

[00:00:00.620] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast, where we offer resources to equip you and stories to inspire you on your adoption journey. I'm Lisa Qualls.

[00:00:10.320] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:18.720] - Melissa Corkum

Hey, friends, welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast, episode 143. We are at the end of an August series of episodes that all had to do with preparing your family to go back to school well. So if you've missed any of the previous episodes this month, be sure to scroll back in your favorite podcast app and catch all the August episodes as we head back into the school year. Last, but not least, for this month, we are talking about one of my favorite topics, which is the brain and specifically how brain games, as they're called, can help our kids meet some of their educational goals when it feels like just practicing or more tutoring isn't quite working.

[00:01:00.460] - Lisa Qualls

I really enjoyed my conversation with Ann Maura who's an expert on things like brain games. She has a Masters of Education and Special Education and over 25 years of teaching experience in a variety of different environments. She is a certified educational therapist in cognitive developmental therapy, and Maura works for Lifeline Children's Services, directing their post educational services for families that have children with learning differences. Here's my conversation with Ann Maura.

[00:01:36.010] - Lisa Qualls

Hello, Ann Maura, welcome to the Adoption Connection podcast.

[00:01:38.560] - Ann Maura Hinton

Hi, thanks. I'm so happy to be here.

[00:01:42.240] - Lisa Qualls

Well, I'm happy to have you here, too, because we are focusing on back to school. It's coming very soon for most of us around the country, and it's going to be different this year and hopefully a whole lot better this year. You know, kids and education is your passion. And so let's talk a little bit about these feelings families might be having as we prepare to go back to school.

[00:02:08.020] - Ann Maura Hinton

Yeah, sure. You know, as a teacher, I love preparing for the first day back to school because there's just excitement. There's a sparkle and the kids eyes. It's just a lot of fun, you know, to welcome the kids back to the classroom, especially after this past year. But also, there can be, you know, as a mom who have had children who has struggled and worked with kids that struggle, I do see that there's a fear that builds up in families as well, too, of just not knowing what to expect. I mean, there's so many transitions, you know, you're always wondering, am I going to get the right teacher? Is the teacher going to get my child? Am I going to get my child if I'm home schooling my child? You know, so there's just a lot of different feelings that pop up at the beginning of school. It can be fun, but it can also be hard as well.

[00:03:04.990] - Lisa Qualls

And do you think that families who have kids with lots of early adversity, you know, most of our listeners are adoptive and foster families, so we're parenting kids who have maybe some unique needs. Do you think that affects how families approach the school year?

[00:03:21.960] - Ann Maura Hinton

Sure, I do. I mean, we do know, you know, I love to dabble in the brain and how the brain is developed and the science part of it. And so we do know, because of science, that adversity, children from hard places, children that come from vulnerable situations, that there are areas in the brain that may or may not have been developed the way God meant them to be developed. That can affect our cognitive development, our ability to learn. And so I do think that that is something, you know, that

teachers and families, you know, I need to be aware of.

[00:04:03.840] - Lisa Qualls

Absolutely. And it really helps when people understand that about our kids. You know, we live with them and we know them so well. But every year with new teachers, you know, there may be people who don't understand our kid's unique needs. In terms of returning to school, what are some tips you can give our listeners and their families as we're all getting ready to go back?

[00:04:28.900] - Ann Maura Hinton

There's so many transitions, you know, in thinking about going back to school. And we know that our kids sometimes tend to struggle with transitions. And so, you know, just some practical things that I think of are, you know, let's prepare the kids for transitions, let's prepare them for that schedule change. Let's go ahead and start practicing and even role playing if we need to what it looks to get like to get up at 7:30 in the morning or even earlier and making that transition to the classroom. We may even want to be able to go and see if we can visit the school and make a visit before the first day of school. We do have meet the teacher, but is it possible that we could Zoom to get to an opportunity to see that teachers face, to talk to them. And, you know, transitions, those type of things are just so important for our kids to make that adjustment back to school. I also think, you know, I look and I think, oh, just don't don't be afraid to let your kids ask questions. And don't be afraid not to know the answer. I mean, we tend to, as parents, we tend to want to get it all right and you have our expectations and different things like that. But it's okay to say, hey, I'm not sure, but let's find out. Don't be afraid to let your kids to ask questions to figure out what's going on. And again, set some short term goals. They don't have to all be long term goals, but set some just short term goals. Hey, tomorrow we're going to pack lunch, what's a healthy lunch gonna look like? You know, we're gonna do that together and enjoy spending that time with your kids. Make that connection. We always talk about connections, you know, making those connections with your kids is, I think it just is so important as we prepare to go back. So those are just some quick, quick little tools that I have found to be helpful.

[00:06:25.850] - Lisa Qualls

I love the idea of actually practicing packing lunch. I mean, it's great because lunch can be, you know, if a child gets to school and they've been eating at home all summer and you pack them a lunch that, you know, is perfectly fine school lunch, but it feels unfamiliar to them, if they don't eat, then you've got a child who hasn't eaten, who is low blood sugar, and the rest of the day is just not going to go very well. So wouldn't it be a fun idea, like maybe the whole week before school that pack lunches every morning and everybody eats their lunch out of their bag or their lunch box that they can get used to it? I think that's such a good idea.

[00:07:02.720] - Ann Maura Hinton

Yeah. Another thing I found to be really helpful for kids who, you know, maybe even have a little bit of that separation anxiety that pops up is, and a lot of our kids are sensory prone and need that sensory input, we have found that, I mean, there's just different, multiple, different things that you can do, but, you know, even getting a piece of felt and cutting a little heart out together and letting them have that piece of felt that you have given them, that heart that you have given them, stick it in their pocket and talk about, hey, when you start missing, mom, just stick your hand in your pocket and there's my heart. It's right there for you to touch, and that gives them something to fidget with, but it also is that reminder to them that, hey, Mom's there. She may not physically be there, but she's with me. You know, she's thinking about you, she's praying for you. Just to give them something also to kind of feed that sensory need that some of our kids may go to school that they have.

[00:08:09.300] - Lisa Qualls

I like that. I like that, just a reminder that we aren't forgetting them just because they've gone out the door to school. They're still in our hearts, are still in our minds, we're still connected. So that's a really lovely thing. I know, even when I home schooled, the week before we got back to actual school work, we started transitioning back into a school schedule of getting up earlier, or at least all kind of at the same time, of having breakfast at the same time, of doing our early morning chores, or, you know, because I didn't want the first year of school to be such a shock to their systems, you know. What

kinds of routines would you suggest families maybe start implementing in that week before or even earlier?

[00:08:56.830] - Ann Maura Hinton

Right, yeah. I think that is an excellent, I mean, for any child. A schedule and a visual schedule is so important, but I would recommend, especially for my home school families, you know, we sit down, and we create that schedule together. And I want to make sure to moms to say, hey, make sure you're also scheduling some self care time in there for you as well. Hey, if that laundry needs to be changed out and that's something that you're incorporating into your day, go ahead and schedule it, you know, hey, this is mom chore time. You know, this is your chore time or, these are the expectations and really talk with your kids through that and prepare that schedule. Not that you're handing them the schedule, but they're having the opportunity to have a voice in that schedule as well, too, even have a little bit of control of that schedule. So you're implementing it together. But I would highly recommend doing that not, you know, the day school starts, but go ahead and again, practice it. Kind of like that lunch thing. Go ahead and practice it be talking about it before you just implement it, you know?

[00:10:13.340] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, definitely. I know that change is hard for all kids. Well, usually. There are those kids who just love it. I have one daughter like that, but for the most part, change can be hard. And for our kids whose brains have been impacted by adversity and trauma, it's especially hard. I think all of this practice is a great idea.

[00:10:38.020] - Ann Maura Hinton

Yeah. I love the verse, I think it's James 1:4, talks about your steadfastness, being, just to be steadfast. It takes time, it takes patience, and it's ongoing, you know. And so I would also, you know, be careful to say, hey, you're not gonna get it perfect the first time. We live in a broken world, and it's gonna be constantly changing and change is hard, but even, you know, accepting that and not being afraid, afraid of change as well, too, because I think us personally, as moms, as teachers, you know, what we say, what we think, how we feel is also impacting how our kids think, what they say, and how they feel. And so they can sense that in us. You know, go ahead and you know, just know that it takes time. Change takes time, it's a process. It's not going to happen overnight and to be okay with that.

[00:11:38.680] - Lisa Qualls

I think, too, you're alluding a little bit to the fact that our brains and our kids brains are connected in a sense. And so the more we can do to keep our anxiety about the changes down, the better for our kids. One of the things when my kids started attending school, I wasn't used to, I was used to spending a huge amount of time gathering curriculum and things for home schooling, but when my kids went to school, all of a sudden I had to pick up that supply list and get all of it. And I live in a college town, and so we have one Walmart. And so not only are all the school kids and all of their supply list needing to be filled, but then you got all the students returning. So I would wait too long because I just wasn't used to thinking about that. So I learned to get that list as soon as possible and really, as much as possible, online order it. Don't get into the crazy frenzy in the store aisles. And already another thing that would catch me by surprise because it was new to me with sports physicals for middle schoolers and high schoolers. So I was quite proud of myself because I scheduled my son sport physical a few months ago, and we did it yesterday. So there was a no August panic this year.

[00:12:55.920] - Ann Maura Hinton

Yay, good.

[00:12:58.440] - Lisa Qualls

And they're not even supposed to go to the first practice without it. So any parents listening out there, if you get ahead of the game on sports physicals, on vaccinations, if you need to catch up on those, and get those school supplies, don't wait till the end. You know, if you want to take your kids to pick out something special, a binder or a lunch box or whatever, do it. But don't try to get the whole list with your kids.

[00:13:23.990] - Ann Maura Hinton
Right, yeah. One, in one day.

[00:13:27.230] - Lisa Qualls
Yeah, and the day before.

[00:13:30.690] - Ann Maura Hinton
Or the night before, yeah.

[00:13:32.840] - Lisa Qualls
We need to stay calm to help our kids stay calm, so.

[00:13:36.530] - Ann Maura Hinton
Yes, so true.

[00:13:38.150] - Lisa Qualls
Okay, so one of your specialties is brain games, and we really want to hear about what are brain games, how can they help our kids, tell us everything we want to know.

[00:13:54.520] - Sarah
Hey, this is Sarah. I'm briefly interrupting this episode to make sure you know about an upcoming support group for adoptive teams that I'm facilitating. As an adoptee, I'm passionate about supporting adopted teens because I wish I had had a group like this when I was younger. During this eight week session, teens will explore the seven core issues of adoption, learn better ways to respond to other's adoption related questions, even the more insensitive one, have an opportunity to process their personal adoption journey, and hear from one another in a supportive and collaborative way. We get started on September 23, so for more information or to sign your teen up, head to theadoptionconnection.com/teen. Now back to the episode.

[00:14:41.090] - Lisa Qualls
What are brain games, how can they help our kids, tell us everything we want to know.

[00:14:46.230] - Ann Maura Hinton
Yeah. Yeah, well brain games, I do love talking about the brain and I do love to help families and kids just move from that sense of frustration to hope. I mean, that's kind of the goal. And I see brain games as one of those tools to be able to help do that. Brain games is, they're basically, they're games that are tailored to kind of meet a specific cognitive, social, emotional, or cognitive developmental need that a child may have. So that's a lot of big words, I guess, you know, and so but when we think of the cognitive skills, we think about what skills children need to be able to think and to be able to learn. And I would even couple on there that I have a desire for children to love learning because it's an ongoing process. We're never out of the learning process. I mean, even as an adult, we're always learning. And I just would love for kids to enjoy that and find joy in that. I grew up going to school, but I grew up as a struggling learner. And so I really did not identify I didn't love school until someone actually encouraged me to look into my learning differences and to figure out how I could strengthen and some of those areas that I had struggled in all those years. And the world just blossomed, it just opened up, and so I really love to see that happen and I love to equip and strengthen others to be able to see that in their children as well and we know that that's possible. And so brain games is a tool. It's a strategy to help to be able to equip and strengthen and shepherd that child emotionally, that child academically, and that child relationally. So we do that through playing games that strengthen processing speed. We do that through playing games that strengthen auditory processing and visual processing, logic and reasoning skills and all of those cognitive skills that I just mentioned impact that academic core and impact your performance in the classroom or at home or in your reading skills and your math skills. And so we focus on those skills that we can strengthen so that it impacts what the kids are doing in the classroom.

[00:17:19.060] - Lisa Qualls
Okay. Can you give us some examples of some brain games? And also, as I'm listening, I'm thinking,

okay, let's say a listener is hearing this episode right when it's coming out, and there's a little bit of time before school. Are there brain games we could be doing with our children in preparation for heading into the school year? And I know we're talking about wide range of ages and things, but just give us a couple of ideas.

[00:17:47.580] - Ann Maura Hinton

So, you know, there's different names, different titles for brain games. There's programs called Cognitive Fitness, there's programs called educational Therapy, there's programs called brain games, cognitive developmental curriculums that are out there. So there's a wide variety, but one that is very simple, you can get off Amazon, called Blink. So Blink is a card game, and on Blink, it's a fast paced game, but we like to back it up. That's the important thing with all these brain games is sometimes we just like to read the directions and play it. And then that's when we see the frustration happen, right? Because sometimes some of our kids don't necessarily aren't as fast as somebody else. And so what I encourage families to do is to break it back down into smaller pieces. Baby, steps. So for Blink, for example, there is a shape on the card. It might be the shape of a flower. There is also a particular number of that shape, like two flowers on a card. And then there's also a color, so it may be a blue flower. So it's a card deck and you're looking at it, so you have numbers, and you have colors, and you have shapes. Well, in your brain, you see number, color, shape at different places in your brain. So you're having to use different pieces of your brain to actually say a number, color, shape. So as you play the game, you can just simply, you can use it for sorting, you can use it for timing how fast you can sort those cards, you can even do "number, color, shape" repetitively after each card. What I just mentioned, you're working on working memory, you're working on auditory processing because you're actually having to speak those things, you're working on visual processing because you're having to see those things. All those different pieces, those cognitive skills are coming together and they're firing together. We know what, you know, wires together fires together. So we're working on that in a fun environment, you know, a fun way. So that link is a, Blink is a quick, easy game that you can purchase off Amazon.

[00:20:10.110] - Lisa Qualls

Let me ask, so with Blink, it seems like you could play it on one level with young children, and it could get more complex as the children are older, it seems like something that everybody would enjoy, too, like, a quick round of blink at the dinner table or after breakfast or whatever.

[00:20:26.980] - Ann Maura Hinton

Yeah, yeah, definitely. No doubt. Yes, definitely. There are several other games that we bring up. You know, the game "Spot It." I don't know if you have Chickfila out where you are, but Chickfila carried Spot It in their kids meals for a while. But even in spot it, you can even use that in an auditory way where you're looking at a card and naming all the different items and objects you found that card and your friend has his card or her card, and she's looking and she's trying to figure out what you just said. You know, that's not even about seeing it, so that's more auditory processing. And a lot of families go, okay, well, what is auditory processing have to do with reading. Well, everything. It has to do with everything when it comes to spelling, you are hearing through your ear, and it's talking to your left side of your brain, which is your language side of your brain. So you're building and strengthening that ability to hear different sounds. Visual processing, tracking, all the different games have strengthen those areas that's going to impact your fluency and how you read across the page and not skip lines. So your Dyslexic students are being strengthened so that their eyes are able to team together and work together in the game and spot it. I mean, just by playing the game Spot It. So that's another simple, easy way to strengthen some of those cognitive skills.

[00:22:00.920] - Lisa Qualls

What about brain games for older kids? Preteens, teens even, adults?

[00:22:08.380] - Ann Maura Hinton

Yeah. Yeah. We use a variety. I actually use a curriculum that's called Cognitive Developmental Curriculum. It's by Quipping Minds, and we use that. Like you said, it's leveled at different ages. So you're constantly using your working memory, but they implement all these different pieces of, like, even Spot It for teens. There's a game called Quitch that is a great math game that you really don't

even realize you're working on that working memory and those math skills. I've got to bring in motor development as well, too, because motor development certainly impacts your cognitive development in your brain. And so there are actually reflex exercises that you can work on to help open up pathways in the brain, and you can do that through working on working memory. And so you may have arrows, these particular arrows that you're following, and they may be left and right, and you're actually up moving to the right, moving to the left. A lot of your kids that struggle with Dyslexic tendency, to be honest with you, they have a hard time crossing that midline. And so implementing exercises such as skipping or even taking your right elbow and hitting your left knee, crossing over to a particular beat is really strengthening the ability to cross that midline, and it's going to impact your ability to read again. And so those are even things that I think as far as adults and teens, it's great to get out there and just play and to really look at those reflexes and to figure out what games, you know, you're talking about sports earlier, you know, wonderful way to build those reflexes and those cognitive skills as well, too. So, so many different things, even the simpler games that you don't think that would seem more for kids that are younger can be implemented for kids that are older as well, too. I have 15, 16, 17 year olds working through some of these brain games, and we have a great time, you know, playing some of these simple games like Blink and Spot It and different things like that.

[00:24:42.560] - Lisa Qualls

I love that. You know, my daughter, Anna Rose, has been living and working in Mexico, and she carries Spot It with her when she goes to visit families and things, because even if you don't speak the same language now, she is fluent in Spanish, but even without that, you can play games like that with people, even if you don't share a common language.

[00:25:06.270] - Ann Maura Hinton

Oh, yeah. You know, it's so interesting, I have had the opportunity to travel, and it's so funny going through customs and opening up the suitcase, because there's all the brain games. There's Spot It, there's Blink, there's Arrows in there, there's a game I call Stair Junior, which is great for visual processing and working memory, and there's no language barriers, it's great. I love to watch Tangrams, I mean, Tangrams. Kids love to put those pieces together and make puzzles and different things like that. And so you really get to open up a whole new door talking about attachment and connection. It's wonderful because you have that opportunity to build that with kids internationally.

[00:25:51.360] - Lisa Qualls

Okay. Before we wrap up, talk about how these games and playing these games with our kids can build connection and attachment.

[00:26:04.030] - Ann Maura Hinton

Well, I mean, I think it's basically time. You are taking time to sit down and play. You know, we talk about, I mean, Karen Purvis' playful engagement, TBRI, that's the first step in engagement is to sit down and play. And if the kids are seeing you, you know, they're not even realizing they're actually working on the cognitive skills because they have the opportunity to engage with you and make that connection and just enjoying that time with you. So setting aside that time and that connection, even through COVID, we worked with kids through Zoom even before Zoom became popular and folks asked us, how did that work? And I was like, you know, there's something about, I know it's through the computer, but there's something about that one on one connection that you're making. One of our tutors was working with a little girl out in California, and she's in Georgia, and this little girl adopted from, I forget, maybe I'm not sure, maybe China. And the little girl looked at her and said, Miss Yvonne, will you be in my wedding one day? You know, Yvonne is 60 and Kaley is ten, you know, so it was just a real sweet connection to even watch those connections being built, you know? And she probably, she loves her, you know? So I love to see that relationship. And that's what education really is all about. I mean, we do say a lot about that they've got to meet this standard and that standard, but really, it's about building relationships and that student-teacher relationship and that parent-child relationship is going to help those children that do struggle to know that they are created in God's image and God is helping them to become the men and women he created them to be. And so I think brain games is a tool and a path to making that happen.

[00:28:18.090] - Lisa Qualls

I love that. Now, if parents want to learn more, where can they find more information on Brain Games?

[00:28:25.920] - Ann Maura Hinton

Yeah, I would send them to lifelinechild.org or to equippingminds.com. They can contact me, and I'd be happy to fill them in, give them resources, point them in the right path and for whatever they may need. But I would be happy to help them get connected to the resources in their area. We do a screening process which does help us to understand kind of what's underneath the academic struggles that their children are feeling. So that kind of helps them to navigate what brain games to use to strengthen those areas to impact what's going on in the classroom. And so that's helpful as well. But I'd be happy to connect with anybody if you have any questions about what that looks like, I'll be happy to connect.

[00:29:22.740] - Lisa Qualls

Okay, for all of you who are driving while listening to this, don't worry. We will have links to everything in the show notes so that you can find these resources. And, you know, even though my boys are teens, I'm listening to you and thinking, I need to be more playful. And anybody who's listened for a long time knows that that's something that I kind of struggle with. It's important, it's not just about having fun, it's about so much more. It's about connection, it's about our kids brains and development. So anyhow, this is just a super encouraging conversation. Thank you so much Ann Maura, and I appreciate you being here.

[00:30:00.280] - Ann Maura Hinton

Well, thank you. And I appreciate all that you do as well, too. So thank you very much, it's been a pleasure.

[00:30:11.600] - Melissa Corkum

I am so grateful for that conversation, Lisa. I, well, it's no secret that sometimes it's hard for me to play with my kids. As they get a little bit older and my brain keeps thinking they should be more and more independent, and we have one particular child who really just still needs like these brain games were built for kids like this kid. I don't know what it is, but brain science is really motivating to me. So as I listened to Ann Maura talk, I just thought, I need to get back to these games that challenge working memory and cognitive function and all of these things. So I dusted off some things that we already owned in our house that are designed for cognitive development and are fun. And also, we have a small grant program in our county that we can use for educational materials or different things. And so I have already purchased the curriculum that Ann Maura mentioned with all the different games, so I am newly motivated to jump into all of the brain games in this new school year.

[00:31:17.500] - Lisa Qualls

That is so great. I'm really happy to hear that. Well, for those of you listening, you can find links for the games and the curriculum Ann Maura mentioned in today's show notes, as well as information about how to find out more about lifelines educational services. We recommend you go to lifelinechild.org and look for the link for Bridge Educational services. So all of the links will be in the show notes for today's episode at theadoptionconnection.co/143.

[00:31:49.440] - Melissa Corkum

Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. You can find us on Instagram as [@theadoptionconnection](https://www.instagram.com/theadoptionconnection), or better yet, join our free Facebook community at [theadoptionconnection.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/theadoptionconnection).

[00:32:03.270] - Lisa Qualls

Thanks so much for listening, we love having you. And remember you're a good parent, doing good work.

[00:32:12.000] - Melissa Corkum

The music for the podcast is called New Day and was created by Lee Rosevere