



BACKGROUND

Anxiety affects roughly 10% of children ages 3–17 and can significantly disrupt social participation, emotional regulation, academic performance, and daily routines (CDC, 2025). Despite its prevalence, nearly 80% of children with anxiety do not receive treatment due to misinterpreted symptoms, limited caregiver awareness, and mental health stigma (The Child Mind Institute, 2018). Early childhood is a critical period for developing regulation skills, and caregiver co-regulation is essential for building self-regulation (Paley & Hajal, 2022).

Occupational therapy (OT) emphasizes meaningful participation and caregiver involvement, making it well-suited to address anxiety-related barriers (AOTA, 2020). Play-based and movement-based interventions are especially effective because they support emotional regulation, resilience, and confidence through safe exposure to uncertainty and controlled challenges (Dodd & Lester, 2021).

Social stories provide a visually supported, predictable, and accessible way to teach coping strategies (Reynhout & Carter, 2006). Grounded in Social Learning Theory (SLT), they use modeling, observation, and structured scenarios to help children understand unfamiliar or anxiety-provoking situations and internalize adaptive behaviors. SLT aligns with OT’s focus on meaningful participation and supports generalization of coping skills across home, school, and community settings (Akpan & Kennedy, 2020; McLeod, 2025).

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Goal: To provide children ages 5–12 and their caregivers with social stories and a caregiver guide that build a shared understanding of anxiety and teach play- and movement-based coping strategies to promote emotional regulation and meaningful participation in daily activities.

OBJECTIVES

- 1) Conduct a needs assessment by sending a structured survey to at least three OT practitioners (OTPs) and two caregivers within four weeks to identify key factors contributing to anxiety in children and determine how to address them in social stories.
- 2) Develop three social stories incorporating play and movement-based coping strategies by week eight, based on the needs assessment findings.
- 3) Distribute social stories to families and OTPs and collect feedback from at least four individuals by week eight to evaluate clarity, relevance, and usefulness.
- 4) Use stakeholder feedback to refine and improve the stories for better effectiveness and usability by week twelve.
- 5) Create an informational handout for caregivers to understand the purpose of social stories by week twelve.
- 6) Build competency in social story development by completing project deliverables under supervision and integrating feedback to support future use of social stories in clinical practice.

ACTIVITIES

- Literature review of pediatric anxiety, sensory overload, coping strategies, and social story use.
- Distribution of therapist and caregiver questionnaires via Google Forms.
- Semi-structured caregiver interviews to supplement low survey response rates.
- Development of six social stories (three pre-made, three customizable) using Google Slides.
- Creation of a comprehensive caregiver guide in Canva.
- Weekly supervision with site mentor and monthly meetings with faculty mentor.

OUTCOME EVALUATION METHODS

- The project was evaluated through:
- Therapist and caregiver surveys assessing clarity, relevance, developmental appropriateness, and usability of story drafts.
 - Semi-structured caregiver interviews exploring anxiety presentation, preferred coping strategies, and understanding of social stories.
 - Mentor feedback regarding therapeutic accuracy, developmental relevance, and overall effectiveness.
 - Iterative revisions of all stories and the caregiver guide based on qualitative input.

DELIVERABLES

Three story topics:

When Change Feels Hard (Transitions)

When Being With Others Feels Hard (Social Situations)

When My Body Feels Overwhelmed (Sensory Overload)

How does my brain feel right now?

When I feel this way, I know my body needs a break.

One comprehensive caregiver guide discussing:

Anxiety signs/symptoms

Treatment options

Sensory Overload

Social stories

Coping skills

Sensory tools

FINDINGS

- Pediatric anxiety is increasing, and caregivers and therapists identified a need for practical, developmentally appropriate coping tools.
- Customizable social stories were strongly recommended, leading to the creation of both pre-made and customizable versions.
- Story feedback was consistently positive, emphasizing relatable scenarios and accessible visuals.
- The caregiver guide expanded into a comprehensive resource on anxiety, sensory overload, and coping strategies.

Overall, findings supported the relevance, accessibility, and therapeutic value of the created materials.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

- Developed six social stories and a comprehensive caregiver guide using evidence-based play and movement strategies grounded in SLT and OT principles.
- Resources support emotional regulation, skill generalization, and meaningful participation across home, school, and community settings.
- Digital format enhances sustainability, accessibility, and ease of sharing among therapists and families.
- Offering both pre-made and customizable stories increases relevance and engagement for diverse users.
- Anticipated benefits include improved caregiver understanding, earlier recognition of anxiety, and stronger emotional regulation skills in children.
- Provides OT practitioners and families with a practical, evidence-supported tool that promotes confidence, participation, and overall well-being.

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REFERENCES

