

Social Stories: School Routines & Transitions

9 social stories. Read one-on-one when the student is calm, not during a hard moment. First person, positive, and true for this student.

Nine stories for the parts of the school day that can feel unpredictable — drills, changes, transitions, and special events. Each one explains what will happen and what the student can do, so the day feels safer.

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The Fire Drill

Sometimes at school we have a fire drill. A fire drill is practice for staying safe.

During a fire drill, a loud alarm rings. The alarm is supposed to be loud.

The loud alarm might surprise me or hurt my ears. I might feel worried.

When the alarm rings, I line up with my class and walk outside calmly.

My teacher stays with me the whole time. I am safe.

When the drill is over, we walk back inside. I did a good job staying safe.

For the adult: Read before every drill if the school gives advance notice. Have headphones ready. Consider a signal from staff before the alarm.

A Substitute Teacher

Sometimes my regular teacher is not at school. Then a substitute teacher comes.

A substitute is a teacher who fills in for the day.

The substitute might do things a little differently. That can feel strange.

Even with a substitute, most of my day stays the same.

The substitute is there to help me, just like my teacher.

My regular teacher will come back. I can have a good day with a substitute.

For the adult: If a sub is planned, read this the day before. The substitute binder should include the student's key supports.

Changing Activities

During the day, we change from one activity to another.

When it is time to change, my teacher gives a signal or a warning.

Sometimes I do not want to stop what I am doing. Stopping can feel hard.

When I hear the signal, I finish my last step and put my things away.

Then I move to the next activity.

Changing activities is part of every day. I can do it.

For the adult: Give a transition warning ("two more minutes") and use the visual schedule. This story supports the warning, not replaces it.

Going to a Special (Art, Music, PE)

Some days I go to a special class like art, music, or PE.

A special class is in a different room with a different teacher.

The room and the rules might be a little different. That is okay.

I follow the special teacher's directions, just like in my classroom.

When the special is over, I come back to my regular class.

Specials can be fun. I am learning something new.

For the adult: Give the specials teacher an IEP at a Glance so the student's supports carry into that room.

Picture Day

Sometimes at school we have picture day.

On picture day, a photographer takes a photo of each student.

There might be a line, a bright light, and someone I do not know.

This might feel new or a little uncomfortable.

When it is my turn, I sit or stand where the photographer shows me and look at the camera.

Picture day is quick. Then I go back to my class.

For the adult: Preview the space if possible. Let the student know it will be brief and that a familiar adult can stand nearby.

A Field Trip

Sometimes my class goes on a field trip. A field trip is a visit to a new place.

On a field trip, I ride a bus and see somewhere different.

A new place can be exciting and also a little worrying.

I stay with my group and my teacher the whole time.

I follow the schedule and the rules, just like at school.

Field trips are a fun way to learn. I am safe with my group.

For the adult: Preview the itinerary and the day's schedule. Identify the specific adult the student stays with.

When the Schedule Changes

My class has a schedule that shows what we do each day.

Sometimes the schedule changes. We might do things in a different order.

When the schedule changes, I might feel surprised or upset.

My teacher will show me the new schedule so I know what is happening.

I can look at the schedule any time I feel unsure.

Even when the order changes, I am okay, and my teacher is helping me.

For the adult: Update the visual schedule as soon as you know of a change, and point the student to it.

Coming Back After a Break

Sometimes I am away from school for a break or a vacation.

When I come back, some things might feel different at first.

There might be new activities, a new seat, or new classmates.

It is normal to feel a little unsure after a break.

I can look at my schedule and ask my teacher questions.

After a day or two, school will feel familiar again.

For the adult: Re-establish routines the first day back. Extra visual support and check-ins help after long breaks.

Indoor Recess

Usually we have recess outside. Sometimes the weather is bad, so we have indoor recess.

Indoor recess is different. We stay inside and play quieter games.

I might feel disappointed that we cannot go outside. That is okay.

During indoor recess I can choose an activity I like.

Indoor recess does not last forever. We will go outside again another day.

I can still have fun at indoor recess.

For the adult: Offer a clear menu of indoor choices so the change from outdoor play feels less like a loss.

How to Use a Social Story

A social story is not a behaviour contract. It describes a situation and a positive response, so the student knows what to expect and what to do.

Read it before the situation, not during it

A social story works as preparation. Read it in a calm moment before the assembly, the fire drill, or the dentist visit — not in the middle of an escalation, when no new information can get in.

Read it more than once

One reading rarely changes behaviour. Most stories need to be read daily for a week or two, then faded to before the specific event. Consistency is what makes the response automatic.

Make it true for this student

If a line is not true — "I stay calm at the dentist" for a student who never has — change it to a goal the student can actually reach: "I am learning to stay calm at the dentist." A story the student knows is false teaches them to ignore it.

Keep more description than direction

Research on social stories suggests most sentences should describe the situation and how others feel, with only a few telling the student what to do. A story that is all instructions reads as a lecture.

Personalise it

Add the student's name, a photo, or the specific people and places involved. The more it looks like the student's real life, the more it transfers to real life.

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