

[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,

[00:00:10.290] - Melissa Corkum

and this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you. So this week, I am super excited to bring you a topic we have actually never covered here on the podcast and share a story with you. It is about embryo adoption. But before we jump into that, I have Rachel Bell with me. And so, Rachel, will you just start by introducing yourself to our audience?

[00:00:36.330] - Rachel Bell

I live in Arkansas. I have four kiddos and husband. All four of our kids joined our family through adoption. Only the youngest joined our family through embryo adoption, and he is about to celebrate his first birthday. I have worked in the realm of supporting foster and adopted families for the last ten-ish years and just right now, transitioning to opening a travel business that really specializes in making travel accessible for people with food allergies or disabilities.

[00:01:14.040] - Melissa Corkum

I'm so excited for you in that space. First of all, I love to travel. Second of all, I know it's like to travel with kids with all kinds of needs. We have some of our own food sensitivities and all the things, and it just makes it more complicated. And so it's great to know that there's someone out there who understands all of that.

[00:01:31.300] - Rachel Bell

Yes. I remember you were a speaker at the WITH Retreat, which I ran for seven years. You were our final speaker. And I remember that you had some food allergies because I used to manage all that or some food sensitivities.

[00:01:46.110] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. And I was super grateful. And it's always great when there's a place that you're going to speak and someone really, actually understands that because you'd be surprised how many times you put that on a speaker form. And I don't know who reads this form. Clearly not everybody. And we show up somewhere and I'm like, that looks really yummy. And also I probably can't eat that.

[00:02:07.220] - Rachel Bell

Right? Exactly. And it's like, oh, you want it to be gluten free? Like pick the bread off. That's not really gluten free.

[00:02:16.090] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. And also, I find that when I'm traveling, I want to be extra careful. And because I often travel and speak for work, you don't want to feel gross when you're supposed to be on.

[00:02:30.170] - Rachel Bell

Right.

[00:02:31.230] - Melissa Corkum

When you told me your adoption story when we met up in not, Arkansas, I think we were in Missouri, actually. And you told me about embryo adoption, and I, of course, knew about it. And I'm sure we have folks in our community who have done it, but I've never had the chance to really dive into that. And so I thought, podcast interview. Great story. What made you decide after ...Okay, first of all, let me back up your first three adoptions, were they foster care? Private Infant? International?

[00:03:07.950] - Rachel Bell

We adopted our first three kids through foster care. Our first two, we never came into their story until the foster care part was over. They had their parental rights terminated. And then our third child, we actually fostered him originally and then adopted him.

[00:03:28.960] - Melissa Corkum

Okay, and so then what made you decide to pursue embryo adoption for your fourth?

[00:03:34.020] - Rachel Bell

To get to how we chose embryo adoption, I have to back up just a little bit. I'll do the super fast version of all of that. But I always, so growing up, I was one of three kids and that odd number kind of bit me in the butt sometimes. I would be the one, if we're at a theme park, my mom and sister would get on a ride because she was younger. And my dad and my brother would get on a ride, and then I would ride by myself. Or we'd go horseback riding and it was like the little kids each rode with a parent. Then I rode by myself. Anytime there was a pair up, I would be by myself and I'm like, you know, this is not cool and I'm going to have an even number of kids.

[00:04:11.240] - Melissa Corkum

So I always wanted an even number of kids too.

[00:04:13.940] - Rachel Bell

So everybody has a person, right? So I decided early on, I'm talking like little kids. Like I'm having four kids. I want a lot of kids, not a ton of kids. Like a medium number of kids. Two is not enough. Six still too many. Four is my even number.

[00:04:30.420] - Melissa Corkum

That's exactly what I thought. I'm not even kidding you. We ended up with six. That's a different story, but same reason. You didn't feel like enough. Four felt like almost a little too much. But I was so set on the even number.

[00:04:42.950] - Rachel Bell

It has to be even. Yeah, right. So I started dating my husband and we started talking about family, whatever. He's a guy. He doesn't care how many kids he has. He's like, he hasn't really considered that. But I'm like, we're having four kids and he's like, okay, good to know. Four was always our number. Like we were always shooting for four. And I was three as we're going to talk about the enneagram. And so I have goals and I had that goal since I was a little kid. So four was the number. So our first two kiddos were kind of a surprise to us in that we weren't really planning to adopt. We were 24 and 23 when we met our oldest son. A friend was fostering him and we got to know him that way. Ended up really falling in love with him and we adopted him. And it wasn't like we set out to adopt or we were infertile and that's how we adopted or anything like that. We just met him, fell in love with him and adopted him. And then the same thing happened with our daughter. It was really fast. After we adopted our son, the same friend started fostering her. And we were really connected with that friend at that point because of our relationship through our son. And same thing, fell in love with her, tried to adopt. It all worked out. We went from newlyweds to a family of four really fast and really easily. It all worked out easy. Like, it all came quickly, and people would ask us where people would love to know if we couldn't have kids and why we did that. And it annoyed me at the time. It's not your business, and we don't even know if we can have kids, blah, blah, blah. And so then we had these two kids. Everything was going along. It was a lot, really fast. And so I still wanted four kids, but we wanted to slow down a little, slow the roll. So we just went along as a family of four for a few years. Then we decided we were ready to have a third. And it was like, okay, well, what do we do? Do we try to have a baby? Because that's what other people do. Do we adopt? Because that's going well. We know how much we love our kids. We know we don't need a biological child to love a child. We had the privilege of knowing what it was like to adopt, and so we're just kind of trying to figure that out. When someone called us and told us about a baby who needed a family, we decided we were going to move forward with adopting that baby. And then not too long after all that took place, we had met the birth mother, been talking to her regularly. She kind of ghosted us. And then we found out she decided to parent the baby, which was our first experience, and then we ended up having several like that. But at the time, it was very hard for us to think we were going to have a baby and then to not. And now I would tell you, like, I think that's best case scenario for that baby to be with his mama, if that's a possibility for her. I don't know that I would have been able to tell you that back then, but that happened. And then so we're back to what do we do? Do we try to have a baby?

[00:08:12.610] - Rachel Bell

Do we adopt a baby? What do we do? And then we had, let's see, three more situations where we were trying to adopt and it did not work out for whatever reason. And we had a birth mom that decided she still wanted to place her baby for adoption, but she didn't want to place her she didn't want to place her with us because we lived out of state and she wanted to find a family in her own state. That was devastating because that was even more devastating because she still placed the baby. We weren't good enough. And so we had a lot of situations like that, and this is all very complicated, but we ended up getting our home open again to foster, to adopt through foster care. And there was a specific child, just like our first two that we knew personally. We fallen in love with her. She was available for adoption. We got our home open just for her. The state ended up choosing a different family for her. We were devastated. I haven't seen her since. It was very tragic for us and I told our worker to close our home.

[00:09:19.170] - Rachel Bell

She didn't listen to me, she didn't close our home. And she called me about a month later and she said, I have this baby, he needs a foster family, but I really think it's going to end in adoption. And I thought of you guys and I know you told me to close your home, but I didn't. And do you want to foster this baby? And so ended up saying yes to her. We did foster him for eleven months and then we adopted him. And that's our third son. And so we're still going along wanting four kids. We have another situation where someone calls us, they have a baby who needs a family, and so we're going to move forward with adopting that baby as our final baby. It was a girl, we were going to have two boys and two girls and be done, and she decided to parent her baby. So after that, I just was kind of like, there's an easier way to do this. Some people just get pregnant, have a baby, it's nobody else's business, just do that. Why don't we just do that instead of going back and forth on all of these?

[00:10:24.830] - Rachel Bell

We get our hopes up and then we get our hopes dashed and the kids. So we started trying to get pregnant just because that seemed like the easier option for us at the time. We tried for a year and a half and there were no pregnancies. So I went to my doctor and I was like, we've been trying for a year and a half and I'm not pregnant. I don't have any reason to think anything's wrong. But that seems like a long time. And she's like, yeah, that's a long time, you should have come in earlier. So she did some tests and she very quickly was able to tell us that we were not going to be able to conceive a biological child. With us it was a conception issue and not a carrying issue. As soon as she explained all of that, I had heard of embryo adoption, which is perfect for someone who can't conceive but can carry or could potentially carry. I guess I didn't know if I could. So I started really looking into that and that's what got us there, like to even open the door to that, all of those things.

[00:11:39.930] - Rachel Bell

We tried to adopt, what, eight children, and we had three children and then we tried for a year to have a baby and didn't have a baby. So that's how we even got there in the first place.

[00:11:52.210] - Melissa Corkum

What is the grief and infertility journey like for an enneagram 3 who really likes to have a plan and know how things are going to work out.

[00:12:03.180] - Rachel Bell

So on the one hand, my grief was different three kids in than it would have been if we had discovered that we couldn't have a baby at the beginning when we had no kids. On the one hand, I was like, you're not sad. You have three kids. You have three kids you love and you're very grateful for your three kids and you're fine. On the other hand, I was a little frustrated because I was like, God, really? We're different than most families I know in that we would take any baby in any way or child. One of those adoptions was not a baby, it was a child. And like, why is it so hard to get to four kids whenever you would take any kid? Nothing was working out. And so I'm like, I don't know what to do and this is embryo adoption deal. It just seems like a lot to step into, not knowing if it was going to work out and honestly kind of feeling like it probably wouldn't work out because so many things had not worked out. It was scary.

[00:13:17.340] - Melissa Corkum

How sure, I mean, you just said you weren't sure. How sure are you that you were going to, I'm assuming, go through maybe a complicated process, perhaps make a financial investment to adopt an embryo, which is different than I mean, we never know what anything, what life is ever going to give us, right? But in every other adoption scenario other than embryo, like when it's finalized, there's a viable human being, whereas an embryo, I don't know exactly how it works, but I'm guessing like you could go through that entire process, adopt an embryo and then it could not take.

[00:14:04.970] - Rachel Bell

Right? I mean, that was very likely especially. We just had no idea. Well, I had several health issues which I did not still have them, but I didn't know about them when we first started embryo adoption, but I did know about them before our embryo transfer. And so it was really scary because it seemed unlikely. But we've always had the policy, my husband and I, on this journey of adoption and growing our family the last 13 years is just like, if there's an opportunity, we're just going to move forward and open our hands to what the Lord might have for us. And if it's a no, it's going to be obvious that it's a no. So we're just going to keep walking forward until the doors are closed. And I have always prayed that for each situation that we've been in, just open the doors that are supposed to be open and close the doors that are supposed to be closed, and tried to have the best attitude about whether they were closed or open. But yes, it was a lot to go through. If it had ended in this is a no.

[00:15:23.090] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. So do you adopt multiple embryos at a time in case it doesn't take? So tell us more a little bit about the process like did you use an agency?

[00:15:40.590] - Lisa Qualls

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[00:16:00.570] - Melissa Corkum

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[00:16:37.030] - Melissa Corkum

So tell us more a little bit about the process. Like did you use an agency?

[00:16:41.710] - Rachel Bell

Okay, so there are options here. We did use an agency you can match privately, like their Facebook groups where people match, to me that really opens you up to the possibility of scamming. Now, there's no money exchanging hands in these Facebook groups. Like, that's illegal and weird and not that kind of scamming, but just like there are crazy people out there that will pretend they have embryos, get your hopes up, and then not really have embryos just because they're crazy, weird internet trolls. So that kind of thing happens. There are also like fertility clinics that have remaining embryos from people, which all embryo adoption is embryos that remain after people do IVF, but they will just anonymously give embryos to people on a waitlist. And I definitely didn't want to do anything like that. Just my understanding of the adoption world and listening to adult adoptees and knowing the trauma and all of that, I'm not bringing that into my family. Somebody who has completely anonymous beginnings. We knew we didn't want to do that. An agency seemed like the best option to not get scammed and to make sure that it was truly treated like an adoption.

[00:18:09.550] - Rachel Bell

We chose to move forward only with families that wanted an open adoption so that our son, who we didn't know was a son at the time, can have a relationship with them and they're able to see what everyone knows what an open adoption is, but we're able to have that. So going through an agency

really made it feel like an adoption and not just like a donation or some weird science thing. So we went through an agency. It was exactly like a private infant adoption would be in that we had to complete some courses, we had to do a home study, we had to make like a family profile with pictures and stories about all kinds of information about our family. And then they asked, exactly like an infant adoption, like preferences and all of those things and then matched us with some families, who like we would have matched with and then handed them our profile books to read and then the families placing the embryos. So those families are families who have done IVF to grow their family and then they had remaining embryos. Either they had a lot of embryos when they did IVF and so they weren't going to have like 20 kids, so they had a lot of remaining embryos. Or a lot of situations are where someone is no longer able to carry an embryo, but they have remaining embryos and they want to choose families for them.

[00:19:44.040] - Rachel Bell

So we were open to, as I told you, we only wanted four kids and we had three, so we only wanted one more child. But we did adopt two embryos and they were from different families. So two families chose us and then we choose them back. They present us with their information, we choose them back. The way it works in embryo adoption is like if the first embryo takes, then there's like a contract, so the adoption is final before the embryo is transferred into the adoptive mother. Right, but there's a contract saying like, if the first embryo takes and we only wanted one child, then that second family gets their embryo back and gets to choose another adoptive family. So that's the arrangement we had. And it's different. Some families are placing seven embryos, ten embryos, or it's just different. For us, we only wanted the one pregnancy, the one baby, so that's how we did it. After the paperwork, the adoption is finalized, then the embryo is shipped from the clinic of the placing family to the clinic of the adoptive family. And then from there it's like the second part of IVF as far as how it works. I had to have a lot of prep work with the doctor and I had to take estrogen progesterone shots, prepare my body for a pregnancy, and then we transferred our embryo in December of 2020. And then ten days later you find out if you're pregnant or not. So that's kind of how it works.

[00:21:32.890] - Melissa Corkum

So interesting. And the open adoption part, I had never really even thought, I mean, it makes total sense and I had just never crossed my mind. And so then you're talking about people who potentially arranged adoptions for multiple embryos, three, 4, 5, 20. Think about all the, at that point, full siblings that are out in the world. So does your son have any full siblings outside of the original family?

[00:22:06.550] - Rachel Bell

No. So in our specific situation, they only had one embryo remaining. So it really was a perfect match because we were only looking for one. They only had one. And so it's just a relationship between our two families. But there are a lot of families who they'll connect all together. Like the original placing family will place with like three different families and they all get together or they all send pictures so they have full siblings in three different families or more. I know it's not ideal, right? None of this is like how things are supposed to be. So I'm not saying that. But it can be kind of beautiful for those families to have that relationship and their siblings to all know each other, like, make the best out of the hard situation.

[00:23:04.370] - Melissa Corkum

You have open adoptions with any of your other children?

[00:23:08.030] - Rachel Bell

Well, interestingly enough, the original answer was no. But when I was pregnant, it really opened up conversation with my kids about, like it just kind of helped them really think about their first mom being pregnant with them and stuff that I guess they hadn't really thought about because they had never really experienced pregnancy. But they were older and I was really sick and it was a really hard pregnancy and it was really up in their business. It was affecting their lives. They started asking questions. It just kind of changed some dynamics for all of us. I'd say, it even gave me more compassion and more understanding of their first mom and what she went through for them. So because of all that, we did some digging with all of our kids, and I'll keep their stories, their stories, but we do now have an open adoption with one of our kids first families because of conversations that

started when I was pregnant, which led to us being able to find some people, connect with them, and we've even gotten to meet them in person this summer. And it's been really great for that kiddo and for all of us, but I don't know if we ever even would have had those conversations if I never experienced pregnancy. So that's been kind of a cool side effect.

[00:24:33.060] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. So the reason I asked is because I'm wondering if there are any notable differences between and I know all open adoptions categorically are all different because of dynamics and situations, but is there anything that you would say is different about an open embryo adoption from other types of open adoptions?

[00:24:54.100] - Rachel Bell

Well, I don't know how to say this. I don't want to disregard anyone's feelings, but I think it appears to me from my perspective, which is only my perspective, that it's easier for someone to place an embryo and then it is for someone to place a child who was already born. Or in the case of foster care, to lose that child. There aren't as many hard things in our relationship with Noah's genetic family because they've never... I don't know, it was like they knew what they were choosing and not that everybody doesn't. I don't know how to say this. Do you understand what I'm saying?

[00:25:50.440] - Melissa Corkum

Well, there's less bonding. I mean, even like for domestic infant adoptions, there's still that whole process of carrying creates a lot of emotional bonding, which may not happen with an embryo that you didn't carry.

[00:26:07.370] - Rachel Bell

Right. I think there is still some of that. And I'm sure when they see him and he looks like their children and we send pictures back and forth all the time, they live far away, so we haven't had the opportunity to meet them yet. But I know their feelings there. But it's like because they were in a relationship with us before any of us knew what he even looked like. And because I gave birth to him, it's all kind of like we more organically create, like an extended family type relationship rather than, like a baby being taken from one family given to another and then those two families trying to repair a hurt. Does that make sense? It just is more natural in an unnatural situation.

[00:26:57.070] - Melissa Corkum

Well, and I also think even in private adoption, where a birth mother chooses an adoption plan, I feel like that is always an impossible choice. Mothers do not make adoption plans under the best of circumstances. And I feel like embryo adoption is a little bit different. The reasons why a family chooses embryo to place an embryo for adoption are different. A birth mother making...

[00:27:37.790] - Rachel Bell

There's not that external hardship now, they have gone through infertility and they have hopes for all of these embryos. And I think it is hard that they know they are not able to carry all of them or to parent all of them or whatever, but there's not as much hardship going on externally.

[00:28:04.920] - Rachel Bell

So I feel very awkward saying any of this because I'm like, none of this is my experience. It is my observation.

[00:28:16.010] - Melissa Corkum

But you're one story, right?

[00:28:17.540] - Rachel Bell

Yes, I'm one story. And if either of the families that we have open adoptions with, because I said we have two and they're very different, if they were like, you're so off base, I'd be like, okay, you're right. So if they ever listen, just know. I'm sorry if I got that wrong.

[00:28:34.170] - Melissa Corkum

I'm just wondering, too, like, in a situation where you maybe have two embryos and you are able to carry one to term and then there's a remaining one to place, that is almost a good situation because you didn't need both because you were successful right. Yeah, that's the optimistic part of me.

[00:28:56.780] - Rachel Bell

Right, yes. But it's just like all of it is complicated and as I said, never like the way it should be.

[00:29:07.950] - Melissa Corkum

Well, I appreciate your story. So if folks have never considered embryo adoption, or maybe they are considering it and so they Googled it and found our conversation. I mean, you've told us a lot, which I think is super helpful, but what would you tell people who are thinking about it?

[00:29:26.660] - Rachel Bell

I would say that if you do move forward with embryo adoption that it would be very important, it is very important to treat it like an adoption, a typical adoption. And remember that it's an adoption. I think in the world of adoption, there have been adoption kind of changes with generations, like what we focus on and what we learn and what we do right, that we've done wrong before. And there used to be a lot of deception in adoption and that's parents not telling their children they were adopted until the kids found out when they were 40 or something else traumatic like that. And that really doesn't happen a lot anymore with adoption. But I think it does still happen with embryo adoption because you can really pull one over on everybody with embryo adoption, our son looks like us. There are people that don't know. They tell me all the time how much he looks like my husband. And I'm like, that's funny. Okay. But I think focusing on the fact that it is an adoption that you have to respect, like your child's whole story. In the case of embryo adoption, their whole story started before they were even in the womb.

[00:30:41.470] - Rachel Bell

So it's different, but really focusing on that. And then just like with traditional adoption, I have learned how important it is to listen to adult adoptees. And I've also really done the work to listen to donor conceived adults in the process of getting myself and my family prepared for embryo adoption. There are lots of hard things to hear, but just the same with listening to adult adoptees, they're hard truths and there are encouraging things and it's the same. Embryo adoption is a little newer, I guess, but they've been donor conceived adults for a long time. And that's where one parent does use their sperm or egg and then they use donor sperm or egg to create the embryo. And so there's a lot of the same feel of embryo adoption. Just with embryo adoption, it's both parents that are not the biological parents of the child. So any kind of adoption you get into, you need to know what you're getting into. And here I am. My baby, he's eleven months. And so I'm sure that there are things that I'm going to learn about embryo adoption from him that I don't know right now. Because I sure have learned a lot from my other three kids that I didn't know twelve years ago before we adopted any of them.

[00:32:06.270] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. Do you know any adults who are embryo adoption? Is that a thing yet?

[00:32:12.090] - Rachel Bell

It is a thing yet. There are some. I do not know anyone personally.

[00:32:16.950] - Melissa Corkum

If anyone knows, I'm throwing it out into the universe. If anyone knows an adult adoptee who is an embryo adoption, we would love to talk to you on the podcast. I mean, just learning. Yeah, I would love to know. I was curious.

[00:32:31.260] - Rachel Bell

Yes, like I told you, I love nothing more than to hear an adoptee tell me all the things. So, yes, I would love to hear from an adult who was adopted as an embryo.

[00:32:49.300] - Melissa Corkum

Rachel, I'm so grateful for your willingness to share your transparency. Part of why I love podcasting

is because I get to have these conversations and I learn. I'm always learning. So if people want to connect with you, I'm specifically thinking non-embryo adoption related. Travel for adoptive families with all the letters of diagnoses and all the needs, how might they find you?

[00:33:24.690] - Rachel Bell

As I told you before, I can definitely relate to those people. So you can find me on Instagram @belltravelco. Or you can email me if you want to talk specifically about a trip you're planning or questions you have Rachel@Belltravel.Co. So that's C O. There's no M, that's important. Yeah, and then I have a website too. It will be ready by August 16 when this comes out. But it is not today, but it is Belltravel.Co also.

[00:34:02.610] - Melissa Corkum

Perfect. Well, we will have all of those things right in the show notes. If you don't want to remember whether it's Dot.com or Co, you can just go right to the show notes and click on it and you can find those at theadoptionconnection.com/189.

[00:34:19.410] - Melissa Corkum

Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our new Instagram handle is @postadopptionresources. Or better yet, join our free Facebook community at theadoptionconnection.com/FACEBOOK.

[00:34:34.420] - Lisa Qualls

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

[00:34:42.690] - Melissa Corkum

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