individuals with autism. This deficit is essentially a lack of understanding that others have their own thoughts, feelings, plans, and points of view result in difficulty understanding the expectations of others and an inability to predict what others will say or do in social situations (Satyan, 2002). This theory of mind phenomenon appears to be unique to those with autism and largely independent of intelligence. Regardless of where an individual may fall within the spectrum of autism-like disorders, they seem to exhibit this deficit, though it seems to be slightly less prevalent in those with AS. A theory of mind remains one of the quintessential abilities that make us human (Whiten, 1993). By theory of mind we mean being able to infer the full range of mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, imagination, emotions, etc.) that cause action. In brief, having a theory of mind is to be able to reflect on the contents of one’s own and other’s minds. Difficulty in understanding other minds is a core cognitive feature of autism spectrum conditions. The theory of mind difficulties seem to be universal among such individuals.

The use of social stories is a relatively recent intervention recommended for children with AS. Social stories are brief, individualized short stories that describe a social situation and provide specific behavioral response cues through visual supports and text (Gray, 1998). A social story provides instruction regarding who, what, when, where, and why of a social situation (Atwood, 1998 and Simpson, 2004). Thus, a social story helps to ensure a child’s accurate understanding of social information for a given setting (Gray, 1998) and provides “how-to” instruction for initiating, responding to, and maintaining appropriate social interactions (Sansosti, Powell-Smith, & Kincaid, 2004).

To date, research on the relative effectiveness of social story interventions used with children with ASD is scant. Prior research has investigated the effects of social story interventions on greeting people appropriately and sharing toys (Swaggart, *et al.*, 1995), reducing tantrum behavior (Lorimer, Simpson, Myles, & Ganz, 2002), improving positive social interactions during lunch (Norris & Dattilo, 1999), decreasing disruptive classroom behaviors (Scattone, Wilczynski, Edwards, & Rabian, 2002), increasing hand-washing and on-task behavior (Hagiwara & Myles, 1999) and change problematic lunchtime behavior in school (Toplis and Hadwin, 2007). In each of these studies, positive trends in data were observed. However, in all of these studies, the participant(s) carried a primary diagnosis of autism, and in most of these studies the goal of the intervention was to increase prosocial behaviors (e.g., social awareness, positive social integration skills) by eliminating pervasive problem behaviors (e.g., tantrum behaviors, spitting, yelling).

Social stories attempt to address the theory of mind impairment by giving individuals some perspective on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of others. They help the individual better predict the actions and assumptions of others. A theory of mind is a specific cognitive ability

to understand others as intentional agents, that is, to interpret their minds in terms of theoretical concepts of intentional states such as *beliefs* and *desires*. It has been commonplace in philosophy to see this ability as intrinsically dependent upon our linguistic abilities. Social stories also present information on social situations in a structured and consistent manner, a particularly appropriate approach for kids with autism, especially when dealing with skills and behaviors which are so fluid as those involved in social interactions. Along that line, social stories also give individuals direct contact with social information, contact through pictures and text as opposed to speech or observation, which are notable areas of weakness for kids with autism. Finally, social stories provide a little distance between teaching and the possible stresses of the social situation itself; they give the child a chance to practice the skills often and on his terms.

### Objectives

This paper focuses on the objectives below:

- to identify the emotions of the subjects during interaction
- to analyze the social meaning of the interactions by using the content analysis approach

### Methodology

Four children with Asperger's syndrome aged 7-8 participated in this study. The study was conducted at a primary school in Serdang, Selangor for ten weeks. Three social stories based on Malaysian culture were chosen and the stories were told to the subjects repeatedly. The social stories chosen were based on the themes: helpful, respectful and caring. The themes would help the subjects to understand their importance in their everyday lives. Interactions with the subjects were taped and the content of interaction were analysed by using the content analysis approach and at the same time looked at their emotions. The emotions were based on the six basic emotions groups in three pairs of opposites: joy and sadness, acceptance and disgust, and anger and fear.

### Findings

Below are the findings from the three social stories. The social stories were based on three themes: helpful, respect others and caring.

#### *Social story 1 (Helpful) joy/ sadness*

*Researcher* : Do you think Ahmad is helpful?

*Subject 1* : Yes.

*Researcher* : Very good! Can you be helpful?

*Subject 2* : Me want help.

*Subject 3* : Help good.

*Researcher* : Why is Ahmad like that?

*Subject 4* : Ahmad help mummy!

*Researcher* : Well done!

The conversations above were based on the theme of joy and sadness. It was found that all subjects understood the social story and were able to answer the researcher's questions. Subject 1 agreed by saying only one word "yes". Subject 2 mentioned "Me want help". The utterance meant that Subject 2 wanted to be helpful. Subject 3 uttered "help good" and he agreed that by being helpful is a good attitude. He was smiling when saying the words. Subject 4 insisted that he was also helpful by saying "Ahmad help mummy". This showed that Ahmad addressed himself as his own

name and as happy to help his mother. Here, it was really obvious that Ahmad has helped his mother at home. The researcher praised the subjects and they all seemed happy. The findings here are similar to the research done by Normaliza Abd Rahim and Nik Ismail Harun (2007) where praising the children while doing the activities would motivate them to learn more.

- Researcher* : *Do you want to help your mother?*  
*Subject 4* : *Yes.*  
*Subject 2* : *Me help today!*  
*Researcher* : *What about you? Do you want to help?*  
*Subject 1* : *Ali help carry bag!*  
*Subject 3* : *Me happy help mum.*

The conversation above showed that all subjects were happy being helpful. This was clearly shown when Subject 4 agreed that he wanted to help his mother by saying one word “yes”. Subject 2 was happy to say that he helped his mother on that day. This was clearly shown when he uttered “Me help today”. This utterance meant that he had helped and the day that he had helped was today. Subject 1 and 3 were quiet so therefore the researcher had to ask questions to prompt them. Subject 1 seemed to be smiling and uttered “Ali help carry bag!” The utterance meant that Ali has been helping the mother to carry the bag. Ali must have helped everyday and he remembered. He was smiling when he uttered the sentence. Subject 3 was smiling too. He pointed to the book and mentioned “Me happy help mum”. Here, it was obvious that Subject 3 has helped the mother before and every time he helped he was really happy doing it.

- Researcher* : *Are you happy with the story?*  
*Subject 3* : *Me very happy. Me mum help!*  
*Subject 1* : *Yes.*  
*Subject 2* : *Happy! Yay!*  
*Subject 4* : *Ahmad happy too!*

The conversation above showed happiness among the subjects. All four subjects agreed that being helpful is really important. The story had made them smile all the time. They were satisfied with the story and at the same time were able to relate their lives with the story. Subject 3 was happy and said “Me very happy. Me mum help!”. Although his sentence was not complete but it clearly showed that he was happy that he has helped his mum. Subject 1 must have agreed with the utterance by Subject 3 as well as the researcher’s question. He uttered “yes” and smiled. Subject 2 and 4 were happy and jumping with joy and uttered “Happy! Yay!” and “Ahmad happy too!”. The action showed by both subjects made Subjects 1 and 3 jump with joy too. They were happy with the social stories and satisfied that they had helped their mother.

#### *Social Story 2 (Respectful) anger/fear*

- Researcher* : *Do you think the girl respects the teacher?*  
*Subject 3* : *Yes, girl respect teacher.*  
*Subject 4* : *I don't like boy. Boy bad!*  
*Subject 1* : *Respect good. I love teacher.*  
*Subject 2* : *I want respect teacher. Teacher good.*

The utterances above were based on the social story with the theme anger or fear. After listening to the social story, the subjects seemed to be angry. They were not smiling and not happy with the boy. Subject 3 understood the story and agreed that the girl respected the teacher by saying “Yes, girl respect teacher”. Here, Subject 3 knew that the girl respected the teacher while the boy did not. Subject 4 was angry and he pouted and uttered “I don’t like boy. Boy bad!” This made it

clear that he knew the boy had disrespected the teacher. Subject 1 uttered “Respect good” and this statement made it clear he knew that to respect a teacher is a good attitude. Subject 1 also uttered “I love teacher” and pointed to the teacher near the door. The teacher waved to the boy and the boy smiled. Subject 2 waved and smiled at the teacher too. He uttered “I want respect teacher. Teacher good”. The utterances showed that he wanted to respect his teacher because he adored the teacher. The teacher has been good to the subject and that was the reason why he said “Teacher good”. They waved and smiled at the teacher for a few more minutes.

- Researcher* : *Why is the boy not happy?*  
*Subject 2* : *Boy bad. Don't like boy.*  
*Subject 3* : *Boy don't like teacher. Bad!*  
*Subject 4* : *Teacher good. Boy bad!*  
*Subject 1* : *Me don't like boy. Me like teacher.*

The conversation above showed anger from all the subjects. Subject 2 was not smiling and crossed his arms and uttered “Boy bad. Don't like boy”. His attitude changed when the researcher mentioned the word “boy”. He was able to relate the story with his emotion. Subject 3 did not like the boy too and explained to the researcher and the other subjects and uttered “Boy don't like teacher. Bad”. Subject 3 rolled his eyes and had anger on his face. Subject 4 had uttered “Teacher good. Boy bad!” Here it was clear that Subject 4 was able to identify the difference between the teacher and the boy. He was able to explain their difference of attitude. When he said “teacher”, he smiled but when he said the word “boy bad” he did not smile at all. Subject 1 agreed with Subject 4 as he uttered “Me don't like boy. Me like teacher”. Subject 4 uttered that he did not like the boy as the boy did not respect the teacher. Subject 4 liked the teacher and he smiled and pointed to the teacher at the door. He even waved at the teacher.

- Social Story 3 (Caring) acceptance/disgust*  
*Researcher* : *What happened to the cat?*  
*Subject 3* : *I don't like the boy.*  
*Subject 4* : *Boy bad!*  
*Subject 1* : *Boy cannot do that to cat.*  
*Subject 2* : *Boy hit cat! Boy dirty! Eeuw.*

The utterances above showed disgust emotion. Subject 3 was not happy and uttered “I don't like the boy”. He pouted and kept on pointing to the picture of the boy. He looked down after he uttered the words. Subject 4 was not happy either when he uttered “Boy bad!” Subject 4 showed his emotion by not smiling and he was not happy that the boy had hit the cat. He touched the picture of the cat. Subject 1 was not happy either and used his finger to indicate “no” and uttered “Boy cannot do that to cat”. He showed his emotion very clearly. Subject 2 was disgusted with the boy. He uttered “Boy hit cat! Boy dirty” and also added the sound “euw”. He did not like to see the boy as the boy was dirty and at the same time he hated the idea that the boy had hit the cat.

- Researcher* : *What about the other boy? The boy who helped the cat.*  
*Subject 3* : *The boy is good. The boy helped!*  
*Subject 2* : *I like boy too.*  
*Subject 1* : *I want boy to be friend.*  
*Subject 4* : *I want to be boy.*

The utterances above were about the boy who helped the cat. All subjects were able to differentiate between the boy, the boy who hit the cat and the boy who helped the cat. This was clearly shown when all subjects were able to answer the researcher's question. Subject 3 uttered

“The boy is good. The boy helped” and the utterances showed that Subject 3 knew that the boy who helped the cat was the good boy. The emotion of Subject 3 was accepting of the role of the boy who helped the cat. He was happy to talk about the boy. Subject 2 liked the boy too and said “I like boy too”. This was obvious as he was smiling again, compared to the previous conversation where he was not happy. Subjects 2 and 4 agreed with each other when they said that they wanted to be the boy’s friend. This was clearly shown in their utterances “I want boy to be friend” and “I want to be boy”. The subjects’ emotions showed acceptance to the idea of the boy who helped the cat from being hit by the other boy. The subjects liked the boys’ attitude and intended to follow by being caring to the animals.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The findings above showed the children’s emotions and its social meaning. Each child is unique and the emotions shown were original as they understood the social story. Below are the lists of summary of the findings.

All subjects understood the social stories. The subjects were able to relate the social stories with their everyday lives.

All subjects’ utterances showed joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, anger and fear.

All subjects were able to relate the social stories with their emotions.

All subjects were happy to listen to one social story to the other as they were seen looking forward to see the researcher. They were seen asking for more stories to be storytold.

All three social stories were relevant for children with Asperger’s syndrome.

All social stories set in the Malaysian culture were suitable for children with Asperger’s syndrome.

Praising the children after their effort in giving answers would motivate them to speak more.

The social story serves a number of purposes. The lists are as stated below:

It provides details and information for the child reading the story - important because children with AS often find social situations confusing.

It provides the child with a list of the events and interactions that they will have to negotiate in a particular social setting.

It spells out expected behaviors for the child and explains why those behaviors are expected.

Sometimes a social story will explain the consequences of not meeting those expectations.

The most important aspect of a social story is that it provides child with AS with a role model. The main character of a social story should be someone with whom the autistic student can identify. The main character can then model success in a social situation for AS that reads the story.

### **Conclusion**

Social stories are important for children with Asperger’s syndrome. The social stories would make them learn to socialize with people around them. Children with Asperger’s syndrome needed to be reminded occasionally on socialization and the social stories would be the best and appropriate activity for the children with Asperger’s syndrome. Social stories by using the story telling method was seen as a success in order for the children to understand the storyline as well as giving answers pertaining

to the questions given by the researcher. This research is similar to the research done by Normaliza Abd Rahim (2007) where her findings with three children with AS and using the storytelling activities enhanced the children's understanding and learning about being social with friends.

The brain basis of the theory of mind deficit in autism is being investigated using both functional neuroimaging and studies of acquired brain damage (Baron-Cohen, 1999 :1203;Happe, 1994; Stone, Baron-Cohen & Knight, 1999). These suggest that key neural regions for normal mindreading are the amygdala, orbito-frontal cortex, and medial frontal cortex. Finally, much of the basic research in this field may have clinical applications in the areas of either intervention or early diagnosis (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1996; Hadwin, Baron-Cohen, Howlin & Hill, 1996; Howlin, Baron-Cohen & Hadwin, 1999).

To conclude, the findings show that social stories can help children with AS to learn to socialize with their peers, teachers, siblings and others. The social stories should also be storytold occasionally as this would help them to remember the dos and don'ts when facing others in their lives. It is hoped that the findings of this researcher will give an exemplary option to other researchers, parents, and teachers in creating new social stories to be storytold to the children, and with the social stories, the children will be able to socialize sensibly with people around them.

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