

[00:00:00.170] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to this month's Mailbag episode where we answer your questions. This week, our first two questions are about siblings.

[00:00:08.140] - Elizabeth

Hi. My name is Elizabeth. My question is, what do you do when your biological children are unhappy with your decision to foster or adopt after you've already begun? My current seven year old son continues to say he wants the foster children to go away, and he doesn't want to do this anymore, and he wants our family to go back the way it was before. I'm not sure how I can get him on the same family mission.

[00:00:44.510] - Alyssa

Hi, Melissa and Lisa. This is Alyssa from Wisconsin. We just adopted our son from Taiwan. He is three. We have two biological children, an eight year old girl and a five year old boy. My question is about our five year old boy. He has had a lot of issues adjusting, we think, to his new brother. He fights with him a lot. He really picks on him. If his little brother is upset, he likes to laugh and poke fun. He just really does not enjoy his little brother, unfortunately. We're just wondering how we can help strengthen their relationship and help him have a better relationship with his little brother. Thank you.

[00:01:32.270] - Melissa Corkum

So, Lisa, we picked these two questions specifically because we're both pretty passionate about the sibling experience when it comes to foster care and adoption.

[00:01:42.070] - Lisa Qualls

Yes, we are. It's something that we talk about a lot. We've done some writing about it, but it's one of those things that I think we both would love to help people avoid making the same mistakes we did and help them have, offer our experiences and the wisdom we've gained so that you all listening can take it for what it's worth and pray about it and think about yourselves.

[00:02:08.890] - Melissa Corkum

And I think one of the biggest mistakes that we made, looking back, is, one, I think we underestimated the impact that our decision had on our current kids in the family every time that we adopted. And that's not to say that we didn't have, quote unquote, like family buy in. It wasn't like they were, like, kicking and screaming and saying, we don't want to do this. They were on board, and yet we still hadn't really counted the cost, and they didn't know what that would look like. And I think the other thing is that we maybe assumed more resilience in them than we should have. And in hindsight, I think they paid higher costs because we maybe minimized or didn't have the energy to really prioritize their needs. And in our case, they were kind of suffering silently. That's not the case of these two questions being asked, but we almost didn't understand in the moment the impact that it was having. When we realized that it was devastating to us, really.

[00:03:16.350] - Lisa Qualls

Absolutely. Our experience was very much the same that I just knew that my kids, they had solid relationships with us, we had strong secure attachments, and they had each other. And I really thought that they'd be able to weather... We knew it wasn't going to be easy right off the bat, like it wasn't just going to... We knew there would be challenges, and I think we really did think, they're going to be fine, we'll get through the tough parts and all will be well. I think a couple of things. One, we didn't really understand that the hard times and the challenges that we were facing were going to last a really long time. This is not like, well, a year from now everything's going to be just right back to normal. It wasn't like that at all for us. And of course, every family is so different. But for my family, adding new children to our family who experienced so much adversity and trauma, it changed the way our family functioned forever. It changed the relationships forever. So it took us a while to really recognize the way our kids were struggling. And honestly, even children who were pretty young did not want to come to us with their worries and their fears because they could see how much we were already struggling to parent our new children.

[00:04:41.390] - Lisa Qualls

They could see how hard things were for us. And I remember even one of my younger daughters saying to me, I just didn't want to make your life harder, mom, so I just didn't tell you. So I think it's really wise to spend a lot of time as a family talking, praying. And I would suggest if you have not already, if you're listening, you haven't already begun fostering, you haven't adopted yet, but you want to, and your heart is just burning to do this. You feel passionate about it. I would start with offering respite for foster families or even for an adoptive family that's needing a break. And really get a feel for what it's like to have another child or children in your home, in your family, and how your other kids experience that. Obviously it's not going to be the same as like, this other mom they adopted a child internationally. It's going to be very different. But I still think it gives you maybe a sense of as a parent, of how your kids are responding and experiencing this before you jump all the way in.

[00:05:56.290] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, and I think if you're at any point in the process where the papers aren't signed, sealed and delivered, then it is worth having a conversation. So even one of the moms who asked the question, it sounds like they're still fostering. And there's a lot of tricky dynamics here. And I know it is our heart, as foster and adoptive parents, that if we're parenting in a foster situation, that we want to provide permanency if that child gets to a point where they need a permanent home that's not birth mom and dad. I just don't know that I would see my definition of success as trying to convince everyone to get on board. It's not doing anyone any favors to push through a situation like that. And sometimes when we say yeses that may not be ours to say, and maybe your kids are giving you a reason to pause about whatever your journey is. It's like we're stealing someone else's yes. There might be someone else out there who is meant to do this. And from the perspective of the child in care, in one sense we could say, well, wouldn't be so traumatic to not adopt after we've been fostering, or for them to have to have another placement. But there's the tension of that versus raising that child in a family where the siblings are not on board, where they don't feel that they belong for the rest of that experience. So it's not simple, but I think these are just a lot of things to think about.

[00:07:40.770] - Lisa Qualls

Well, and it could be too, that how your children already in your family are feeling about adding new siblings. It might be that right now is not the right time or maybe this particular child because of their age or sibling set or whatever, that is just not the right... I don't know the right way to say this. I want to be so careful, you know, because we all understand these children need families, but it could be that these particular children are not the ones that are meant to be in your family forever. And I'll just share from our perspective, we adopted first and then we had the very unexpected, unplanned experience of becoming foster parents to a really lovely teen girl who we did fall in love with. When we were approached about adopting, as much as we all loved her, there were a number of reasons that we felt that that was not the right decision for her, for her family, but also for our family and for our kids who were feeling very depleted. And I think it would have actually wounded our relationship with some of our older kids had we said, we don't really care what you think. I mean, this is our decision to make. We're the parents and so we're going to make the decision we want to make.

[00:09:08.910] - Lisa Qualls

But for me, of course, it really, really comes down to seeking the Lord. We already have children in our families that we are responsible for, that God has placed in our families. And so we want to be really wise both about our yes or our no. The timing, the particular children. There are a lot of things to consider. We don't have to just rush headlong into this new circumstance. We really do want to be very, very thoughtful and consider the needs of our other kids. I would also say if you have a child who's already really struggling, or if you have other children who've experienced a lot of trauma and adversity, if there are a lot of needs already in your family with the children you already have, I would be very, very cautious to layering on more needs of more kids. Because they may already be somewhat fragile and their needs may be pretty all encompassing. And so if you add more children with more significant needs, who gets more of you? Who gets less? Who gets more therapy, who gets less? I mean, it's just be really sure that the children already in your family are in a really stable place. Not perfect, of course, but stable, and that your home and your life as a family is balanced and it's working.

[00:10:30.670] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. Well, in our case, we thought we were more stable, I think, and then we added three teenagers that were unrelated, so that was pretty extreme. But it destabilized our child, who we already had, who was already from a hard place. He's always been a little bit of a tricky kid, but we thought we were in a really good place with him. And so then we brought three more kids from hard places in, and then all of a sudden, that activated all his extra needs, and it had just exploded into this really quite unmanageable situation. And so I think even if you are stable, but you have a child who has trauma and adversity, and who has a nervous system that is more sensitive to these big changes, I think we have to think really hard about that. But what if you're in a situation where you're already in the middle and you have the sibling dynamic? That's really tricky. Yeah.

[00:11:29.800] - Lisa Qualls

Let's talk about this little five year old, little guy, right? He's five. The new adopted sibling is three.

[00:11:35.040] - Melissa Corkum

Three, yeah.

[00:11:35.860] - Lisa Qualls

And then there's an older sibling, too. I think if I could go back and do it all again, I would say I would really try to meet the needs of your little guy's heart. Your five year old, I would go hard toward connection with him, toward making sure his attachment with you is really secure and he's feeling very safe, very solid. Whether it's a lot of one on one time with you and your spouse, whether it's not having those children share a bedroom, if they're sharing a bedroom, and your child is really feeling like his whole world has sort of fallen apart and everything's off kilter, I would not have them sharing a bedroom. I would really figure out, what is it that your little guy needs from you right now to get through this transition. Because this is a dramatic change to a child's life and one that they could never be prepared for. And even if we think we are all well prepared, there's so much that we can't anticipate. So, yeah, I would just really stabilize his little world, his little life. If you can get time where he's just with you without siblings, I think that can really help a lot.

[00:12:54.470] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I say a lot that this really deep sibling rivalry, right? It's not the, like, bickering that we see with typical siblings where they kind of like pushing each other's buttons just for fun. We have lots of kids that do that really well, both kids by birth and kids through adoption here. But you can kind of feel that there's this really much deeper underlying tension in the relationship that comes from a lack of felt safety in the nervous system. Like when we fight with that much self protectiveness against other relationships, whether they be siblings or friends or whatever, that that's really a clue to us as the caregivers that your little person's world, their nervous system is telling them that they're not safe. And so I think then we can work from that perspective of what can we do to queue safety, to build up that safety, to reestablish the secure attachment, all of those things. The other thing I think is... I just read a quote to you, Lisa, about this from somewhere, and I wish I can't even remember where it was from. But this idea that it's tempting for us to just go the way of least resistance and just keep them separate, just kind of avoid conflict. And sometimes I think we do need to do that, especially for safety reasons. But I think what we want to also start doing is building short, shared, positive experiences.

[00:14:28.910] - Lisa Qualls

Yes.

[00:14:29.530] - Melissa Corkum

Right? What are the places where the two boys can both be excited about something that's going on? And what's the amount of time that you can engage in such an activity where it ends on a high note, where it doesn't devolve into that sibling rivalry? And it might be 30 seconds, it might be two minutes, it could be really short. But is there something that makes them both laugh? Is there a food they both like? Is there a treat they both like that they could receive at the same time, even if they're not sharing it? And those things build on each other. Maybe it's 30 seconds this week, and maybe next week it's 45 seconds. And I think positive shared experiences among siblings are the best gifts that we can give as they navigate that relationship, and create the narrative in their minds about who they are as

siblings and what their relationship is.

[00:15:28.270] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah. And I think the way we even talk about it, we can begin forming those connections. Like just catch him being a good big brother every time you see him do something kind or helpful for his little brother, just affirm it. Not like way over the top or anything, but just like you could say, I sure like to see you helping your little brother or whatever. Now, some kids that might backfire, I don't know. But I do think you want to build him up because he's a big brother now for the first time, look for those moments. And I totally agree, Melissa, with what you're saying about these moments of connection and fun, because that starts to build a foundation and an idea in their brain like, oh, I am a good brother, and we do have fun together, little by little. And honestly, when I think back to my two youngest daughters, boy, that relationship started out so incredibly hard, and it ended so very beautiful. I mean, they did develop just a beautiful friendship and relationship when they were older. But it took a long time getting there, mostly because my biological daughter had so much fear of her sister, and her sister was a little bit older, but she had so much fear, and our whole world was so shaken. So it took a long time, but they did get there.

[00:16:54.370] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. We have a resource that we also wanted to share with folks who are kind of thinking about the sibling experience and what it means in their family. Inside of our membership community, which we affectionately call the Village, we have quite a few webinars and workshops amassed in our little library. And one is a siblings webinar that Lisa, you did with one of your original kids. And she shared pretty candidly about her experience as a sibling. And you guys talked about practically maybe what you all could have done better, and then just kind of beautifully what all the redemption looks like at the end. It's a pretty balanced and you get kind of the full picture of what that is. And so we would encourage, if you're listening and you're thinking, I just need more information about this, that would be a great resource. The Village has so many other things besides that webinar library. It's really a thriving live community of support. It's where Lisa and I get to hang out with you all the most. So you can find out more about that at theadoptionconnection.com/VILLAGE. And use the Code podcast as a podcast listener when you go there and you'll get a discount off your first month.

[00:18:15.630] - Melissa Corkum

Our next question is from our Facebook group. This parent asks, do you think it's a problem if a child is given several choices and they always want to pick an option that is not on the list? I feel like he's trying to be in a constant power struggle over every single thing.

[00:18:37.510] - Lisa Qualls

Well, I would eliminate as many of those power struggle opportunities as possible. My initial thought about that is, yeah, it can be super frustrating. It can make you just feel like a crazy person when your child does that over and over. So, I mean, sometimes it's probably not necessary to make it a two choice thing. Like, if your child if you offer two kinds of fruit and they're always choosing something, that's not one of the options that you gave, just set out a little bowl of fruit and tell them to choose a piece. Just eliminate some of those opportunities, I guess, for the child to push back or try to take control. And I would also think about when you're going to practice this, making choices, make sure you do it at a time when your child has a wide enough window of tolerance, enough ability to do it. Like don't do it right before bed or when they're super, super hungry. You're not likely to be very successful because their little brains are not going to be operating very optimally and their nervous systems are going to be all alerted and activated. So when you're going to offer choices and you want them to practice choosing from one of the two that you're giving, set them up for success, that they're going to have the capacity to even make a good choice.

[00:19:55.710] - Melissa Corkum

When I first learned about choices, I kind of thought it was like supposed to be this magic tool that I could use whenever. It would just always fix the conflict, and clearly it doesn't. So I think what you're saying, Lisa, is we have to know our kids and our kids nervous systems and our nervous systems well enough to know if choices is the right tool out of the toolbox for that particular situation. And it might not be. And maybe one of the reasons is your child's window of tolerance is so small or their nervous

system is so fragile that maybe any choice is stressful to them. And so maybe they'll do better without choices, with you just creating a really solid routine where maybe for food, maybe the same thing for breakfast, lunch and dinner every single day. Or we had a season where our son wore the same thing on Mondays and the same thing on Tuesdays and the same thing on Wednesdays, and we just set it up and he kind of had a little bit of choice going into that initially, but then it wasn't like the choice every day. It was like a one and done choice for the season. And then we just let that choice ride.

[00:20:59.370] - Melissa Corkum

Your kids are not going to say, I don't want a choice. It would be better if you just told me what to do. And even if you give them a standard that's going to be a routine for a season, they still might fight against it. They're not going to be like, oh, I'm so glad that you made all those decisions for me. So you have to really kind of - it's a tricky dance to figure that out. But that is one option, right, is to go a little bit higher structure so that you're helping your child get that predictability and that might help calm their nervous system. And then I think the other thing is high structure might be that you don't give in to a third or fourth option, right? And sometimes we don't have the option to do that, right? Like if you're saying, do you want an apple or an orange for breakfast? And there aren't any other fruits in the house. Those literally are your two choices. The structure is to hold your ground, right? You're not trying to appease them with some other option. But the high nurture is, I think, validating how hard it can be to be limited by two choices or to have to let someone else create a boundary around. So, you know, man, I know it's really hard to make a decision sometimes I'll leave an apple and an orange on the counter, and so when you're ready to make that decision, you just let me know. I think we have to be able to leave the choices. We can't be attached to the choice or their response, and we have to take some of that emotional response out of it. We have to be able to hold our ground with the choices, but also not escalate into the emotional roller coaster.

[00:22:38.530] - Lisa Qualls

That's a really good point. And I think some kids, too, depending on the degree of attachment challenges they have, really, some kids, in order to truly feel safe and to begin building trust with you, choices won't work. You may have to have a child who you are keeping right by your side, and mom's making all the choices because they're learning how to trust you. So they might have a choice between, am I going to have half an apple or a whole apple? But the apple is not the choice. So it's a wild experiment. You just have to see what is going to work for your child and your family. But I think, like Melissa said, it's really important not to get emotionally caught up in all of it, because that can just take us down a road that's very exhausting and discouraging. So try to remove sort of the value of, oh, this child is never satisfied, or this child is trying to manipulate me, or whatever. Try to step out of all of that and just make it very simple. And here are the two choices. Or mom's making all the choices, whatever you decide, and just don't let it be emotional. It just is what it is. But also, like Melissa said, having compassion for your child, because it could actually be pretty painful and scary for them. But what you're trying to do is build felt safety and security.

[00:23:57.470] - Melissa Corkum

So our last question comes from Carla.

[00:24:01.560] - Carla

I am wondering, from your experience, if you truly believe that anything that we're doing for our kids is really making a difference if we can't see any sign of it being impactful. Just hearing your answer is something that will help me become less discouraged. Thank you.

[00:24:22.630] - Melissa Corkum

When we heard this question, we were excited to answer it because we feel like we've put a lot of years into this journey. We have been in the space of asking that question of, like, one, you know, just wondering and in the waiting of, will this ever end? Does this ever get better? We also both have young adult children who have come to our family through adoption. So Lisa, you have a whole slew of adult children, but time has taught us a lot of things about this question. And so I think not just being able to see some of the redemption happen after years and years of challenging. But also thinking, I think I would ask myself a different question if I was back in the hard. Like if my now self

could mentor my eight year ago self, and my eight year ago self was being like, is this mattering? Are we making a difference? I think I would encourage myself to be asking a slightly different question. What about you, Lisa?

[00:25:30.890] - Lisa Qualls

Well, I was just thinking that as you were talking, that is it making a difference? Well, if we look at it from the perspective of our obedience to God, if we have walked in obedience in adopting our children or fostering, and it's so hard, and we think I am trying and trying and trying and nothing seems to matter and nothing seems to work. Well, God is writing a story in your child's life and in your life, and you are in the very thick of it. You can't even begin to see what the end is going to be. Or even what five years, ten years down the road is going to be. You are making a difference. I mean, just make no mistake, you are making a difference in your child's life and in your other children's lives and in your life. And then day to day, the little things well, not just the little things, but the things we are doing. We are working so hard at parenting, honestly, some of the things we're doing are probably truly, truly helpful and some maybe not. And we just have to continue to just do our best.

[00:26:43.190] - Lisa Qualls

And let's see, we adopted 15 years ago, is that right? Yeah, 15 years ago. And I will tell you, it is an incredible thing to see where we started, where we were even five years ago, ten years ago and where we are now. Yeah, it didn't feel like it. There were times of so much despair. I am not kidding you, lying in the middle of the night thinking, god, what have we done? I'm scared. I don't know what's going to happen. Our God is a God of restoration and he's bringing about something that may not look beautiful at all right now, but he does make all things new. And so I would just stand on a lot of those promises. Do your best as a parent, but also really trust the Lord that he is there, he is with you in it. It is going to make a difference.

[00:27:40.770] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I mean, we have the benefit of kids who have come back and said that thing did make a difference. Right? And so echo what Lisa said, like the seeds that you're planting now are not necessarily the harvest that you're going to reap this month or next month. It could be years, which hopefully is encouraging and not disheartening to know that there is a harvest to be had, even if it's in the future. I think the other thing is you mentioned it a little bit, like we're changing everybody around us, including ourselves. And I think I talk a lot about definition of success and what is definition of success. And I came into parenting with a definition of success that I ultimately didn't have control over. And it had to do with how my kids turned out, that I wanted them to make the decisions that I approved of, that I wanted them to love Jesus. I wanted them to be kind and upstanding citizens and happy and fulfilled and healthy. Those are all good things, good relationships. I know those are all good things. They're not a single one of those things do I have control over, and nor do they make or break my success as a parent.

[00:28:51.900] - Melissa Corkum

And honestly, nor do they make or break our kids. You know, like we have kids... Even though we've experienced an immense amount of redemption, we also have kids that are breaking our hearts and making decisions that objectively, we know are probably not the best. And we are seeing all the different paths that our kids could be taking and looking at the one they're walking down and cringing a little bit, shrugging our shoulders, praying extra hard. And that's all of our kids, not just the kids from hard places, the kids with trauma, the kids through adoption. This is happening on all levels. I think part of the trickiness of fully starting to understand, like, these kids are not ours in the sense that we don't get to make their futures. We get to steward them and love them well. And so I think that's the thing. Are we being obedient? Are we being the best version of ourselves? Are we doing the things that we can control? Like I can't control my kids personal growth journeys, but I can control mine. I can set a good example. I can get my nervous system in a really good place, that I can support them and love them and be their safety net even when they have fallen and are struggling. Or even when I want to say, I told you so, I knew that wasn't going to work out great. I think that's the thing, too, is where are we looking for the difference? Are we looking for the difference in ourselves? Are we looking for a difference in behavior? Behavior modification feels like the Holy Grail of parenting, and it's not, unfortunately.

[00:30:30.880] - Lisa Qualls

Right, even if we can change our kids behavior, that doesn't mean we're changing their hearts. So I think we go for the heart and we do what we can about behavior. But, yeah, I just speak life over your kids. Speak life over your family. I think we just keep walking forward in obedience and we love the Lord, love our kids.

[00:30:57.900] - Melissa Corkum

We go to a lot of therapy to learn how to let go of control. I do. I'm speaking for myself.

[00:31:01.570] - Lisa Qualls

Spiritual direction for me. Wow. I mean, that really changed me a lot, is just learning how to release my children in faith to journey, my friend. I'm glad you asked this question. We have been all over the map answering it. I don't know if it was helpful at all, but this is kind of one of those things where you just want to sit down with coffee and talk about it. And Melissa and I actually talk about this very thing often because we have so many young adults between us. So anyhow, thank you for asking that question.

[00:31:34.110] - Melissa Corkum

And we get to do it with folks in the Village, too. We get to support other parents going on this journey. We get to watch other families see redemption or have heartbreak, and we get to talk about... I mean, here's the thing. It's a lot easier to redefine success as a parent and start to let go in a group. Like one of my favorite spiritual nonprofits, like, their tagline is something about individual work that cannot be done alone, right? We're all in our individual parenting journeys, and we all have our own growth and we all have our own buttons that get pushed. And we can't move forward in that journey without the support of people who are doing it with us. So for our second plug of the Village, this is all happening in the Village, right? It's all in one place. We're trying to make it as the most accessible to you all and the easiest. So it's just one place to be, to pick and choose the kind of support that you need. We invite you again to join us there because it really is a sweet place to have these conversations.

[00:32:48.690] - Melissa Corkum

You know, like, we're podcast listeners, just like you all are, too. And I often am listening to a podcast and I'm talking back to the host, right? Because it's like a conversation that I wish I was a part of. So if you feel like that when we're chatting here and you wish, man, I wish I could just be part of that conversation. You can be, yeah, that's what the Village is. So theadoptionconnection.com/VILLAGE. Use the code podcast. These are important questions. All your feelings, whatever as you're listening about, all of them are important and they need a place to be processed. So if you don't have a community where you can do that, we would love to have you.

[00:33:26.480] - Melissa Corkum

If you have a question that you would like us to answer on a future Mailbag episode, our favorites are the ones where we get to hear your voice and hear the heart behind your question. So we would invite you to go to the show notes for this episode, and there will be a really super quick widget where you can just record your question. You don't have to worry about finding the voice memo recording app on your phone or figure out how to send it to us. You can just record and have it sent all in one fell swoop. So we encourage you to ask your question there, and we will look forward to answering it on a future episode.