

## ***S.S.GRIN (Social Skills Group Intervention) HFA*** *Social Skills Group Training for High-Functioning Autism*

*S.S.GRIN-HFA* is a small group intervention program designed to build the social skills and social relationships of children with high functioning autism spectrum disorders (HFASD).

The program is suitable for children ages 7 to 12 and is divided into three modules: (a) Communication Skills, (b) Working with Others, and (c) Friendship Skills. Introductory, process, and review sessions are also integrated into the curriculum for a total of 15 weekly group sessions (see Table 1 on the next page). The sessions are structured and scripted for ease of use, including scripts complete with instructions and specific activities. Video and graphical (social comic scripts) elements are integrated with written materials (e.g., child workbook).



*S.S.GRIN-HFA* sessions are written for a 60-minute timeframe and for groups comprised of 5 to 7 participants. Parent involvement in *S.S.GRIN-HFA* is an integral part of the curriculum. Parents and children participate together in four of the group sessions: an introductory session (orienting families to the intervention goals and procedures) and at the conclusion of each of the three modules (to discuss experiences with community exercises and intervention progress).

During community exercises, children have the opportunity to practice new skills in a naturalistic setting with the help of their parents as coaches (e.g., children are asked to order a meal at a restaurant) to increase generalization of learned skills beyond the intervention setting. In addition, parents have access to relevant web-based resources (e.g., reading lists, tip sheets) to use at home and share with teachers.

The *S.S.GRIN-HFA* program kit includes the following components:

**Professional Manual.** This is the group leader’s guide to running an *S.S.GRIN HFA* group. The manual contains an overview of the program, a review of the research on the program, administrative guidelines, clinical resources, resources for parents and children, and sessions scripts for the 15 lessons.

**Session Scripts.** The three modules of *S.S.GRIN HFA* each contain sessions that focus on a specific set of skills: Module 1 – Communication Skills; Module 2 – Working with Others; Module 3 – Friendship Skills. The session scripts include information about time limits for activities, as well as guidance



for how to alter sessions to decrease time requirements or split content into separate sessions. Many examples are included in the directions for activities and additional information is provided for parents to help their children complete community-based activities. Session activities also incorporate the Video Segments (see below).

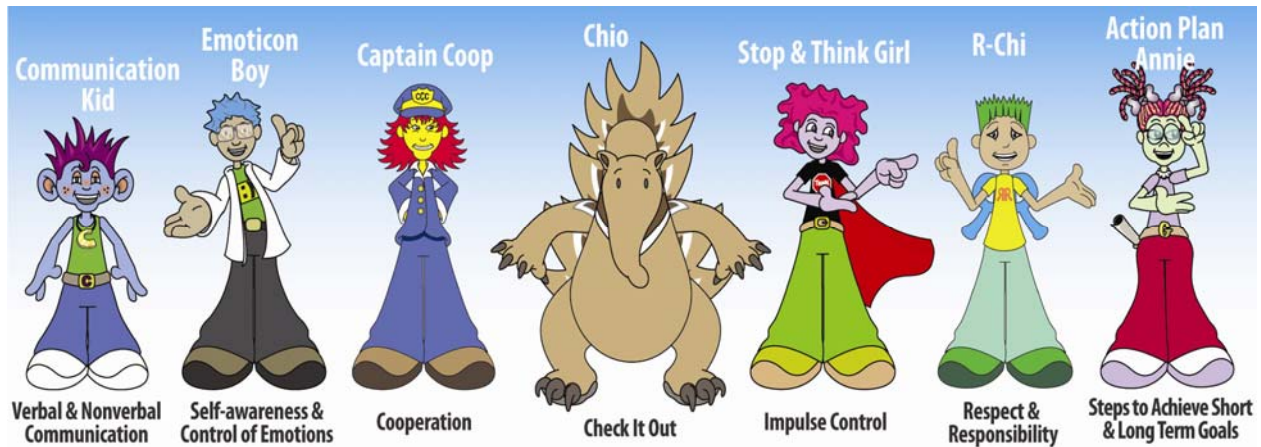
The Session Scripts are designed to accommodate the specific learning needs of children with HFASD, including:

- Increased repetition of key concepts in order to sustain knowledge of new concepts;
- Additional concrete examples to help children learn concepts;
- Larger font on worksheets to aid in reading and comprehending activities;
- Greater tailoring of activities to the developmental level of children (including developmental alternatives for particular activities); and
- Alternatives for community-based activities that allow for flexibility and tailoring to the particular needs of children in a given group.

**Table 1.** *S.S.GRIN-HFA* skills and concepts taught within each session

<p><b>Session 1: Introduction</b> Purpose and goals of group; Getting acquainted activities</p> <p><b>MODULE 1: Communication Skills</b></p> <p><b>Session 2: Verbal Communication</b> What you say (content of words); Verbal communication styles; Staying on topic; Perseveration</p> <p><b>Session 3: Non-verbal Communication</b> How you say it; Forms of non-verbal communication; Reading social cues</p> <p><b>Session 4: Listening Skills</b> Combining verbal and non-verbal for effective listening; Conversational turn-taking; Assign community-based activity</p> <p><b>Session 5: Process Group</b> Joint parent and child meeting for in-session practice</p> <p><b>MODULE 2: Working with Others</b></p> <p><b>Session 6: Consequences / Stop &amp; Think</b> Positive vs. negative consequences; Making good choices; Impulse control (Stop &amp; Think)</p> <p><b>Session 7: Perspective Taking</b> Taking another’s point of view; Empathy; Using Stop &amp; Think with perspective taking</p>	<p><b>Session 8: Cooperation</b> Working as a team; Cooperative learning; Mutual goal setting</p> <p><b>Session 9: Compromise</b> Compromise versus cooperation; Conflict resolution; Negotiating a solution; Assign community-based activity</p> <p><b>Session 10: Process Group</b> Joint parent and child meeting for in-session practice</p> <p><b>MODULE 3: Friendship Skills</b></p> <p><b>Session 11: Making and Keeping Friends</b> Positive and negative friendship qualities; Polite vs. rude; Kind words and compliments; Helping, encouraging others</p> <p><b>Session 12: Initiation</b> Play and conversation entry strategies; Overcoming barriers to entry; Role of communication and perspective taking</p> <p><b>Session 13: Social Problem Solving</b> Setting appropriate boundaries; Showing interest in others; Good sportsmanship; Patience</p> <p><b>Session 14: Coping with Bullying &amp; Teasing</b> Recognizing bullying behaviors; Coping styles; Ignoring; Assign community-based activity</p> <p><b>Session 15: Process Group</b> Joint parent and child meeting for in-session practice</p>
---	---

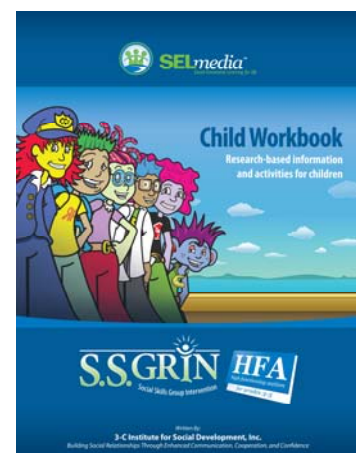
**Graphic Characters.** The core *S.S.GRIN* programs for K-2 and 3-5 incorporate a set of graphic characters throughout its written materials (e.g., child workbook, posters) and video materials for children. These characters were originally developed and refined using feedback gathered in a series of focus groups with elementary school-age children comparing characters that varied color (e.g., fanciful vs. realistic coloring) and other aspects.



These same characters are included in *S.S.GRIN-HFA* to function as pedagogical agents (PAs), facilitating learning through visual representations of key social skills and concepts taught during the intervention. The PAs provide visual cues to help children more easily associate the application of particular social problem-solving strategies to particular social situations (e.g., using a Stop & Think approach when teased). The PAs make *S.S.GRIN-HFA*'s social concepts more concrete and intervention materials more engaging for children.

**Child Workbook.** Each child gets a workbook and uses it throughout the program. The child workbooks are tailored to the characteristics and learning styles frequently observed among individuals with HFASD, including:

- Decreased detail in graphics to minimize perseveration by children;
- Simplified artwork;
- Use of softer, more muted colors in graphics;
- Page numbers for ease of reference; and
- Increased “interactive” components of activity pages to require less reading.



**Comic Strips.** The Comic Books are graphical social stories that employ the characters mentioned above and are used throughout *S.S.GRIN-HFA* to illustrate and reinforce social skill concepts. They were developed in collaboration with Carol Gray based on her Social Stories™ technique, an intervention method which employs brief stories to address social situations or social concepts that individuals with autism spectrum disorders may find confusing or have trouble interpreting.

The stories typically outline the social situation, explain what others are thinking, feeling, and doing, and describe the socially normative behavior response. In *S.S.GRIN-HFA*, Gray's concepts were used as a foundation and were expanded to appeal to children through the use of color, engaging graphics and a comic strip layout.

As with the child workbooks, the Comic Books were developed to best match the learning style of children with HFASD, including:

- Decreased detail in graphics to minimize perseveration by children;
- Simplified artwork; and
- Softer, more muted colors in graphics.



**Parent Handouts.** Handouts are provided to parents following each session of the intervention to provide information on topics covered and suggestions for reinforcing the materials with their child at home. The handouts have been well received and were developed based on feedback from parents of children with HFASD, including:

- A simple, easy to follow format;
- Minimal use of technical jargon; and
- Increased instruction for completing activities



**Video Segments.** The use of video engages children and makes abstract concepts more concrete and real. The *S.S.GRIN HFA* animated videos enhance learning and provide another mode of instruction. These videos employ the characters mentioned previously to demonstrate the social skill concepts. Video segments are used in each session and are linked to training content to introduce and explore the skill objectives and provide concrete examples to spur discussion during sessions.



**Online Resource Materials.** There are two categories of online resource materials:

- **Public Resources:** A comprehensive list of books and websites that have information of interest to children with autism, their parents, and professionals who work with families is available for free under the Resources section of the SELmedia website. These resources include information such as summaries of research on autism, personal accounts by individuals with autism or their families, and self-help books for children to better understand their diagnosis. These resources are a useful way to engage children and families outside of group and to maximize exposure to treatment materials outside of the intervention.
- **Clinical Resources:** Schools and organizations that have purchased the *S.S.GRIN HFA* program have access to a secure online account that contains resources used to run the groups. Group leaders can download replacement black/white versions of the parent handouts, child workbooks and comic books or order the full color versions. Group leaders can also view the online professional training video to help them learn how to use the *S.S.GRIN-HFA* program. Upon successful completion of the online training, group leaders can obtain continuing education credit.

### **Innovative features of *S.S.GRIN-HFA***

Although the *S.S.GRIN-HFA* product is built upon the solid foundation of the original *S.S.GRIN*, a number of key alterations were made to create a product that is both unique in the intervention marketplace and designed specifically to meet the needs of children with HFASD. These key alterations include the following:

- **Focused Skill Set.** In order to maximize skill training for core social difficulties related to HFASD, the *S.S.GRIN-HFA* intervention product focuses on a more narrow set of social skills that are especially challenging for children with HFASD. In particular, non-verbal communication skills (e.g., reading social cues, non-verbal expression) and empathy (e.g., perspective taking) are emphasized throughout the curriculum.
- **Intensified Training.** Given the difficulty that children with HFASD have learning and incorporating new skills, the *S.S.GRIN-HFA* intervention was designed with several sessions devoted to each of the three core skill modules (rather than one session per each specific social skill as in *S.S.GRIN*). Within a module, lessons increase in complexity with previously taught skills and behaviors being reintroduced and reinforced in a step-wise fashion. This more intensified training model allows for more activities, more diversity of activities, and greater practice and reinforcement time.
- **Focused Training.** Although some *S.S.GRIN* activities were relevant for *S.S.GRIN-HFA*, new activities were created to better address social skill difficulties that are more prevalent with HFASD. For example, reading nonverbal communication cues is a particular area of difficulty for many children with HFASD. Therefore, the Communication Module of *S.S.GRIN-HFA* was developed with additional specific exercises designed to help children identify and interpret nonverbal communication cues.
- **Parent Involvement.** Whereas parent involvement is an adjunct component of *S.S.GRIN*, parent involvement is fully integrated into the *S.S.GRIN-HFA* curriculum. Parents participate in selected sessions and help with implementation of community exercises via

a variety of educational methods. Parent involvement enhances treatment efficacy by supporting and reinforcing positive changes within the home environment, enhancing communication between home and school/treatment center, and modeling positive attitudes towards treatment.

- **Naturalistic Practice.** Lack of skill generalization is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching social skills with children with HFASD. Children may learn the concepts presented and use them appropriately within the group setting or in highly similar situations, but have difficulty applying this knowledge in novel social situations. A unique feature of *S.S.GRIN-HFA* that is intended to enhance skill generalization is the community-based activities. With parents as their coaches, children are asked to practice new skills in a more naturalistic setting in the community (e.g., ordering food at a restaurant). Process group sessions, which include both parents and their children, occur following each community-based activity to allow participants to talk about the successes and difficulties they experienced.
- **Supplemental Training Techniques.** Because *S.S.GRIN-HFA* differs from the original *S.S.GRIN* program in its focus on intensified training of targeted skills, supplemental training techniques that have been found to be successful with children with HFASD are included. For example, Social Stories™, visual schedules (activities to be completed within session), personal goal plans, and DVD segments are all used to establish and maintain the interest of children with HFASD while at the same time teaching important skills and concepts.

