



Just the Two of us

(A learning place for tender hearts)

Curriculum created & developed by Nicolle Nattrass CAC II

A tender-hearted guide for parents, educators & helping professionals working with children (ages 4-12) for connection, using Journaling as a key recovery tool to process trauma, stress and to encourage a dialogue when words are too much or not enough.

This is a sample Chapter only, released during Covid 19. Dedicated to my grandparents who held the space for my tender heart.



Bio: Nicole Natrass

Nicolle's professional expertise is a result of her distinct and unique careers in **Theatre** (Acting, Writing, Teaching) and **Counseling** (Individual Coaching/Group facilitation). She is a proud member of the Journal Council with the [International Association for Journal Writing](https://www.nicollenatrass.com), an Addiction Counselor (CAC II), a Jessie Award nominated actress (CAEA), playwright (PGC), and creator of 3 Creative Journaling for Self-Care Courses. www.nicollenatrass.com

Forward by author:

Writing this guide has been on my wishlist for many years. I am compelled to share its beginning now, during Covid 19, as a free resource & tool for parents, educators and helpers so that together, we can provide children a soft place to land, to process thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Supporting children to make sense of their experiences is key to healing and resilience.

A note for Educators & Parents:

If you believe that a fire engine needs to be red, this book is not for you. This work goes against any formal need to teach or train a child what is right or wrong. There is no place for correction or outcome assessment in this work. Any judgement and perfectionism must be put aside.

Your role will require you to closely monitor your own attitudes, experiences and beliefs. In many cases, that will mean becoming aware of your own biases, gently putting them aside to be fully present and comfortable with the process. The work done in the journal need not be Art nor be aesthetically pleasing, whatever that is for you.

Focus instead on holding space which means being a witness, an unconditionally loving and gentle participant. Initially it may feel as if you are doing very little but you are doing a whole lot. You are fulfilling a huge task, holding the space for both

the child and yourself to process on the page. What lands on the page is not the objective, the participation and connection is the perfection you are seeking.

Disclaimer:

This work is not a substitute for Art Therapy, Play therapy or work with any qualified professional.

Scientific research has proven very clearly that journaling is beneficial to our mental and physical health. For example, Dr. James Pennebaker, a lead researcher in this area, maintains: "It's a whole cascade of things that occur. Labeling emotions and acknowledging traumatic events — both natural outcomes of journaling — have a known positive effect on people and are often incorporated into traditional talk therapy." [From NY times article, What's this all about Journaling](#) by Hayley Phelan.

We also know that creativity can act as a huge antidote to stress and can help a child engage in their own creative alchemy. Sadly we also realize that anxiety and stress are on the rise in children. Their world and ours is changing very rapidly, not only during this Covid 19 crisis but through the overwhelming digital presence that acts both positively and negatively.

Introduction

I come to this "tender-hearted work" after having to face what no parent expects to face, witnessing the effects of trauma on their child. Our family experienced a very traumatic motor vehicle accident. Our son was four and a half years old at the time. Thankfully he was not physically injured, save for the some bruising from the straps on his carseat that kept him safely in place. However the emotional and mental impact was significantly life-changing, enough that there was no way we could ignore it or chalk it up as an unfortunate event. In spite of well meaning suggestions like "try not to talk about the car accident and that maybe he would forget about it in a couple of weeks", we could not.

I considered their sensible suggestions initially, but the following days, in between doctors' appointments for my husband, who was severely injured in the accident, I kept running into strangers who related stories of surviving childhood accidents

with uncanny detail, vividly reliving the emotional experiences. I could not deny the authentic quality that resonated within these encounters. Daily, I noticed my son's actions. In his play he was building towers in places in precarious places where they were sure to be knocked down in passing or blocking obvious paths right in front of our front door. When they did fall over, the emotional distress he displayed was more than a normal response. I began paying more close attention, having been trained to notice signs and symptoms of PTSD when I worked as a frontline addiction counselor in residential treatment.

We began to realize that he was too young to "talk through" his experience, verbally. Researching what was available, it was quite clear that not only resources were limited, particularly in our area, but those that were available were not age-appropriate. Luckily, we found a play therapist and as a family, were able to work through a great deal of trauma together.

I began seeing a counselor to help unpack my own reactions and the intense fear that I faced as I rescued my son from the car accident. Another important factor to note, as it would change the course of our lives for the next 4 years, was the timing of the accident. It occurred one day after my son's very first day of pre-school, his first-ever extended separation from us and from his home.

This was a complex trauma for all of us; the shared trauma of the circumstances, the individual experiences and narratives of the accident, separation issues as well as the fracture of our safety as a family.

Even after some physical healing and therapy were set in place, the increased stress was our new normal. On one particularly challenging day at home, I pulled out a large journal and grabbed whatever was nearby, my son's crayons, and opened the page. My son sat next to me and I pointed to one side of the page as belonging to him and the other as mine.

This is how our tender-hearted work began.



When my son's anxiety was high or either one of us was having a challenging time, we ended up at the kitchen table, journal spread out. With little or no words, we explored and put whatever came up onto the blank page.

As we interacted, I realized that even as an avid journaler, I did not feel that I could write about the effects of the accident. I believe that this feeling of not being able to put one's traumatic experience into words is present in degrees for all of us, even more so for children.

This journal became our recorder, our witness, our companion when we traveled, our entertainer when we were out eating a meal in a restaurant and much more. It became a soft place to land, to rest, and to lay what we needed to on the page, without question, correction or judgement.

That last sentence is key.

The gift of this experience for children is to provide a place to express their bigness, big feelings either joyful or traumatic. The journal provides a safe outlet to make sense of their world and enables a concrete experiential language to

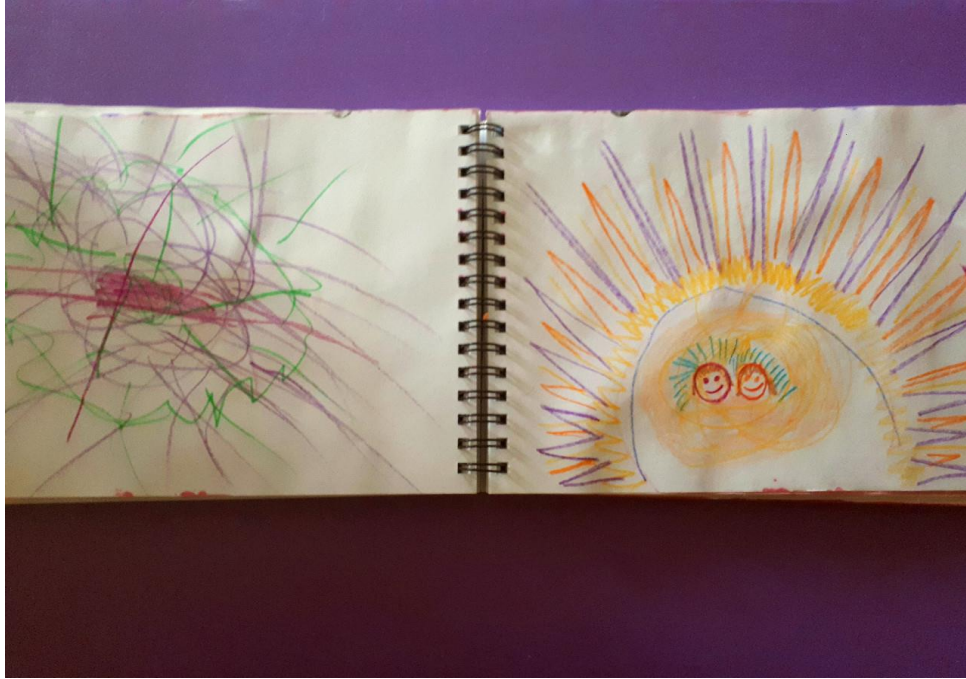
surface. For example, even today when my son and I look through the journals, he can confidently select a page full of his 4 year old scribbles, and tell me what was going on for him that day he drew it, what he was feeling and if it was related to the car accident. The journal has become a reference point to acknowledge his past and a compass for a way forward. This is the beauty of this type of creative alchemy.

I am releasing this **Sample Chapter** early to make it available as a tool/resource to begin to support students, children and clients.

How do we begin tender-hearted work?

1. Find a large journal or a scrapbook that will lie flat on the table. I suggest very large so that there is ample room to be free. You have one page and the child has the other. You can often find these not only in Art stores but Dollar stores.
2. Find a special place to store this journal, somewhere reachable for the child. This journal is something to share only between the two of you, not something to Show and Tell. It is a sacred trust. The child will guide and this is based on his wishes. It can also be helpful to put a date somewhere on the page.
3. Let the child take the lead, making this journal their own. They may want to decorate the front cover of the journal, do not push. Best not to jump to teaching moments. This is not homework. For example, if a child draws on your side of the page, let them explore the boundary. Talk about it. Once trust and interest have been firmly established, engage in a positive, mutually inclusive conversation about consent/permission or other topics that may arise.
4. All mediums are welcome on the page- pencil, felt, tape, paint, glue, multi-media, collage- anything goes. Let the child lead, incorporating any of their “stuff” onto the page. They might find ways to add sparkles or mud or other

“treasures”. It is also ok to let them explore destroying a page, it is just a page of a journal. Reminder, there are no journal police.



- 5. The Journal is always there when you need it. If you are upset or struggling with something or when you need a break from day to day routine, take it out. You are the model for this process. The child learns from your attitude and approach. Remember that the process is enough. Your child may or may not join you. Do not force participation. No punitive measures or pressured outcomes should interfere or be connected to this activity. Try your best to not comment on what is “good” or what appeals to you instead become curious and ask questions: What colours did you use? Do you like that color? What is that? Tell me more about that. It’s important to be present. Sometimes the non- verbal can be more supportive than vocal praise because it does not stop the process. Remember, the value is in the “doing”, the process is more important than words.*

Journaling is a powerful tool that addresses self-care, family care and client care. There will always be a need to process the experiences that life sends our way, especially during times of stress and the challenges we are facing right now.

My goal is to have this guide completed before the end of 2020. The full guide will continue to explore topics that support children's mental health, including using journals for social stories, addressing big emotions, obstacles and specific examples with photos.

If you have any questions or would like to book a personal consultation via telephone/Zoom, email nicollenattrass@gmail.com

*Lastly, if you feel would like to support the completion of this guide, **Just the Two of Us**, you can make a donation of \$20.00 here to my [Square up shop](#).*

Until then, take care of tender hearts

Nicolle Natrass

www.nicollenattrass.com