The Situation
Recently, I decided to try the RIRO training activity about creating a story from a picture with the 3- to 5-year-olds in my group. I was excited to see if I could gain some insight into how the children think and solve problems. I also wanted to give the children an opportunity to practice their “causal analysis” and “generating alternatives” skills as well as their emotional regulation by talking about their thoughts and feelings.

Preparation
To prepare for the activity I found several children’s books which had not been on the shelves for a long time. I was intentionally trying to avoid stories the children were familiar with because I thought that if they recognized the picture they may be more inclined to just retell the actual story instead of creating their own. I chose five pictures that had no text on the page and showed people in different situations, displaying different emotions.

To prepare the children for the activity I explained that they could choose one of the pictures and make up a story about what was happening in the picture. I told them I would write their story down as they told it so we could make a book for the shelf in our classroom. The reactions from the children were very positive and there was a lot of excitement leading up to doing the activity.

Encouraging their Stories
Over the next two days I found time to sit one-on-one with each child to make our stories. Some children chose to do the activity more than once, both because they enjoyed it, and because they thought their first stories were too short. As they told me their stories I encouraged them along by asking questions such as: What is happening in the picture? How are the people feeling? What are they saying to themselves in their heads? What will happen next? I also tried to repeat their ideas back to them to clarify what they were telling me and to demonstrate that I was really listening and interested.

One Child’s Story
One child in my group chose a picture showing a boy kneeling on a chair and reaching into a drawer with one hand and holding his other hand to his ear. I started his story by saying, “Once upon a time a boy climbed onto a chair…” The child continued the story by saying the boy is listening to something in the drawer, that he hears a crocodile in the drawer and tries to catch it in a cup. When the crocodile breaks out of the cup the boy is sad and scared because he is worried that he might get bitten. The boy then asks the crocodile to come out. By this point in the story the boy has tried three different ideas to get the
The crocodile out of the drawer – catching it, scaring it and asking it. The crocodile comes out, has a shower and eats an octopus. Now because the crocodile is not hungry, the boy and crocodile can be friends and live together.

**Listening for strengths and skills**
This story was great not just because it was funny, but it also it showed some definite strengths in this child’s thinking skills. For example, the child used causal analysis to determine that the crocodile was dangerous because he was hungry. Once the crocodile had eaten the octopus, the boy didn’t have to worry about being eaten anymore – now they could become friends. He also showed flexible thinking by generating alternatives, first by coming up with different ways to get the crocodile out of the drawer, and then again by imagining a way for the crocodile to become friendly. And talking about his feelings and thoughts supported his emotional regulation.

**Another story -unexpected abilities**
One of the biggest surprises I had doing this activity came from a boy in my group who has very little language. He was able to tell a story which was much longer and clearer than I expected of him. When I showed him the picture options he immediately chose the one of a boy in his bedroom looking angry. The picture included a younger child jumping on the bed and a woman in the background.

I started the story off for him by saying “Once upon a time there was a boy in his room…” and the child continued with the following story. “Mommy in room, too. Baby, too. And Calvin. Calvin is happy. Baby on bed makes Calvin happy. Baby jumping up and down. Mommy has a coat. Baby having bed now. Calvin angry now. Baby get off my bed!”

This child has a younger sister at home and he really seemed to empathize with the boy in the picture. He was able to label the emotions felt by the boy in his story and say what caused these emotions. It was great to hear him making these B-C connections! At the end of his story, the child made it clear that he knew what needed to happen for the boy to be happy again. He needed to tell the baby to get off his bed! This activity gave him an opportunity to practice skills that support emotional regulation. Telling the story was an amazing accomplishment for this child.

**What I Learned**
I learned several things from doing this activity with the children. One thing that jumped out at me is that their problem-solving skills are quite good. For every adversity they made up in their stories, they came up with a solution for it. Their stories showed signs of accurate and flexible thinking – strengths in causal analysis and generating alternatives. The children also showed they have strategies for emotional regulation. The people in their stories not only solved their problem but they remained calm and came up with a variety of solutions.
I also noticed in re-reading the stories that several “thinking traps” were apparent. The most common thinking trap was “catastrophizing” – some of the stories involved problems that were very exaggerated in the mind of the character. Other stories “magnified the positive” and “minimized the negative.” In these stories the children seemed to ignore parts of the pictures that hinted at or showed negative situations such as a crying baby, or an upset child and focused only on the happier aspects of the story.

Knowing that my group has strengths in emotional regulation, causal analysis and generating alternatives gives me an excellent starting point to help them practice challenging the thinking traps that appeared in their stories.

**Promoting resilience through story telling**
I think story telling is a valuable tool to gain insight into the skills and thinking styles of children. And through repeated exposure to this activity children can gain a sense of self-efficacy as they think of ways the characters can make positive choices about their situation.

Using the question “What happens next?” children are encouraged to get into the habit of considering the outcomes of their actions. Most importantly this activity helps children think about how they feel in different situations and how others feel. Developing skills that help develop their emotional regulation and empathy will help them make friends, resolve conflicts and enjoy a sense of belonging.