

METHODOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH SOCIAL STORIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

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Abstract: This work highlights the pedagogical significance of the social stories methodology in developing communication with children aged 2–5 living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Social stories are short, visual guides that help the child understand everyday social situations and respond appropriately to them, and they are considered a convenient learning tool especially for children with autism. This study examines the main principles of this methodology, methods of creating age-appropriate stories for young children, and the ways of applying them in practice. In addition, practical recommendations for educators, a sample activity based on social stories, and ways to enrich them with visual aids are presented.

Keywords: Autism, social stories, communication skills, special pedagogy, visual approach, early childhood, inclusive education, sensory development, behavior management, individualized approach.

Introduction

Today, the number of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is increasing worldwide, and this situation requires serious attention not only from the healthcare system but also in the fields of education, social adaptation, and pedagogical approaches. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), at least 1 out of every 100 children has autism spectrum disorder. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in 2023 that 1 in 36 children is living with autism, and the condition is four times more common in boys than in girls. This highlights the need for in-depth research on the biological and social causes of autism.

In the context of Uzbekistan, official statistics on autism are relatively scarce. However, the growing number of specialists, the increasing activity of non-governmental organizations, and the opening of specialized centers indicate that the topic of autism has become a pressing issue in society. Especially for young children, early diagnosis of this condition, proper pedagogical approaches, and establishing social integration remain urgent tasks.

The biggest challenge for children with autism is difficulty in social communication and connecting with others. Therefore, it is essential to implement individual, visual, and socially comfortable methods in working with these children. One such method is the social stories technique, which helps the child understand simple everyday life situations and teaches them how to respond appropriately. Developing communication through social stories not only simplifies the pedagogical process but also contributes significantly to the child's independent thinking and socialization.

This article analyzes the theoretical foundations of developing communication with young children with autism using the social stories methodology, its application in pedagogical practice, and the possibilities of implementing this approach in the context of Uzbekistan.

Literature Review

The effectiveness of individualized and visually-based methods in working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been substantiated in many scientific studies. In particular, the “*Social Stories*” methodology developed by **K. Gray [1]** (1991) is recognized as an innovative way of teaching children with autism to understand social situations and respond to them appropriately. This method gradually and clearly teaches children skills such as communication, waiting for a turn, and completing a task.

L. Wing (2001) [3] focused on individual developmental differences and deficiencies in social skills in understanding autism spectrum disorders. She emphasized the importance of a structured approach to effectively develop language and social interaction in children with autism.

Vygotsky’s social development theory (1978) [2] describes that children’s development is mainly shaped through social interaction. From this point of view, preparing children for real-life situations through social stories aligns with the theory of social learning.

The **PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)** developed by **J. Frost and S. Bondy [4]** is also built on a visual communication approach, and it is considered an accessible tool for communication for children with autism. When used together with social stories, this system helps improve children's ability to express their needs and enhances their level of social adaptation.

Although research in this area in Uzbekistan is relatively limited, pedagogues such as **S. Jo‘raev [5]** and **D. Rahmonova [6]** have emphasized that the use of innovative methods in special education – especially visual and sensory approaches – yields effective results.

Moreover, international guidelines published by **UNESCO**, **WHO (World Health Organization)**, and **CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)** broadly highlight the importance of social stories, visual cards, and play-based technologies in early intervention and the development of social-emotional skills.

Autism cannot be completely prevented, as its causes are unclear and stem from a complex interaction of genetic and environmental factors. However, with early diagnosis and individualized support, the development of children with autism can be improved, and their integration into society can be strengthened. The following methods can be effective in supporting children with autism and increasing their social integration in the community:

1. Early Diagnosis and Intervention

Early diagnosis is the main way to detect autism in its early stages and provide appropriate support. By diagnosing children at key stages of development (ages 2–3), suitable pedagogical approaches and therapy methods can be selected. Intervention and treatment methods such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), speech therapy, sensory integration therapy, and approaches aimed at developing social skills are crucial for children with autism.

2. Individualized Educational Approach

Since each child’s symptoms and needs differ, it is important to develop Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Considering the special needs of children during the educational process and teaching with appropriate approaches helps ensure their successful development. Teaching in small groups and developing skills (e.g., social skills, speech, self-regulation) support children in leading an effective and independent life in society.

3. Social and Emotional Support

Social integration is of great importance for children with autism. By creating special educational programs, opportunities for social skill development, and group communication, they can feel more comfortable in society. Providing emotional support — helping them express themselves, regulate their emotions, and adapt to society — requires working with psychologists and specialists.

4. Family Support and Parenting

Parents and families play a vital role in raising children with autism. Providing training and psychological assistance to parents expands their ability to support their children correctly. Cooperation between families, the community, and specialists is key to successful child development. Parents should learn to understand their children's symptoms and support them accordingly.

5. Raising Public Awareness

Raising awareness about autism and combating stigma in society is important. Encouraging society to understand autism and its symptoms creates a supportive environment for both children and adults. Through educational programs and seminars, schools, community organizations, and businesses can be motivated to support children with autism, thereby strengthening social integration.

6. Sensory Support

Children with autism are often sensitive to sensory stimuli. Therefore, adapting learning materials and environments to their sensory needs can improve their learning process. This increases their chances of success in reading, writing, and other activities.

7. Training Staff and Teachers

Preparing teachers in schools, kindergartens, and other educational institutions to work with children with autism is essential. Teachers should learn how to work effectively with children, take their special needs into account, and apply appropriate pedagogical methods.

8. Empowerment and Preparation for Independent Living

For children with autism, developing self-empowerment and preparing for independent life is important. By developing self-management and independent functioning skills in education and daily life, they can find their place in society.

To increase the social integration of children and adults with autism, action must be taken on many fronts. This is important not only to help the children but also to make society more inclusive and tolerant.

In working with children with autism, effective methods for educators must be adapted to their specific needs and developmental stages. Choosing and applying effective methods for children with ASD requires individualized approaches, patience, and didactic flexibility from the educator. Since the needs and developmental stages of children with autism differ, the approaches must be systematic, consistent, and visually supported.

One of the most effective methods is **Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)**. This method reinforces socially acceptable behaviors by rewarding them. The ABA approach allows for adapting the child to daily life by teaching each behavior step-by-step, analyzing it, and introducing necessary changes.

The **Social Stories** methodology also plays an important role in understanding social situations. This method teaches the child how to behave in certain situations in a simple, visual, and

positive way. For example, situations such as how to play with a friend, wait in line, or go to school are conveyed to the child in the form of simple stories.

Most children with autism process visual information more effectively, which is why teaching through visual aids (pictograms, schedules, symbols, and images) is extremely important. Visual tools make daily activities, time, and tasks more understandable and acceptable for children.

Positive reinforcement serves to shape appropriate behavior by encouraging the child. This method not only increases motivation but also helps the child make independent decisions and express themselves.

Through **sensory integration therapy**, children develop tolerance to various sensory stimuli. This method aims to balance the child and reduce stress through activities such as working with modeling clay, playing with sand, and listening to music.

Creating a **daily schedule and structured routine** provides psychological safety and stability for children with autism. Maintaining the sequence of study, rest, and play activities at designated times each day helps the child adapt to their environment.

In addition, establishing **consistent and gentle communication** using defined gestures and short phrases is also very important. This requires not only the teacher's linguistic skills but also their empathy and emotional approach.

Modern **game technologies and specialized programs** offer increased opportunities to engage children in learning. Through role-playing, interactive games, and specialized mobile applications, the child is given the chance to engage in communication and practice social situations significantly.

Integrating children into society, that is, involving them in group activities with peers, is one of the key directions in pedagogical work for developing social adaptation. This allows the child to interact with others, act according to rules, and become accustomed to a social environment.

One of the last but very important approaches is **step-by-step teaching and repetition**. Each new knowledge or skill should be taught gradually and progressively, with confidence-building and reinforcement leading to the next stage.

In general, if these methods are selected based on a **comprehensive approach** and adapted to the individual needs of the children, significant results can be observed in the development of children with autism. The role of the teacher in this process is crucial in guiding, supporting, and applying a person-centered approach.

Methodology

For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the process of understanding and adapting to social situations and communication skills is more complex compared to their typically developing peers. Therefore, there is a high need for educational-methodological approaches that are adapted to their developmental stages—clarified, simplified, and enriched visually. From this perspective, **social stories** hold great importance in the pedagogical process as an effective and practical method.

Social stories are short, simple, and visually supported texts that explain to a child how to behave in a specific situation, activity, or social environment in an understandable and sequential way. They help children comprehend a certain social situation, imagine it, and understand their role and responsibility within it.

Relevance of Social Stories in Early Childhood

Early childhood is the stage when core social skills, behaviors, and self-regulation abilities are formed in a child's mind. Especially when a child first starts attending kindergarten, they encounter many new people, new rules, and an unfamiliar environment. This process can be stressful and confusing, especially for children with autism spectrum or other developmental challenges.

In such circumstances, through a social story, the educator explains step-by-step what will happen during the day, what actions are expected, and how to complete tasks. For example, with stories like "I Go to Kindergarten in the Morning," "I Need to Wash My Hands," and "I Wait in Line," the child can learn in advance about each stage—from waking up in the morning to entering the classroom, playing with toys, and having lunch.

Visual Images as Tools to Deepen Understanding

Enriching social stories with visual illustrations is especially important for children inclined toward visual perception. With matching pictures, symbols, or sequential scenes for each story, the child not only hears or reads about the situation but **sees** it—significantly increasing the level of understanding.

For instance, in the story "Having Lunch," if scenes like a table, spoon, plate, waiting in line, and wiping one's mouth are given with illustrations, the child can clearly see what action needs to be taken. This helps not only with understanding the action but also with strengthening memory retention.

Supporting Social Adaptation in Inclusive Education

Children with autism raised in inclusive environments need more support and guidance compared to their peers. They may not easily adapt to societal rules, group activities, or mutual interactions. Through social stories, the educator gradually helps them integrate into this social system.

For example, with stories like "I Take Turns Playing with My Friend" or "I Ask My Teacher a Question," the child's confidence in the environment increases. Knowing in advance what behaviors are expected, the child feels safer and more stable.

Story 1: "Waking Up in the Morning and Brushing Teeth"

Story:

- I wake up every morning.
- My mom wakes me up with love.
- I open my eyes and slowly get out of bed.
- I go to the bathroom and take my toothbrush.
- I put toothpaste on the brush.
- I start brushing my teeth. I brush my upper, lower, and back teeth.
- When I finish brushing my teeth well, I rinse my mouth with water.
- My mom says, "Great job!"
- I feel happy. My teeth are clean and healthy.

Purpose:

The goal is for the child to begin independently completing their hygiene routine after waking up each day.



Story 2: "Mealtime and Sitting at the Table"

Story:

- When it's time to eat, my mom calls me.
- I go to the chair and sit properly.
- I wash my hands — with warm water and soap.
- When I sit at the table, the food is ready.
- I only eat at the dining table.
- I hold the spoon in my hand and eat my food.
- I sit calmly while eating.
- When I finish eating, I say "Thank you."
- I get up from the table and wash my hands again.
- My mom says, "Great child!" I feel proud of myself.

Purpose:

The child learns social behavior rules during mealtime and develops independent habits.

Conclusion

Social stories are pedagogical tools that explain the world to children with autism through simple words and a clear structure. They play a significant role in developing the child's language, communication, social adaptation, and self-regulation skills. When teachers present these stories enriched with pictures, especially during early childhood or in adapting to new

environments, the child not only learns but also strives to find their place in society. For this reason, the social stories methodology is becoming an integral part of inclusive education today.

Foydalanilgan adabiyotlar

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