



The Story Behind Noni[™]



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When I started teaching, I got in the habit of writing a child's name on a piece of heart-shaped paper and putting it in a small jewelry box that I carried with me everywhere. Usually, it was a child who needed some extra attention and support or a child with whom I was struggling to make a connection.

Keeping this little box with the child's name in it with me at all times—in my pocket, in my purse—was a helpful, physical reminder of the value of that child and my relationship with them. I'd absentmindedly turn the box around and around in my hand while waiting in line at the grocery store, and I'd reflect on what went wrong or right that day in our interactions. I'd think about new ideas I could try to connect with or help that child, or just simply think about how important and valuable the child was. When we'd get to the point where I felt we'd overcome our challenge together, their name would come out of the box.

At the time, I didn't know anything about the research that existed about childhood trauma or ACEs, or what happens to a young child's brain when it is exposed to toxic stress levels. Like many teachers, intuitively, I just knew that there were some children in my class who needed more of my focused attention, patience, and care. Fortunately, I had good models to learn from.

When I was little, my early childhood teachers were my only constant. My mother died when I was nine, and was very sick for a few years before she passed. My father split his time between work and the hospital. During the week, my older brother and I were frequently on our own.

At the time, I had really long hair and my little arms couldn't quite brush the middle. My poor father was ill-equipped to tackle the terrible knots that I'd frequently get, so my teachers would brush my hair for me. Before the school day started and after the day ended, I would go and sit with one of the teachers and she'd work on the latest knots. And while she brushed, we talked. These women invited me to express my sadness, my fears, and my hopes in ways that made me feel normal and understood.





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Most importantly, they made me feel loved, nurtured, and supported. They hugged me. They told me that I was smart, capable, strong, and could do anything I set my mind to.

My brother didn't have that kind of support. He was a little older than me; his relationships with his teachers were different. He was smart, creative, and so charismatic—but he went through those challenging years without the warm, nurturing embrace of a consistent, supportive adult relationship.

When we were younger, my brother and I had more in common than not, and I adored him. But we came out on the other side of my mother's death as completely different people, and would go on to take opposite paths in life.

I did well in school, went to college, got my Masters' degree, and became a teacher, a school administrator, a mother and later, a CEO. After barely making it to high school graduation, my brother struggled to keep a job, lied to everyone he knew, became a master manipulator, and eventually, a drug addict. He was a father who took his kids in and out of homelessness, and neglected and hurt them and others in ways that still breaks my heart to think about, even

though they are safe now. A few years ago, my brother died of a drug overdose. As I grew up and could reflect on our childhood with some adult perspective, and certainly as I studied human development in school, it was clear that a key differentiator in our experiences was that I had these amazing women, these incredible teachers, who quite literally saved me. I've always known that I, too, wanted to be one of those people who could change the trajectory of someone's life. And as I worked with young children and learned more about the critical importance of the early childhood years—and the significant impact that trauma has on a child's development and learning—I knew I was so blessed to have had the experiences with those women that I did, when I did.

All children deserve those kind of relationships in their lives. Just like the names of the children I used to carry in the jewelry box, some children need more from us than others. I know from my own teaching experience just how challenging it can be to support children's social, emotional and mental wellness, particularly when they are in stress-response mode and exhibiting dysregulated behaviors that making teaching and learning incredibly difficult. It takes time that we teachers often don't have, and

it can be both emotionally and physically exhausting. That's why we created Noni™. Educators need strategies and guidance to be able to build those strong relationships and break the ongoing cycle of dysregulated behavior for trauma-impacted young children, setting the stage for them to lead healthy, happy, productive, and successful lives. They need reminders and support for prioritizing their own self-care. And they need a supportive partner in creating trauma-sensitive learning environments that prioritize the social and emotional needs of young children who have experienced ACEs.

Noni™ is the digital-age version of my jewelry box with a child's name in it—a daily reminder of the importance of relationships for successful development and learning. And we hope it will help you to reflect on your own teaching practice, and build safe, secure relationships with the children you teach and care for, in the same way that its physical counterpart did for me all those years ago.