

[00:00:01.185] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption and Connection podcast, where we share resources by and for adoptive and foster moms. I'm Lisa Qualls

[00:00:09.075] - Melissa Corkum

and this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it and we're here for you.

[00:00:14.695] - Lisa Qualls

Well, hello, friends. Welcome to episode number one hundred fifteen of the Adoption Connection podcast.

[00:00:20.535] - Melissa Corkum

We are so glad you're here. This week, we're talking to Kristin Berry about understanding childhood trauma and how this knowledge can transform the way that we parent. But before we jump in to this week's content, we want to just remind you that there are still a couple of spots left in our upcoming typing session, and intro to the Enneagram. So if you caught last week's episode, you know that we are going to spend some dedicated time in twenty, twenty one, really exploring what the Enneagram brings to us in terms of wisdom and how we experience adoption and our stories. And there's just so much insight there that can really help us understand ourselves, have compassion for ourselves and understand our people and have more compassion for them. So if you are new to the Enneagram or you are familiar with the Enneagram, but you're still not quite sure what your dominant type is, we would love to have you join us on January twenty sixth at 1:00 p.m. Eastern, 10:00 a.m. Pacific for an intro to the Enneagram. This will also be a group typing session. So to find out more and to get updates as new Enneagram resources are available, just head to theadoptionconnection.com/enneagram. And there will also be a link in this week's show notes.

[00:01:40.265] - Lisa Qualls

So today's guest is Kristin Berry. She is a mom to eight, a writer, public speaker and a grandma to four adorable grandkids. She and her husband, Mike, live on a farm in rural Indiana where they are currently parenting their youngest four children, their niece and their two college age daughters who are home due to covid. She loves reading and hanging out with her miniature donkey, Meg, and I personally would love to see a picture of Meg, so maybe we can get Kristin to post that somewhere. So Kristin and I had a great conversation talking about understanding childhood trauma and how this knowledge helps transform the way that we parent. This conversation was really wonderful, I think it's filled with a lot of compassion for you and your child, and it offers hope for the long journey of parenting. It may even help you answer some questions like what is it about a certain tone of voice that makes your heart race and why do you feel so overwhelmed when your child behaves in a certain way? I think you're going to find this conversation really interesting and helpful.

[00:02:46.825] - Lisa Qualls

Hello, Kristin, welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast.

[00:02:51.135] - Kristin Berry

Hi, it's so good to see you.

[00:02:53.165] - Lisa Qualls

It's good to see you, too. I always look forward to meeting with you in person or sometimes like this over Zoom.

[00:03:00.465] - Kristin Berry

I agree.

[00:03:02.415] - Lisa Qualls

So one of the things that you and I and Mike have talked about over the years, of course, we've talked a lot about parenting. We've talked a lot about trauma. We've talked about the challenges and needs of our kids. I would love to hear your thoughts, just like just the basics of what is trauma and really is it only our kids who experience trauma? Like, is it all the big stuff or is there more to it than that

[00:03:32.215] - Kristin Berry

With understanding trauma was actually at an empowered to connect conference where we heard Dr. Karyn Purvis talk about childhood trauma. And as she was talking, you could see just a light bulb go on for Mike and I. And we both grew up in two parent homes. Our parents have been married forever. We grew up in sort of middle class enough to eat. And all of a sudden, as Dr. Purvis was talking about that trauma, we realized that we had also experienced trauma. And so as we began to listen to her explain some things about what our children might be experiencing, we both walked away from that and said, that's why I react the way that I do. And so for us. You know, the idea that everyone has experienced trauma, so a trauma is anything that interrupts the ideal, anything that interrupts the way that things are supposed to go. So it could be something like getting a new caregiver, moving to a new school, losing your house to a house fire, experiencing a car accident. And so as you begin to think about what those things are, you realize there's no way that we avoid that. We live in the Midwest, and so I bring up tornadoes a lot in our trainings with foster and adoptive parents. Why? Because you don't get out of the Midwest without experiencing a tornado. Everyone has had that. Sirens are going off, the dark clouds are forming. You're racing toward home or you're trying to decide, am I going to hide out in a ditch or a tunnel? How am I going to get myself to safety? And so everyone here in the Midwest has experienced that response to a life or death situation. That leaves a lasting effect. If I hear a tornado siren, my body goes into a reaction. And so that's just something very simple that everyone around here has had some experience with. So when we translate that to our friends in California who experience earthquakes, it's just a part of their everyday. But it's also something that could have devastating effects. And then you start to take that into what are our childhood experiences? Have I ever had a food insecurity, housing insecurity? Have I ever lost a loved one to death? Have I ever been sexually abused, physically abused, emotionally abused? And so as we begin to ask ourselves these questions, not just about our children, but about ourselves as well, we can begin to see how we react. And what we have really discovered is that at the root of what we do in our own home, we have eight children, all of whom were adopted. We had twenty three foster children. We're currently a kinship provider for a family member and as we begin to not just address the things that are happening with our children, but to ask ourselves, why do I respond to things the way I do? I can have compassion for myself. So anyone has ever heard me speak knows that I use pants as an example a lot. I really don't like when pants are too tight. I don't like when the snap is in the wrong place. I don't like when things are squeezing my guts and that really irritates me. Now, that's not a trauma. That's just a part of how my body was made. When I was a kid that was probably incredibly frustrating to my mother who wanted me to wear something other than the mint green corduroy pants that I wore until they fell off my body. Yes, they were as tacky as they sound and I don't know where I got them, but I loved the way those pants felt. Well, as I grew out of those pants, my mom was able to say, hey, Kristin, which kind of pants would you like? I can see that pants are a real issue for you. How can we find a way to get your body to feel good in a different pair of pants? Because we can't go through life with no more pants. The mint green pants are over. And so I was able to try on a bunch of different pants, choose ones that fit, something that feels good. Even into my adult life, if I grab a pair of pants that I don't like the way they feel, I'll go back and change. I will go get something different. Why do I do that? It's because I know and understand my body and I want my body to feel good. So when I translate that kind of response to something silly like pants, and I think for my child who has experienced, let's say, multiple caregivers. How is my child responding to the fact that I need to go to work right now? How is my child responding to a new baby sitter? How is my child responding to the fact that my spouse and I would like to go out on a date for an hour, that I'm five minutes late tucking them into bed? So when I think about how my own body reacts to things that are uncomfortable and I have compassion for myself, I don't get angry with myself. I just say I'm going to go get a different pair of pants because I like being a nice person and I like to wear pants that feel good and I'm just going to go change my pants. So I have compassion for myself. If I'm in a cranky mood because my pants are too tight, I just fix it. So when I look at my children and I think what is causing this reaction? Why are they behaving the way that they do? Why are they responding to something super simple, like mom and dad just want to go for a walk around the block? Mom and Dad just need 15 minutes before we tuck you into bed tonight. And I see my child then respond to something. If I have compassion for myself, if I have an understanding of myself, I might think, how do I respond when tornado sirens go off? My heart starts to race, my hands start to clench, I'm looking for a way away from the tornado and towards safety. That's how my body responds. If I

see that my children are responding to mom and dad want to go out on a date, and their heart is racing and their hands are clenching and they're looking for an escape route, they're responding to their previous trauma in the same way that I am responding when I think that there might be a tornado. So we have really discovered that for us in our parenting, we needed to understand ourselves as well as we need to understand our children. And so a lot of what we have come in contact with are a lot of ideas for how to help our kids. Use a coping skill, do the breathing exercise, go see this therapist. But what we weren't doing with our kids when they were little, we were trying to address their trauma. We were trying to be mindful of where they had come from but we weren't addressing the way that we respond to the things around us. The more that we began to understand. If we as parents grew up in a household with yelling and screaming and we have a child who behaves out of their trauma by yelling and screaming. We are then going to have a response back to that trauma, that previous trauma that we had. Now our child is yelling and screaming, well, how did we handle that as children? Maybe we grabbed a book and curled up in a corner and pretended it wasn't happening. Maybe we jumped in the fray and started screaming, too. And so we now find ourselves responding to the way that our child is responding to trauma. And so now we have a cycle of interactions and behaviors on both our parts that aren't particularly healthy and don't help us to create that relationship that we wanted to have with our kids.

[00:11:24.285] - Lisa Qualls

That is so good. I'm really, really glad you're talking about this. It reminds me of a friend who's an adoptive mom who had a father who was very verbally abusive and was a big yeller, very intimidating yeller. And she adopted a child who had a lot of trauma, who's, you know, fear response was fight. And so he would get very loud and she could not figure out why it was affecting her so, so deeply, like really hindering her ability to connect with her child at all. And it took her a little while to realize, oh, I am feeling when he goes into that yelling, I am feeling all those feelings I had as a child with my dad. So once she understood that it helped, it didn't make it go away. So let's talk about that. If once we realize, yes, we have these particular traumas and so we are humans, we are not perfect parents, and so our bodies and brains are going to respond to things with our children that may bring up our own stuff. So once we know that, if we can figure out what it is, what do we do now?

[00:12:38.835] - Kristin Berry

I have a lot of ideas and thoughts about that. One, I have to admit right off the bat that I have been telling parents to go to therapy for as long as Mike and I have been doing this job. But was I going to therapy? Well, nobody was asking me, so I didn't have any accountability. I would say, you know, hey, if that's your experience, you need to talk this out. You need a trusted person. You need a place to care for yourself. But I wasn't going because unpacking and digging through everything that I experienced was not a box that I thought that I could open up. And I thought if I go there, what if I can't get back out? And what if I dig up something that I cannot process, that I cannot deal with? What if I take that home to my kids? So I sat in so many therapy sessions along with my kids and watched how my kids were digging into their trauma. My kids were beginning to learn skills and ideas to help them heal that I realized that it was possible for me to go ahead and talk with a trusted person privately and disclose some of the things that have happened to me. So what I discovered in one of my children's therapy sessions was a therapist that said to me, don't try to rescue your child from this story. They're strong enough to handle this. And we want to express we want to give the idea, the belief to our children that they are strong enough to handle this. And for me, that was really a turning point where I realized, one, I don't need to change my kid's story. Two, I don't need to change mine and I don't need to hide from it anymore either. And I am strong enough to deal with the things that have happened in my past and to make a change for how I interact with my kids. And so when we recognize that it's our father's voice coming out, when we're yelling at our children or it's our mother's response of. Hiding away and pretending something wasn't happening. Or it's our it's our grandpa's rage, it's our neighbor's. Whatever it is, whatever that experience, when we hear that coming out of ourselves, instead of beating ourselves up, it's time to turn around and face that head on. Where did I come from? What did I experience? What am I repeating in my own family? And what can I do to do this differently? And that comes from seeking healing for ourselves. And a therapist is going to take while we're in the middle of a pandemic as we're recording this. So therapists might take a while. One quick thing we can do for ourselves is to say out loud what it is that happened. That can be with a trusted friend, that can be with our spouse. And we can say something like, I'm afraid I'm repeating

the same behavior with my kids. I am responding to my child's trauma with with an attitude of anger instead of compassion. And I want to do this differently. And then another quick thing that we can do is begin to create some narratives for ourselves as well as for our kids. And that can be something as simple as writing a Post-it note on the bathroom mirror that says, "you're a good mom, you're doing a good job." Creating a narrative for how something's going to go. That's anticipating what your child might do. Maybe your child is the kind of child that puts a wall up and rejects. And for me, if my kid rejects me, my response to that is immediate anger. I'm like, what is your problem? Why don't you like me? What is wrong with you? I just made you a cake. Or something, I don't know. I want to, like, love me back. Why don't you love me back? And so if I recognize that, then I can anticipate. Hey, I know that my kid is going to put this wall up, but since I know that's going to happen, today, I'm going to respond by saying this. And so that might be something like. Like I said, I'm currently at kinship placement, so I have a family member living with me, and that family member might say to me. Yea, Chris and I hate living here, this place is stupid. Well, I know that that's coming and that hurts my feelings. So I create a narrative in my head. Hey, that really hurts my feelings but listen, it sounds like you're feeling really frustrated right now. Why don't you take a minute and and we'll talk. Now, what that does is I already had the narrative in my mind. So instead of responding back to that rejection with my own feeling of childhood rejection, I am now responding with the narrative. It still might hurt my feelings, but I have set a boundary. I've let the child know, hey, it really hurts my feelings when you say that. Why don't you take a minute and we can talk. Now what that's done is that that's left the door open. So what we've noticed is then that child is able to come back and say, sorry, I said I hate living here. I was feeling so sad about my mom right now. I was just missing my sister, you know, whatever that. But you've now left the door open instead of what I tend to do, which is yell back at people. That's just my natural response. So when I understand my natural response, I can begin to make steps toward doing things in a way that help my child heal.

[00:18:26.715] - Lisa Qualls

Well, understanding childhood trauma is so important to you that you and Mike have written a new book and I would love to talk about the book. It's called Securely Attached How Understanding Childhood Trauma Will Transform Your Parenting. And I mean, just reading the chapter titles will pull anybody in because you've laid it out beautifully, I think, in a way that just makes a lot of sense. And but I'm curious why this book? Why right now? Why why did you and Mike write this?

[00:19:00.015] - Kristin Berry

We actually published this with Moody publishers and the idea was their idea. So the publisher came to us and said, "What about a parent handbook? What about parent to parent idea on creating healthy attachments?" To be perfectly honest, I spent months saying absolutely not. I am not writing that. And the reason is, there are plenty of awesome books out there. We really kind of thought, well, isn't the market already saturated with that idea? What do we have to say? We're not medical experts. We're not therapists. How can we write a book that's authentic to who we are? And so finally we settled on this this title. I like the tagline How Understanding Childhood Trauma Will Transform Your Parenting. We spent like a solid month arguing about that tagline and finally settling on that. And the reason is that words are so important. And we wanted to put something out there that expressed exactly what it is. So woul an adult adoptee read this and maybe find it helpful? I don't know. Our audience is parents, and the concept behind it is that we wanted to write a book that felt like the way that we talked to other adoptive and foster parents. And so pre-pandemic, Mike and I are the kind of people who would sit down for a cup of coffee with someone and listen to what was happening. We would say something like, "Wow, that seems really hard. And I'm sure you're feeling really sad about how things are turning out in your home. I'm sure you didn't expect this behavior to happen. Here's an idea. What if you tried something different? What if you understood yourself differently? What if you understood your child differently?" And so really, what we tried to do in writing the book then was to take those topics and answer them in a way that we would answer them if we were to sit at a coffee shop, having a little chat and talking about what it's like to be a foster and adoptive parent. And the experience comes from twenty years of parenting. It comes from doing a lot of wrong things. And so the idea behind expert has always made us uncomfortable because our feeling is we're not. We want to talk to other parents and say, if you could do this differently today, you might not have the regret that we have 15 years later or 20 years later. And so a lot of what we write comes from that understanding later of looking back and saying, "Oh, my gosh, if I had only known what my child

experienced and why they were behaving that way, I wouldn't have sent them to head start." That's one that I deeply regret all the time. And that particular child is now 20 years old and has forgiven me for taking her to Head Start. But it is something that comes up all the time when I think back to her three year old self and the Department of Child Services telling me we had to go to Head Start and ripping her off my body every morning to go to Head Start and thinking about that, that fear that was involved in that whole situation. I go back and change it. Should your kid go to Head Start? I don't really know. Maybe you have an awesome head start and your kid is going to love it. But in our home, we then look back at these situations and say, "If I knew today or if I knew then what I know today" I would have evaluated every single thing we did differently.

[00:22:43.035] - Lisa Qualls

Such a good point. What about the parent who you're sitting across the table with your coffee and they're like, they say "You know what? I think I've messed up so much that this ship has sailed. I don't think I can turn it around." What if their kids are already teens or even young adults and they have so much regret they feel like maybe all hope is lost?

[00:23:09.795] - Kristin Berry

I would say two things. One, it's OK to grieve. In fact, I do a significant amount of grieving even as I brought up the Head Start situation, and I kinda wish I wouldn't have brought it up because it chokes me up to think about participating in something that was so hard and sad for my kid. So it's OK to grieve. It's OK to say "If I could go back and do this differently, I would." And the reason I say that is because I think we often feel forced to skip past those feelings. We must find healing. We must have an answer. We must move forward. And the truth is, sometimes we have deep regret over choices that we've made even as parents, especially as parents. So grieve that. If you're grieving it, grieve it. Write it down in a journal, write it to your child. If you have a young adult child and something comes up to you and you say, "Gosh, I'm just thinking about that time that I made you go to preschool and you were so scared, I want to let you know I'm really sorry about that. I would have done that differently." You know, it's 2020 right now. Everybody has a phone. Everybody has a way to text. Your child may not answer you. Your child may say, "Hey, I don't care about preschool. But when I was a teenager, you really hurt me when you responded to me having sex with my boyfriend. You really lost your mind and freaked out and I felt terrible. And that's why I'm really mad at you." That's OK. If they come back and say you really handled that poorly, sometimes you might want to talk about that. "Hey, I'm really sorry I was scared for you, but I'm sorry I made you feel bad about yourself." You may have a kid that just ignores you. That's OK. Put that message out there. So first, go ahead and grieve, and second, apologize. I find that Mike and I are in a place of apology an awful lot right now. And that's for past things as well as, "Hey, five minutes ago when I just yelled at you about the laundry, I recognize that you struggle with the executive processing and I shouldn't have yelled at you. I should have used a different skill. I'm really sorry. From now on, I'm going to write it down on a piece of paper." Oh, and thirdly, I don't know if this goes in this category or not, but we are big believers in not only understanding ourselves as parents, understanding our children, but also teaching our children to understand themselves. So a word like executive processing. I have a couple of kids that struggle with executive processing. So that's our brains ability to get from point A to point B to point C to point D to make goals, to plan ahead. And that could be everything from putting two socks on instead of just one and getting distracted and fixing a bowl of cereal and then getting distracted by that and dancing in front of the mirror. So executive processing is what gets me up on time in the morning and gets me to an interview with all my clothes on, including two socks. If I know that my child struggles with executive processing, I'm going to tell my child what that means so that they have the tools. And the reason that I say that too is, we're raising adults, they're not going to be children forever. I also know what my strengths and weaknesses are, and when I know them, I am empowered to use resources. So I would say for that parent who is feeling like, "I've gone too far a mess this up." In your apology, put a name to the things that happened. We may not have thought to teach our kids about trauma 20 years ago. I didn't know, but with my older children, I try to put some words to those things now. "When your dad died, that was traumatic. And I didn't know how to help you through that situation. I'm sorry that I didn't support you well." We're putting some words to that, and our child may come back and push back at that concept, but we've now put a few words into their vocabulary. So we might say something like, "You felt really sad. I wonder if you felt really lonely. I wonder if you felt really abandoned by me. I wonder if I really hurt you when I responded that way." Our child might say

something back, like, "I didn't feel sad. I felt pissed off." That's OK. You've now opened the door up to that conversation. So I would say to the parent, to who is feeling like this is too far, this relationship is never going to be mended, I'm there. I get that. I definitely feel that way. And then I remember that we have our whole life ahead of us and that nothing is lost, healing is always possible and that I can keep that door open for that child that that I've participated in a damaging relationship with. And, gosh, that that's a place I am all the time. So it is never too late to apologize, to make things right and to try to do things differently.

[00:28:22.425] - Lisa Qualls

I agree so much. I have a lot of young adults and I, I definitely think that these young adult years in particular are years of lots of apologies, because you know what? You and I have both been parents a long time and we've had the benefit of learning from so many people. And still we mess up. We just do. And so I'm with you on that. Another thing you said, Kristin, that really was a little bit of a light bulb moment for me, is using the right language and even diagnostic language with our kids to help them understand themselves. I think for years I felt almost like I had to protect my kids from their diagnoses. And then I had an experience with one of my kids where I said, "You know, I think that might happen because maybe I've never mentioned this to you, but you have an auditory processing disorder, which means that your brain, it functions a little differently from other people in terms of how it processes things that you hear." And I could see this sense of understanding done in my child and maybe some shame even start to fall away. But as you're talking, I'm thinking I need to do this a whole lot more because my kids are all teens now and they need this language. And it's, you know, it's information about themselves that can actually help them. So I appreciate you bringing that up. Thank you.

[00:29:55.215] - Kristin Berry

Thank you.

[00:29:57.005] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, that's good, that's good stuff. Well, as we wrap up this interview, is there anything that you want to be sure parents hear from you before we close?

[00:30:10.775] - Kristin Berry

Yeah, I would like parents to know you are the exact right parent at this moment. You can do this. You have the strength to do this, to be a better parent. And if you have found yourself in a realization that what you've done is wrong, it's not too late to change. And it is absolutely possible to connect with our children. It is absolutely possible to heal alongside of our children, and it's absolutely possible to create strong attachments with our kids.

[00:30:47.615] - Lisa Qualls

Those are such hopeful words. So, Kristin, thank you so much for spending some of your morning with me. I've really enjoyed getting to do that.

[00:30:55.865] - Kristin Berry

Thank you for having me.

[00:31:02.225] - Melissa Corkum

I really enjoyed that conversation with Kristin. She has so much wisdom and she has such a great sense of humor, just about everything their family has been through. She said something that really struck me towards the beginning of the conversation. She talked about this kind of hesitancy to get her own therapist and work through her own issues. And she talks about like, what if I get stuck there and I can't get out? And as an Enneagram seven who really struggles with, like the negative range of emotions, I have had that exact sentiment before about exploring hard things. I even have had this sentiment of like, what if I get rid of, like, my anxiety? What if my anxious energy is what fuels like everything that I do. And what if I get rid of it and then I'm not as effective as I am or what, all these what ifs about. You know, it's just scary to go back to your past. So anyway, I really appreciated her honesty about that. All that to say I still am a huge advocate and fan, I think we all need to have a good therapist in our back pocket.

[00:32:01.415] - Lisa Qualls

Yes. And I will say that there are therapists that pushes me to get beyond my own hesitancy due to my Enneagram number, where I just don't want to take the time for the big feelings. I just want to keep moving forward. So therapy is a good thing. We highly recommend it. So you can find Mike and Kristin's newest book at any place where books are sold. It is titled *Securely Attached: How Understanding Childhood Trauma Will Transform Your Parenting*. You can also find them on their website honestlyadoption.com. We also have other episodes where they have been our guests that are also great interviews. We will have links to those in the show notes and all of the places you can find them. And lastly, a new thing, we will also have a transcript of this episode with the show notes. So you can find all of that at the adoptionconnection.com/115.

[00:32:57.065] - Lisa Qualls

Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. You can find us on Facebook or Instagram as [theadoptionconnection](https://www.instagram.com/theadoptionconnection).

[00:33:04.655] - Melissa Corkum

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a quick review over on iTunes. It will help us reach more moms who may be feeling alone.

[00:33:14.825] - Lisa Qualls

And remember until next week, you're a good mom, doing good work and we're here for you.

[00:33:21.995]

The music for the podcast is called *New Day* and was created by Lee Rosevear.