

[00:00:01.390] - 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.

[00:00:10.410] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:18.810] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to this month's Mailbag episode where we answer your questions. Our first question today is about visitation with birth family.

[00:00:27.510] - Speaker 1

Hi, my question is about our son's relationships with their birth parents. They are three and five and were adopted locally from the foster care systems. They have not seen their birth parents in about two and a half years. We have had some very mixed opinions on what is a good idea in regards to visiting and relationship, with most of those opinions being no, that it's not a good idea. And I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about the pros and cons that you've experienced and what to do when the bio parents aren't always in the healthiest place and when your kids are young and we don't want them to be more confused, even though we talk about their stories frequently. We just don't want to trigger them just because they already are working through so many different things. We just appreciate any insights you have. Thank you.

[00:01:27.570] - Lisa Qualls

Well, first of all, I have to say I really appreciate this question. Actually, the first thing I really want to say is I really appreciate that we had a listener who called in and spoke her question so that we could hear it in her own voice. That was wonderful. Secondly, I really appreciate this question because it's something that's important to Melissa and I, both as adoptive moms, but also with me as a birth mom and Melissa as an adoptee. We talk about these things quite a lot. And I guess I want to say that I think there's something openhearted about even asking the question, especially when you've had people discourage you from doing visitation. So I wish we were having a real conversation because I'd love to know who the people are that are discouraging you. Are they professionals? Are they family members? I think a lot of times as parents and people who love our kids extended family, we don't want to do anything that might make life feel harder, that might make our children upset. We want to keep things as smooth as possible, which actually, I'm very much like that. So it's in my nature not to want to make things more difficult. It's okay for our kids to have big feelings because we're big enough and strong enough to help them with their big feelings. And not all kids are going to have big feelings either. So I'll let Melissa address that more, but I want to talk a little bit about options. I mean, there are so many options here in terms of visitation. And I think as a mom and as parents that we need to kind of get a good sense of the situation. Are these parents truly, truly unsafe? Well, that's one thing you have to answer that question. If you want to get to know the parents and really have a good sense of whether a visit with them is going to be okay for your kids, I would start with a visit just between the parents. You don't need to bring the children. Get together with them, hear what they have to say, hear their hearts, talk about how the kids are doing. Take them some pictures and you get to know them. So if after meeting them and you feel that they will be safe people for your kids, then I would talk really specifically with them about what a visit could look like and encourage them about these would be great things to talk about. Really, what your kids need to hear is that they are loved, that you've always loved them. Developmentally, your children that we're talking about right now are really young. So I think if you can encourage them to just be loving and playful, and if they can start associating some positive memories with these birth parents, I think that would be great. They're so young. This isn't really the time to dig into deep, hard stuff. But I would answer the kids questions as they come up, of course. I would also say if you need to meet with them a couple of times before you're ready to do the visit, that's okay. Really, for better and worse, as the adoptive parents, you hold all of the power and the birth parents hold none. They have absolutely no rights, and that's a really sad and scary place to be if they love their kids. So, yeah, I think that really getting to know them a bit, establishing what the visit is going to look like, keep it very simple. Keep it short. Meet at a park for 1 hour or meet for ice cream and spend 1 hour. Like I would tell the birth parents from the beginning, put those boundaries in place because you never know. They may feel a little overwhelmed

emotionally and not want to make it a long visit, or they may feel a little desperate for more. So as long as you're really clear from the beginning about expectations and boundaries, I think there's a lot of good that could happen. Melissa, what do you think?

[00:05:23.250] - Melissa Corkum

You mentioned your kids are young and that you didn't want to confuse them more. And the first thing that came to my mind was a lot of kids that have early trauma and then especially kids that age, are just really concrete. And so I actually think that having concrete contact with birth parents, again, whether it's short visits or maybe it could start with a slower form of communication, like sharing pictures and cards and letters and drawings that your kids make or even I know technology is not ideal, but a short FaceTime or Zoom meeting, if that's something your kids enjoy doing. I know our three year old granddaughter is all about talking to people on FaceTime right now. But I think actually having concrete contact with them actually makes it less confusing and helps them put together the pieces of their story. I do also think that it's easy for us to say that big feelings are our kids being triggered, which I think can be true. But I also think as a culture, we don't do a great job of handling kids' big feelings. I know that historically I haven't always done a great job of it, and it's something I'm working on. And as we are helping to raise our granddaughter, I'm seeing the benefit of kids who have adults who can stick with them in their big feelings. Reading a lot of work around ambiguous loss as an adoptee, and there hasn't been a great place in our culture for some of these big feelings around ambiguous loss. And I actually think it's probably great for our kids, especially at these young ages, to be able to have those experiences and process those feelings with safe adults, you know, you as an adoptive parent, and have processing those big feelings be normalized at these young ages, I think is super helpful. Because let me tell you, as an adoptee in her 30s, almost 40s, who's trying to learn how to process big feelings, it's a lot harder to teach the old dog new tricks. And so I do think our kids are so open with their emotions and they're learning from us what to do with those emotions. We have such a privilege as adopted parents to be able to create really safe places for our adopted kids as they kind of process their stories.

[00:08:02.170] - Lisa Qualls

I think the other thing this question brings to mind for me is even though I've been a Christian for many, many years, I often go back to the very basics of to love my neighbors myself, and to think, if I were those birth parents, what would I want? What would I hope for? What would I need? And then ask yourself, what can I offer to meet that need? Try to put yourself in their minds, which I think you already are. I can already hear that you care about this connection between your children and their first parents, so I think you're already on the right path. It's just figuring out what your best next steps are. Thanks for such a great question.

[00:08:42.930] - Melissa Corkum

Our next question comes from Andrew, and he said, "I get really angry and upset when our recently adopted four year old slaps bites, hits and kicks my wife on occasion, typically during discipline. If you experience this, how are you and your spouse able to work through this both physically and mentally? He's only been with us for four months." So because this was a dad question about specifically something that we've heard from a lot of dads is a really hard thing to do, which is witness our kids being either disrespectful or physically aggressive towards a spouse, especially dads witnessing this against moms, we thought we would phone a teammate and ask Greg to weigh in on this. Greg Rea is the dad on our team who runs the dad only groups in the Village. And so here's what Greg had to share.

[00:09:44.130] - Greg Rea

I am so sorry for your struggle, how frustrating and maybe even painful this is. In our culture, dads are expected to protect our spouses and the other family members, so this kind of behavior can lead to two primary responses on a dad's part. One is the fight response, which makes us want to get big and scary to shut this down now. Or maybe it's our flight response because we have no clue what to do, we feel trapped. This is all so overwhelming. I want to start with the why for this behavior, and then let's look at a couple of options for responding the why. It's oversimplified, but human brains can be divided into two systems. The connection system, which makes us want to get close to people and be connected to people and love on them and be loved by them, and the protection system. When we

feel a threat, we might go into fight or flight. Our little ones are supposed to spend the first years of their life in connection brain because their needs are being met over and over again by healthy, loving adults. Instead, our kids experienced early trauma, abuse, neglect, abandonment, and that means that your child spent most of his early years in protection brain. And so his protection brain system muscle got very strong because it was used so often and his connection system is relatively weak. He has a weak connection system, so even though you are wonderful, loving parents, he doesn't know that. His brain doesn't register it. He doesn't know that you are safe and trustworthy. So he is always a microsecond away from dropping into protection brain. And for your son, that looks like hitting verbal abuse, refusing to obey. From what I've seen in numerous families, the children who act out of protection brain, it's not unusual for them to focus that on their moms. It's difficult to know for sure, but it might be that it was a birth mom or another female who abused or neglected the child, and so this is residual anger and residual fear that might be coming out as aggression. It's also the case that mom is an easy target because mom is always there. Mom has primary care, so that's a possibility too. Three quick ideas to a complex problem. You mentioned discipline. In parts of the traditional parenting world, discipline is a code word for punishment, and most common forms of traditional discipline can trigger the feelings that our children had in their early trauma, and it can trigger their protection system. So we have to remember, discipline means teaching. Challenging behaviors, misbehavior needs to be dealt with but the appropriate response is to teach the good behavior. In many homes, secondly, in many homes, this aggressive behavior happens during transitions when the child is moving from one activity that they're enjoying and feel safe in to an activity that may not feel as safe. Feeling unsafe puts them into protection brain. Cindy Lee from the Halo Project in Oklahoma has a great video on helping our children with transitions, so that's a good resource. Thirdly, as husbands as much as we can, if we can take on more care for our children so that not only mom gets a break, but also so that mom can actually focus more on connection and providing felt safety, more time in nurture, less time for corrections and transitions. I hope this helps. You are not alone in this situation, though, so our hearts are with you.

[00:13:55.170] - Lisa Qualls

Our next question comes from Dana, who asks, "Any advice on how to help my two daughters, biological sisters, adopted four years ago at ages four and seven, process their feelings about not having photos from early childhood. I have two older biological children with birth stories and pictures, infants, et cetera. The younger two deal with jealousy and grief that they don't have. That the very limited bit of info we have on their early years is mature content that they will learn when they're much older."

[00:14:24.870] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, well, first of all, this is a thing for real, and it certainly happens in our family. My siblings and myself were adopted as infants, so we do have the benefit of some pretty early pictures. Ty was adopted at two and a half, and we do have the privilege of having some photos from his first two foster families. So we have pictures that go back pretty far for him. And then we have three children from Ethiopia who came to us in double digit ages and have pretty much nothing from their childhood before they came to us. We have uncovered a few pictures here and there, but they do struggle with this quite a bit. And as with all hard things with adoptees and their stories, I think the most valuable thing that we can do as adoptive parents is validate our kids and their feelings and be okay sitting with them in the hard and not feeling like we have to fix it, especially when it's kind of not fixable. It's unlikely that you're going to stumble across a vault of baby pictures from either of your girls certainly not going to be the case for our kids from Ethiopia. And so I just think there's value, we already talked about this a little earlier about helping our kids process those feelings of grief, naming it as grief, try not to get impatient when it comes up over and over again and really saying, yeah, that is really hard. And I just can't imagine having those big holes. I would also say, whatever you do have, if you haven't put together a little life book for them, I think that's helpful. And telling them as much of their story in age appropriate terms as possible, going back to those early years. And I know you said that it's mature content, but my guess is there are some things that you can pull out. What I hear from adoptees over and over and over again is when there are missing pieces, our brain is programmed to fill in those gaps with whatever information we have, or if we don't have the information, we make it up. You want to create a narrative that has enough detail to kind of have a cohesiveness from birth to how they came to you with as much information as you're willing to give. Again, an age appropriate

information. Because the thing is, even though it feels too mature and too hard, they probably witnessed it. Even if they don't have words for it, their bodies remember it, and they need help putting words to some of those things in the best way that we have. And this is also a great time to start a relationship with a really great mental health professional or therapist if you need help kind of creating that cohesive narrative for them. But I think that's really important because again, they're going to make it up if they don't have it. And sometimes what they make up is harder than what we need to share with them.

[00:17:35.730] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah. I would say, too, that if you're making an album with whatever pictures you have and maybe you don't have any, maybe you have the ones of you meeting them. And I don't think you mentioned whether your children were adopted domestically or foster care or internationally. But for international adoptions, even if we don't have early pictures, we might know this is the orphanage they were at and have a picture of that we might know this is kind of the area where you live. You might have a picture of that. So I think to add to that narrative that Melissa is talking about, we can add visual things as well, even if they aren't actually the pictures that our kids most long for. And like Melissa said, there's really nothing we can do to replace that. But our children do have a deep emotional connection to their past, and I think we want to have open conversation, like Melissa's saying. As I was listening to Melissa talk, I was thinking about one of my children who was adopted internationally, and he came home quite young, and I had these metal crosses from Ethiopia, and they're really beautiful. I had them hanging on the wall, and for some reason I was doing something, and one was sitting on the table, and he walked over to it. He was very young, and he picked it up and he held it to his chest and he started to cry. He had no explicit memory of these crosses, but there was something about it deep within himself that he remembered. We want to give our children everything we possibly can to help them fill in their early history. As for the jealousy, man, I get it. One of my daughters took pictures off the walls of her siblings who had been in our family since they were born. It's rough, and all we can do is just say, I'm really sorry, too. I wish I'd had pictures of you when you were a baby. I bet you are so beautiful and fill in some of those positive early parent feelings as much as you can.

[00:19:34.950] - Melissa Corkum

And I think the other thing, one of the things that my parents always included when they were telling us our stories was what they were experiencing before we were ever connected. So we always also heard the story of how they came to connect with us, what their hopes and dreams were, how they wanted to parent so badly, how they were so excited when they heard they had a match, when they got the phone call. So we can fill in gaps even before we actually met our kids. The other thing that we did as a kind of concrete way to kind of grieve that time we had lost with our kids is I did something called the Christmas Ornament Project years ago when our Ethiopian kids first came home. And I may have shared about this on the podcast before, but basically I rallied our friends and family and we created a sign up genius for all the years that our kids had missed because we have a family tradition of buying a Christmas ornament for each of the kids each Christmas that kind of represents something that they're into or that they like or whatever they choose, really. And all the kids that come to us at birth have like a baby's first ornament and those types of things. So we back filled all of the kids ornament boxes, starting with their birth year and then moving through to the year that they spent their first Christmas with us. And we asked because we had older kids who had lived a decade or more without us, it was quite a feat. And so we asked friends and family to kind of sponsor ornaments and sign up to do that. And we had them mail them to us and with little notes of why they had picked that ornament or why it was special to them or why they chose that year or whatever. And so now our kids all have ornament boxes that are full from their birth year to the current year. So that was really cool. And our kids, I don't think, knew how to express their appreciation. They were still English language learners and newly home, but you could kind of see it in their eyes. And even now, as they're moving on to start their own families, we have full boxes to send with them for them to start their own family tradition. So that, we can't replace the pictures but there are probably some tangible things that you could maybe backfill that are tangible like ornaments.

[00:22:01.900] - Lisa Qualls

I love hearing about that project every time you tell it. I also filled ornament boxes but not in as nearly as unique and wonderful way as you did. I just bought a whole bunch because really again it's a big

deal putting all those ornaments on the tree and my other kids had so many.

[00:22:19.890] - Melissa Corkum

It was an unusual spark of inspiration because this is not my go to normally.

[00:22:28.530] - Lisa Qualls

I know that, I'm pretty impressed. Well, good job, Melissa. You did great on that one. I feel like this is just the ongoing experiment of being adoptive parents and doing the very best that we can.

[00:22:42.240] - Melissa Corkum

So if you have a question that you would like to have us chat about here on a mailbag episode, you can do that by going to the show notes for this episode and clicking on the speak pipe widget or drop a message in our Facebook group at theadoptionconnection.com/facebook and we love gathering and answering your questions live as well. And we do that inside the village. So if you want to find out more about joining our support group meetings or Q and A's you can go to theadoptionconnection.com/village. Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our new Instagram handle is [@postadoptionresources](https://www.instagram.com/postadoptionresources) or better yet, join our free Facebook community at theadoptionconnection.com/facebook.

[00:23:35.670] - Lisa Qualls

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you and remember you're a good parent doing good work.

[00:23:43.950] - Melissa Corkum

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