When I was a preschool teacher, I worked with children who were separated from their families for nine or ten hours each workday. Knowing how important it was that the children feel safe and secure at school, I tried in several ways to demonstrate that they could trust me. I developed predictable routines so they knew what would happen during each part of the day. I made sure that they observed positive interactions between me and their parents. And, perhaps most important, I built trust by simply listening to them.

This chapter describes how listening to children during the story dictation process helps to build trusting relationships between caregivers and children. It also deals with how story dictation gives the provider important information about individual children, supports children’s social and emotional development by promoting friendships between children, and enables an early childhood curriculum to meet a broad range of learning standards.

**Story Dictation Builds Relationships**

Story dictation is a social interaction, an invitation from the adult and a response from the child, that contributes to the development of a trusting relationship between them. The teacher gives the child the gift of her full attention, which invites the child to open up and respond. As children participate in story
dictation regularly over a period of time, they gradually come to feel more and more at ease in expressing their feelings and ideas. Story dictation is an especially valuable practice in working with vulnerable children who have difficulty using language or building trusting relationships with their caregivers.

During the story dictation process, the teacher and child create something special: a story on paper. With an encouraging manner and open-ended questions, the teacher leads the child through the creation of the story. The deepening of their relationship as they work together to produce the child's finished story can be very satisfying to both of them. When I was teaching, the primary reason I did story dictation was to strengthen my relationships with the children in my care.

**Story Dictation Helps You Learn about the Children in Your Care**

In this book, I use the word *assessment* to describe the ways teachers and child care providers get to know the children in their care. Each time we learn a bit more about a child, we become better teachers. It is a natural, intuitive process. True assessment is more about understanding than about measuring. It is also part of building strong relationships.

Assessment can be informal or formal. Getting to know a child through casual conversation, chance observation, and storytelling is informal assessment. More formal assessment practices include documenting children's growth and progress through the development of child portfolios. Either kind of assessment can be a source of important information for teachers.

Listening to the stories a child tells is one of the best ways to get to know that child. His stories offer a unique opportunity to understand what makes him tick, how he thinks, and what he knows about the world. Through children's stories we can find out what interests them, what they're wondering about, what frightens them, and what makes them feel passionate.

**The Brave of the Girls**

Mary, Lindsey, and Mikayla hopped on their surfboards at the beach. They saw a boat. "The boat is sinking!" said Mary. They rescued the pirates from the sinking ship. They hopped on a giant surfboard and went slashing through the sea. They went to a hotel. Mary worked on her book about boats in the middle of the night. The pirates yawned and fell asleep. The next day the pirates told the girls where their mom was. They smiled and ran to their mom.

*Heidi, age 5*
By reading “The Brave of the Girls,” we know that Heidi has a vivid imagination and a good vocabulary. We can also make some educated guesses about her interests and personality. Heidi’s choice to tell a story about a group of brave girls tells us that she probably values her friendships with other girls and enjoys thinking of girls as active and powerful. We can also guess that Heidi loves and values books, because in her story her character Mary is writing her own book.

Informal assessment takes place every time a teacher or caregiver listens to a child’s story. We can even liken it to what happens when you make a new friend. You probably want to find out what your friend likes to do for fun or what your friend likes to eat. You want to know what makes your friend laugh. You may want to know what your friend’s family is like. You probably want to know what fears or worries your friend has. You want to know what your friend’s interests are and what hopes for the future your friend has.

In the context of a story, a child will share this kind of information with you naturally. Of course, since children freely mix truth with fiction, if a child says in her story that she has a new baby brother, that may or may not be true. Some outside verification of facts may be necessary. But even a make-believe story reveals a child’s feelings and interests. If we listen with a flexible ear, noting most the emotions and passions in a story, we will learn a great deal indeed.

Once upon a time there was a snowman. He rescued a penguin from a bad pig. The bad pig was a vampire pig. He was a bad one. The snowman had a play date with the penguin. The penguin said, “Okay. Can we play?”

Adam, age 4

This story reveals, for example, that Adam may be especially interested in learning about penguins and engaging in pretend play related to penguins, snow, and cold places. The ending of his story also suggests that Adam has some understanding of how to make friends and initiate play with other children.

Unlike many formal assessment tools, such as checklists that require eliciting specific responses from a child (“Can you tell me the name of this letter?”), children’s dictated stories are a natural and authentic source of information. This makes story dictation an extremely valuable practice. Like a good talk with a friend, a child’s story may reveal emotions and interests that might never be touched upon through direct questioning. When these connections are made, our teaching improves naturally, because we are better able to tailor our teaching
to the needs and interests of the children. By assessing (or, in other words, by understanding) children in this way, our relationships become stronger and we become better teachers.

Story Dictation Fosters Friendships

The positive influence of the story dictation process becomes even broader when children share their stories with each other. Of the many ways teachers and child care providers can facilitate friendships and partnerships between children, story dictation is one of the most powerful. We can use it to bring children together, to teach them to listen to each other, and to show them what they have in common.

We can foster friendships during the story dictation process by modeling for children what respectful listening is. Since story dictation usually takes place in the middle of a bustling room, other children are often observing and listening while a teacher is writing down a child’s words. The teacher shows that she is listening to that child by tilting her head toward the storyteller, by moving her gaze from the page to the speaker’s face, and by providing encouragement through occasionally nodding her head or asking questions, such as “Yes, now what comes next?” The teacher also models respectful listening by responding to the inevitable interruptions with statements, such as “I’ll help you in a minute. Right now I’m listening to Marina’s story.”

This kind of respectful listening on the part of the teacher or child care provider encourages the other children to listen and interact in respectful ways. For example, if story dictation takes place at a writing table during free play, there usually will be other children at the table besides the child who is dictating a story. The other children may be writing and drawing, or waiting for a turn to tell their own stories. Since such an arrangement invites listening, conversation, and collaboration, the children may spontaneously respond to each other’s stories as they are being told and even offer ideas and suggestions. Doing so is evidence that the children are listening carefully to each other. The teacher or provider can facilitate partnerships and friendships at the writing table by keeping interruptions brief and helping to clarify the suggestions that are made. Although some timid children may feel overwhelmed by suggestions from other children, most will welcome the positive attention and interesting ideas they get while they’re in the role of storyteller.
In her book *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom*, Vivian Gussin Paley writes that the best thing she did as a teacher was to use the children’s dictated stories to draw “invisible lines” between the children, fostering connections that enriched the classroom community (1990, p. xi). Children learn what they have in common when they listen to each other’s stories, both when the stories are told and later, when they’re read aloud to the class. The expectation that connections will be made can be stated explicitly as the teacher or child care provider introduces a story. “Let’s listen to Nathan’s story. I’m wondering if anything like this has ever happened to any of you.”

*My papa is funny. I runs around and laughs around. My momma and my papa eat supper with me. I always sleep backwards on my bed. My turtle and my bunny are snuggling together. My bunny is sometimes by herself in the washer.*

_Nathan, age 3_

Any child who has watched a cherished stuffed animal churn in a washing machine can strongly identify with the last line of this story. When this story is read aloud to Nathan’s class, children are likely to experience a sense of recognition and may spontaneously comment, “That happened to me too!” Or the teacher can invite children to discuss these connections by asking, “Does Nathan’s story remind you of anything that has happened in your life?” When such connections are made, children are likely to find that they have much in common.

Dictated stories also can be used to make connections between children during play. For example, one day Shaun, who enjoys telling stories about aliens, was having trouble finding someone to play with on the playground. Shaun’s teacher helped him find a playmate by saying to another child, “Remember that story Shaun told about the aliens? Would you like to play aliens with Shaun? The climber could be your spaceship.”

A community is a place where connections are made. During the story dictation process, connections are made through listening, observing, and learning about and appreciating one another. Once children experience connections with others through their stories, not only do the stories they tell become even more interesting, but the classroom or child care setting becomes more cooperative and friendly, and the opportunities for learning become even richer.
Story Dictation Helps Meet Learning Standards

Current public policies put pressure on early childhood educators to achieve more and to achieve it sooner. A recent study coordinated by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation found that for many teachers, the struggle to align their teaching practices with specific learning standards often resulted in their engaging in ineffective teaching practices, such as whole-group direct instruction (Jacobson 2006). Story dictation offers an alternative: a child-centered, imaginative, and open-ended curriculum activity that yields tangible, measurable results and helps address a wide range of early learning standards (see chapter 8).
The richest and most obvious opportunities for learning through story dictation are in the area of language and literacy development. The story dictation process encourages children to express their ideas in words, expand their vocabularies, and speak in sentences. Creating and retelling stories helps children develop their understanding of literary conventions, such as story structure (beginning, middle, and end) and dialogue. Creating written stories, with an adult managing the writing process, also helps children learn concepts about print, such as letter recognition, phonics, and a beginning sight vocabulary.

Expanding language and literacy skills is an essential part of children's cognitive development. Creating stories stretches children's imaginations, which, in turn, helps to develop abstract thinking. Storytelling also helps children develop problem-solving skills, understanding of cause and effect relationships, and ability to compare and contrast. In addition, children's stories often provide opportunities for demonstrating and expanding upon children's understanding of math and science concepts. For example, the stories may include numbers and quantities or explore physical properties.

As this chapter has explained, story dictation helps build relationships, which promotes children's social-emotional development. Creating stories also can help children understand and describe both their own emotions and the emotions of others, and it can help children develop confidence by building a strong sense of self.

If practicing emerging writing skills is part of the process, story dictation can contribute to children's small-motor development, and large-motor development might be supported if children act out their stories as a group, using their bodies to represent characters and events in their stories.
Practice paying close attention to how much time you spend listening each day. You’ll probably notice how frequently, for the sake of group management, you must interrupt children’s conversations. Practice listening to children more attentively. At the snack table, on the playground, or at the art table, make a conscious effort to listen rather than talk.

Use children’s dictated stories to identify common interests between children and to then encourage friendships. When helping young children make friends, try pairing children who have similar interests but not necessarily similar personalities. Remember that because sometimes opposites do attract, sometimes quiet, timid children enjoy the company of more gregarious companions.

Keep in mind that story dictation can be a good way to help a new child feel welcome. Encourage a new child to sit next to you as you take dictation from other children. She will feel more secure sitting close to you, and she’ll also learn how to tell stories by listening to and observing the other children. Soon she’ll also be telling her own stories.

In both individual and class portfolios, use dictated stories to document children’s learning.