

Guide 11



Helping young children express and challenge their thoughts

Social psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman notes that by age two, children begin to verbalize the meanings of their actions.⁵ For example, a toddler wails, “*It’s mine!*” as she grabs a toy from another child. By age three, children are actively trying to figure out why things happen. For example, a child might say, “*Mommy and Daddy are fighting ‘cuz I’m a bad boy.*”

Yet, often when we ask children, “*Why do you think that happened?*” “*What do you think about that?*” they will reply “*I don’t know*” or simply shrug their shoulders.

We want to encourage children to express their thoughts about the world for several reasons. It gives them an opportunity to practice language and interpersonal skills, as well as enjoy the experience of being heard by an interested and caring adult. And, when children tell us what they are thinking, we can gain valuable insight into their feelings and behavior.

Child-friendly questions and approaches

Teachers working with young children have found that the following child-friendly questions help children express their thoughts:

- “What are you saying to yourself?” (*point*)
- “What are you thinking inside your head?”
- “What is your head telling you?”

In addition to asking children directly about their experiences, we can use indirect methods to help children articulate what they are thinking and expose them to others’ thoughts and feelings.

People in pictures: let’s make a story!

“People in pictures: let’s make a story!” which follows, shows how using a hand-drawn image or a single picture from a storybook or magazine can help individuals and groups discuss their thoughts and feelings, deal with cause and effect, and generate positive solutions to everyday problems.

PEOPLE IN PICTURES: LET’S MAKE A STORY!

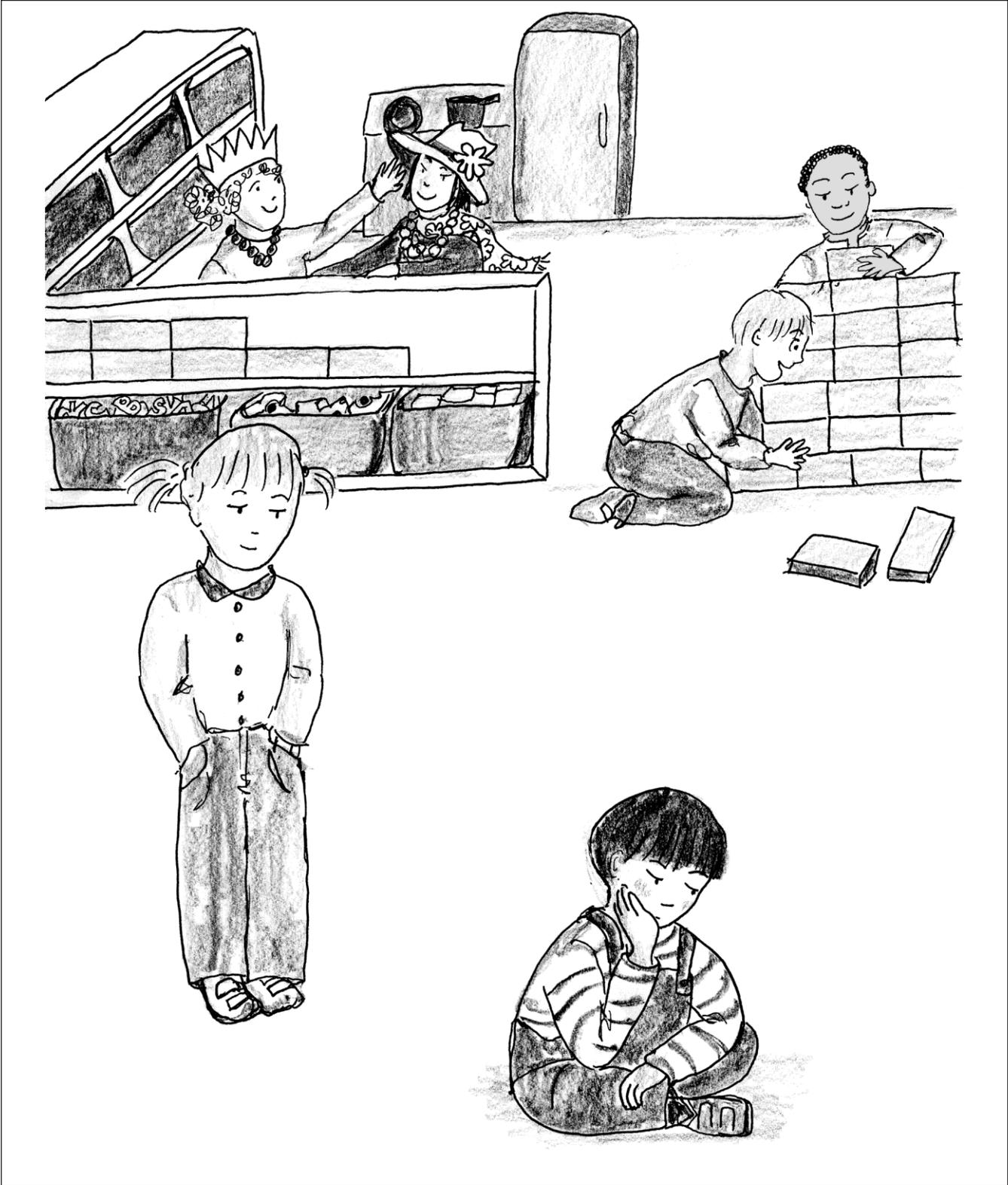
Helping children express their thoughts and generate alternatives

Here are five steps to get you started:

- 1) Show the children the picture on page 43 or a picture from a storybook.
- 2) Say to the children: “*Let’s make up a story about the people in this picture.*”
- 3) Start by describing the location and people in the picture, for example, “*Once upon a time, there were some kids playing outside ...*” or “*There was a dad and his kids*”
- 4) Ask the children the following questions to continue making up the story:
 - *What’s happening in the picture?*
 - *How are the people in this story feeling?* (“Feeling” questions are the most familiar for young children, so we start the story with them.)
 - *What’s making them feel sad/angry/happy, etc.?* (Find out about each person in the picture and listen for Thought-Feeling Connections.)
 - *What are the people in the story “saying to themselves” about what is happening? What are they thinking in their heads?* (Get a response about each person in the picture.)
 - *What is going to happen next in our story? How come?* (Look for cause and effect statements, and listen for Thought-Feeling Connections.)
 - *Now let’s try to think of some different things that could happen. What else could the people in the story do?* (Help children generate alternatives.)

If the children cannot generate any positive alternatives, ask them to think of some “happy” or “good” things that might happen next.
- 5) Congratulate the children on their story. Restate positive alternatives they generated for the characters in the story.

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Using children's storybooks to generate discussion about resilience

Children's stories can be a rich and powerful resource for promoting critical resiliency abilities and thinking skills. In addition, stories provide us with a way to challenge children's assumptions and biases about differences. Promoting cultural competence is a key factor in supporting resilience,⁶ a positive self-concept and a sense of belonging.²⁹

Children love to listen to stories. Literature can be used to help children articulate their thinking and expose them to others' thoughts and feelings. It can also help children discover new ways to overcome obstacles and deal with the inevitable challenges of life.

Storybooks can introduce children to resilient thinking and behaviour. You probably have some favourites—stories that are rich with examples of optimism, perseverance, personal competence, dealing with emotion, triumphing over setbacks, and making the most of life's opportunities.

Drawing attention to the resiliency abilities that storybook characters demonstrate provides children with examples to imitate. For example, to highlight causal analysis, realistic optimism, or self-efficacy, you might say, "*They figured out what the problem was, then they made a plan to solve it. They didn't give up, did they? They kept on trying.*"

Developing resiliency abilities is an ongoing process—something we continue for our whole lives. The magic of reading and listening to stories joins adults and children in the spirit of lifelong resilience development.

For a comprehensive list of children's storybooks go to the RIRO website.
<http://www.reachinginreachingout.com/resources-booksKids.htm>

The books relate to the critical resiliency abilities discussed in Guide 2, as well as stories that promote flexible thinking and cultural competence in young children.

We encourage you to share your favourite storybooks about resilience. E-mail your suggestions to us at info@reachinginreachingout.com and we'll add them to our list.

What do educators say about using stories and actively promoting a resilient view with young children?

I learn so much about children's thoughts and feelings when we read or make up stories together. It's fun and also a great way to get to know them better. Hearing the children's ideas about why characters act in certain ways actually helps me understand the children in my group better. —NB (kindergarten)

This is the age when children are forming their beliefs about themselves. They are receiving feedback from parents, from their friends, from their teachers. This is the stage where they haven't got their beliefs consolidated yet. We, as educators working with the children day after day, could actually tap into and see the thinking patterns that may be forming in the child. So if we intervene by giving them a different perspective, generating alternatives—by talking with the child—the child can develop a more resilient set of beliefs. —JG (supervisor)

Summary of Guide 11



Helping young children express and challenge their thoughts

Social psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman notes that by age two, children begin to verbalize the meanings of their actions. By age three, children are actively trying to figure out *why* things happen.

We want to encourage children to express their thoughts about the world because it gives

- children the opportunity to practice language and interpersonal skills
- children the opportunity to be heard by an interested and caring adult
- adults the opportunity to gain valuable insight into children’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour

We can use child-friendly questions, such as the following, to encourage children to express their thoughts:

- “*What are you saying to yourself?*”
- “*What are you thinking inside your head?*”
- “*What is your head telling you?*”

We can also use children’s literature or made-up stories to

- promote discussion about the children’s beliefs
- give them exposure to others’ thoughts and feelings
- challenge children’s assumptions and biases

Using children’s storybooks to generate discussion about resilience

Children’s storybooks can also be used to develop children’s resiliency abilities. Good stories offer multiple layers for learning and discussion—opportunities for readers and listeners alike to validate their own experiences, broaden their perspectives, and discover new ways to overcome obstacles and deal with life’s inevitable challenges.

Most good stories contain themes related to the critical abilities that researchers associate with resilience. The magic of reading and listening to stories joins adults and children in the spirit of lifelong resilience development.