Alvin the Alligator

One morning the children in Nancy Dykhouse's kindergarten class at Gateway School in Atlanta, Georgia, decided to write a story about an alligator.

"What should we call him?" Nancy asked, and then suggested "Let's give him a name that starts with the same letter the word "alligator" does," in an effort to reinforce the concept of initial letter sounds as well as introduce the children to the idea of alliteration.

Andy suggested "Alvin," and Alex composed the first line. "One day Alvin the alligator crawled out of the zoo." After Nancy printed the sentence on the chalkboard, Todd provided the next sentence. "He went into the street," and Andy expanded the idea by adding that it was "Peachtree Street." Then there was silence.

Nancy prodded them. "What did he do next?"

They thought a moment and then Larry Racioppo

Carolyn Boiarsky

Carolyn Boiarsky was Coordinator of the Southeast Center for the Teaching of Writing at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Josh said, "He climbed up a tree."

"And scared the birds away from their nest," Keith added.

But Tracy said alligators couldn't climb trees, so they decided to erase the sentence. There was more silence and Nancy finally asked some leading questions. "How do you think he felt? Was he happy? Was he tired?"

Her questioning spurred Andy to suggest, "Alvin was hungry," and Alex solved that problem by adding "so he went to a restaurant for something to eat."

When they finished, Nancy read the story back to them. Then, while

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they were in the playground, she copied it on paper and ran it off on a ditto machine so that the children could take a copy of it home for their parents to read aloud to them.

Most preschool children are capable of creating stories similar to this one if they are encouraged to use their imagination, to express their ideas and to communicate their thoughts to one another.

This oral form of storytelling provides a basis for later attempts at creative writing. Children actually begin to learn to write as early as the preschool years though they have not yet mastered handwriting skills or learned to spell and read. Long before they are intellectually and physically capable of writing sentences, they can compose stories which have all of the elements required of sophisticated narration.

They organize their stories around a beginning, middle and an end and they are aware that they need to include some suspense (a plot). They can employ a variety of rhetorical devices and demonstrate mature syntax by using compound and even complex sentences as well as dialogue when they tell the story orally.

When children are motivated to create a story, when they are led to move from one idea to another in a logical sequence, and when they are reinforced by seeing their words printed or if possible typed like the stories they read in books, they begin to acquire confidence in expressing themselves, a necessary prerequisite for achieving fluency in writing.

There are a number of methods which can be used to stimulate children to create stories. The composite story, similar to the one Nancy's students developed, is an excellent method for introducing children to storytelling. Using a round robin technique, one member of a group starts a story, then stops after a few sentences and lets another member continue until he or she is ready to stop and turn it over to the next member. The story continues from one member to the next with each member adding something new. Though the children tell the story orally, someone needs to record what's being said on a chalkboard or a large piece of paper so the children can begin to see the relationship between their oral utterances and the visual words. When the story is finished, it should be read aloud so that the children recognize the relationship between writing and reading.

Another method to start young children thinking about creating their own stories is to show them a picture and ask them to tell a story about it. Many of the books in the juvenile section of the library are picture stories without words. Dorothy Zahurak Berry, a teacher in Rockdale County, Georgia, and a consultant for the Georgia State University/Southeast Center for the Teaching of Writing, has her third graders select one of these books, make up a story to fit the pictures, and then read their story to the first graders. There is nothing like having an appreciative audience to motivate children to write.

This method easily can be adapted for preschoolers. Rather than write down the story they can simply tell it to each other or to a favorite doll or stuffed animal. In fact, the latter often make an excellent audience for the child's first storytelling efforts since they are always appreciative and never interrupt or wander off in the middle as real playmates are apt to do. In another variation, the children can record their stories on tape, which not only provides an opportunity for the other children to hear them but also offers the children the opportunity to hear themselves, a necessary prerequisite for achieving fluency in writing.

Though the stories children tell don't have to be original. In fact, children's first attempts at storytelling are often retellings of stories they have heard. My four-year-old son, Mikey, created his first book as a present for his cousin Keith's second birthday. He selected the story of The Three Pigs to tell in his own words.

First we drew the pictures.