

# Co-Creating Scripts

## with Young Children to

## Help Them Feel Better

If you've ever kept a journal, you know that expressing your feelings in writing can be therapeutic. Young children can also experience emotional validation, self-expression, and relief through writing. When children see their words printed and listen as their teacher reads them aloud, their language and emotions have power and meaning.

Preschool teachers have long known the benefits of taking child dictations. Co-creating scripts is a similar process, but the teacher takes a more active role. The teacher offers to help the child solve a problem by writing down his words and ideas. A teacher asking a sad child if he would like to write a letter to his mom (whom he is really missing) is a perfect example of co-creating a script.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

### Charlie's red glove

Charlie, a bright and sensitive preschooler, had difficulty with transitions and often found the busy classroom overwhelming. He sought quiet places and sedentary play.

Today Charlie was sobbing; he had lost one of his red gloves. All of the teachers tried to console and comfort him. They helped him search for the missing glove and suggested that perhaps his mom had accidentally taken it with her. Nothing seemed to help. Charlie had one glove on, and the other was missing. He refused to borrow from the mitten basket. He wouldn't budge from his cubby.

I sat down on the floor next to Charlie's cubby with my clipboard, trying to decide how I might help. A few days earlier, when he'd had a hard time separating from his mom, we had co-created a letter. With each sentence dictated and reread, I could see him released from his stress. When we had finished the letter, Charlie had folded it up in the crumpled way 3-year-olds fold paper, stuffed it in his backpack, and moved into the classroom to play.

On this day I engaged Charlie again. I asked simple yes and no questions that I felt would validate his longing for his missing glove.

"Charlie, was your glove red?"

Charlie nodded.

"Here is a red marker. Charlie, I want to draw a picture of your red glove so that I can remember what it looks like."

Another nod.

"Can I see your other glove? I can trace it and make a picture of your missing glove."

As I carefully traced the glove, Charlie stopped crying and watched me color in each finger with the red marker. We sat quietly together while I worked on my clipboard, which was tipped in Charlie's direction. Although I colored

in silence, I tried to involve Charlie by moving the marker slowly and watching his response. The coloring itself gave us a peaceful shared moment and a certain distraction from the previous stress.

Next, I said, "I have an idea. Sometimes when people lose something, they make a sign for everyone to read. Would you like to help me write a sign about your glove? We can hang it on the door. If someone finds the glove, they will know it is yours."

Charlie looked at me and said, "Yes!"

After writing the note with Charlie, I read his words back to him several times. When he agreed that the sign

was done, we taped it to the classroom door. Below, you can see the sign we co-created and read Charlie's exact words in quotation marks.

Charlie ran outside gloveless to enjoy the last 10 minutes of playtime. A few days later we all enjoyed a giant class cheer when the missing glove turned up in a playmate's backpack.

This life experience let Charlie know that he could cope with difficult emotions. Through an emergent literacy activity as simple as making a sign, Charlie had a real-life lesson that supported his emotional life, contributed to a responsive and caring classroom, and demonstrated the power of language.





## Tips for co-creating scripts with young children

### Grab your clipboard and stay close to the child

The first few times it may feel a bit awkward and unnatural for you and the child. Comfort and ease will grow as you build a reflective community that solves problems by writing them down.

### Ask a question or use a simple phrase or other prompt if the child needs support verbalizing

"Maybe we could make a list of things you are worried about."

"I wonder what you want to say next."

### Act as a coach, but let the child talk

Ask open-ended questions, and invite the child to respond. Don't speak for the child or assume you know what the child is thinking or feeling. The adult's role is to write the child's words exactly as he or she speaks them, while acting as a coach by making suggestions. ("Do you want to write a letter/make a sign/develop a list?")



### Read the sentences or words back to the child several times

Rereading the child's words and phrases is a wonderful validation tool. This is also an important step in helping the child slow down, breathe, listen, and reflect.

**Teacher:** Let's make a sign to tell everyone what just happened. (*Teacher reads as she writes.*) "Charlie lost his glove." Now, what else shall we write? What would you like to say about your glove?

**Charlie:** I love my glove. I want my glove!

The teacher writes his words and reads them aloud several times, pointing to each word.

**Teacher:** What should people do if they find the glove?

**Charlie:** Give it to me!

The teacher writes Charlie's words inside quotation marks and reads the entire sign aloud several times.

### Two strategies in one

What could be more meaningful and tangible in the life of a young child than writing about an emotionally charged event? Co-creating scripts with children is a dual-purpose strategy. It responds to children's strong emotions while also creating a literacy experience. Experiencing and expressing strong emotions is new and sometimes frightening for children. When adults respond with care, children can develop healthy attitudes about themselves as individuals and as members of a group.

### Create a "Let's write that down" atmosphere in your classroom

When a child makes a suggestion about which story he wants to read at group time, you can say, "That's a great idea. Let me write that down so I remember it." When a child is crying because she didn't get a turn with the magnets at the science center, you can say, "I'm going to write a note that Amanda wants a turn with the magnets."

### SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Even if you don't speak a child's language, you can still support his or her self-expression. Try taking dictation phonetically—listen carefully and capture the sounds of the child's words. In the moment, you will be showing the child that his or her words are just as important as every other child's. A parent or volunteer can help you translate later.

Taking the time to learn a few key phrases in each child's language will also help you write down children's words. Ask parents to help you learn to say "Tell me more" or "What do you want me to write?" Then work collaboratively with each child to build that bridge of communication.

