Choosing illustrations for the Library Summer Reading Challenge Social StoryTM

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Illustrations are often included as an important part of a Social Story. Their purpose is to enhance the content of the text rather than to distract from it, so they are never used purely as a decoration. The type of illustration used may include photographs, diagrams, charts, drawings, Powerpoint or video and these may be used in combination too. It is very important that the illustration chosen is clear and meaningful for an autistic reader and accurately depicts the information within the text. When writing a Social Story for a broad audience, such as a generic Story for a library, the individual’s understanding of the representational meaning of an illustration is unknown, therefore photographs are probably the best option.

Illustrations need to be positioned carefully within a Story close to the relevant text and not on the next page or after another paragraph so it is clear to the reader what text the illustration is referring to.

For a child who may struggle with generalisation the illustration needs to depict the situations, objects, staff members exactly as described in the text. Generic pictures of libraries may confuse the reader. For this reason each library needs to choose illustrations that are actual photographs or clear and accurate drawings of their own library so the child is prepared for the actuality of their visit.

Accurate photographs of the folders, medals and current layout of the library should be replaced each year as they are changed. Having last year’s Reading Challenge folder for example as an illustration will only confuse, therefore updating the illustrations and names of the Challenge is critical to maintain accuracy.

Some children on the autistic spectrum may have a very literal interpretation of the words and pictures in a Social Story. For this reason, authors are always careful to only use words that are meaningful when interpreted literally (acontextually) and this is also true for the choice of the illustration content. For example, when including a photograph of a lanyard and badge to depict who the child can approach safely for help, it is important that the lanyard is not shown on a particular person in a photograph, but rather on a plain background, to avoid the confusion of searching for the specific person in the photo when in the library, instead of any staff member wearing the lanyard.

Colour may also be interpreted literally, for example, if a picture depicts a child sitting on a blue seat whilst talking to staff, a child may conclude that the blue seats are the only seats that he sits on for discussing a book with a member of the library staff. Literal interpretation of illustrations will not be an issue for all children, however if the use of colour is minimal this may reduce misinterpretation in those who do. One way around this is to use good quality black and white photographs.

When choosing photographs to illustrate a part of the Story care must be taken about including extraneous detail that may distract the child from the most relevant parts of the photograph. Typical children are drawn to the social content of any photograph but often it is the minute details, not the social content of the photograph, that attracts and holds the attention of the autistic child. The child may therefore instead focus on the details that are more interesting for them and miss the important social information. It may be helpful to draw a line around the most relevant aspects of a photograph, or remove any irrelevant background detail.