

[00:00:01.120] - Lisa C. 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.

[00:00:10.020] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:19.030] - Lisa C. Qualls

Each month we host a workshop where we invite a guest expert to share their knowledge and expertise. This week, we're bringing you a recording from a recent workshop. We hope you enjoy it.

[00:00:34.530] - Melissa Corkum

Welcome to February's workshop. For those of you who are new to the Adoption Connection, we run, I'll say monthly, we generally have been pretty good about running monthly workshops. They are free to those folks who are inside our group coaching program, Reclaim Compassion. And then some of you have bought guest tickets through Eventbrite. And this month we are talking about how to explain our families to others. This is definitely an episode that will be a great share for family and friends. We're going to hold all of the questions until the end. So if you're listening to the podcast and you would like to hear what happens after we stop the podcast recording, we would invite you to jump into Reclaim Compassion to get the full recording, including the Q&A. But for privacy reasons, we don't broadcast the Q&A to the podcast. But for those of you who are here live, feel free to drop your questions in as we go. I know that my memory is not what it used to be, but we will wait to address all of those questions until the end so that there's a clean break for the podcast. If you need training hours, we are able to provide completion certificates for this time together. I will let you know at the end how to do that. It's up to you to let your agency know or figure out with your agency whether or not they'll accept that. But we can at least give proof of attendance. I think that's all in the way of housekeeping. So Beth, are you ready? Okay, great. So I'm going to just let you introduce yourself to the folks and then just go ahead and take it away.

[00:02:21.360] - Beth Smith Feger

I like to start with a little agenda set my intentions. We're going to go through tips for communication with our families, understanding trauma, and how it informs our parenting. And that's mostly going to be for us to share with our people. And then ways our families can support. And I added some do's and don'ts because I know we all like those. And then setting boundaries, which is what to do when nobody's listening, or dealing with push back, rejection, and judgment. As Liz mentioned, I love questions. So if you have questions that you want us to answer, feel free to just pop those in the chat, and we'll talk about them at the end of our discussion. So a little bit about me. I am a parent. I have two children that we adopted from foster care and one biological child. I'm a trauma trainer. I'm the director of programs here at Fostering Hope. I come by this work as an educator. I spent eight years as a public school teacher and then got a PhD in education. I'm a learner, a lifelong learner. I read books, articles, all that stuff. I'm a mistake maker, and I encourage all of you to be mistake makers.

[00:03:35.870] - Beth Smith Feger

I'm also a Longhorn, just in case you are curious. I know we're all over the world, but I have three degrees from the University of Texas. One thing I would like to say is I went into my foster parenting journey thinking that I was well equipped to manage anything that the world and the kids might throw at me. And I was not prepared. And that is part of my journey into being a trauma informed parent and trainer. But I want to share this image with you. And for those who may not be able to see it, it's a heart. And my daughter, who we've had since she was six months, drew this picture. And the very outside of the heart is joy. And then the blue just inside of that is sadness. And then there's red, orange, and yellow that are shy, mad, and nervous. And at the very heart is love. And I feel like this so perfectly describes what we find with our kids. They may have a little shell of joy around them, but there's a lot of sadness, shyness, madness, and nervousness that may cover up the love that they feel for us and for what's going on.

[00:04:55.680] - Beth Smith Feger

So I just like sharing this. This helps me appreciate and love the kid that I am and am raising. I

skipped this slide. I find this hilarious. I sometimes think when we are dealing with our friends and family and we come to them with the problems that we're facing, they might just say something like, Think positive, or Follow your dreams, or Just believe in yourself. I know you guys have all experienced that someone, when you go to talk to them about some of your challenges, doesn't really get it. So I hope that this is a space and a time where you can be with other people who get it. So we're just going to dive right in and start talking about what it is that we need to do, and how we can talk to the people in our world about the things that are happening, and what we need from them, and how they can support us. I didn't include a lot about what to do if you're in the process of deciding because I'm guessing that most of us are already somewhere in this parenting journey. So a few things just to think about is when you're talking to your people, be clear about what you're feeling and what you need from them. Be specific about what the other person is doing that supports or doesn't support you and your child. Assume the best about your people. They want to love and support you. They may not know how. Also, be mindful of where it's safe to be vulnerable and with whom. Then this is the hardest one for me. Not everyone is going to understand or support how we parent and why we parent the way we do, or even our foster or adoption journey. I think it's really that's a hard truth that we have to accept. But I think it's really important to keep that in the back of our mind that we always want to be choosing what is best for our kids and our family.

[00:07:01.960] - Beth Smith Feger

I want to give you an example of how this plays out, how it played out in my life. So we have three kids. Our middle son is our kid who probably has the most troubling behaviors. But several years ago, my parents are big gift givers, lots and lots and lots of gifts. And at Christmas, my mom came with, I can't even count how many presents. And it was extremely overwhelming for our middle guy. And he got extremely dysregulated. And it really ruined our Christmas, to be honest. And so the next year, I tried to think about what we could do differently. And I talked to my mom and I said, Hey, mom, listen, I really only want you to have one gift for the kids. And I would also really like it not to be the big gift. We want to be able to give them the big gift. And she said, Okay. And we went on our way. And then come Christmas morning, they come down. My folks live just an hour away. They came down and my mom had taken a giant gift bag and put in a ton of gifts. And she said, Oh, it's only one present. And I have to tell you, well, I'll tell you later what happened the next year at Christmas, but I'm just going to leave that there for now. You can think about that.

[00:08:30.940] - Beth Smith Feger

So how do we talk to our parents? This little bit is going to be more focused on what we're actually going to say to them, to our people. And I know that some of this information is probably going to be basic or repetitive for you guys who probably already know a lot of this. But my hope is that this information is something that you can share specifically with your family. Just hand them this and say, mom, dad, listen to the podcast. Okay. So the first thing we want to be able to do for families is to help them understand what trauma is. So a quick definition of trauma is that it's a response following an event that psychologically overwhelms us. And this can result in shock, denial, changes in our body, mind and behavior. Body, mind and behavior, all of those things are impacted by trauma. Complex trauma is trauma that repeatedly occurs over time and can have a cumulative impact. And most kids who have experienced adoption or foster care, separation from their first family have experienced complex trauma. These are our kiddos. These are the kids we're parenting. It's also really important for those who live outside of our world to know that two people can experience the exact same event and only one person will experience that as trauma. When we're working with kids who've experienced trauma like this, they may have what looks like really bad behavior. It may look bad, it might look dangerous. It's really helpful for us to remember that it's not bad behavior, it's the brain's response to this chronic toxic stress.

[00:10:24.720] - Beth Smith Feger

We'll talk a little bit more about that in a minute, but our brain is actually trying to keep us safe. And these behaviors that look bad or dangerous are a child's effort to keep themselves safe. And how does this happen? So in a typical situation, we get a brand new baby, we bring them home from the hospital and they come into a secure base. We love them, we nurture them. When they cry, we comfort them. When they make a sound, we praise them. This is a cycle of attachment. It's how security and attachment are formed with kids. I want us to think about this little blue part that I've

circled. That the child is going to come back to us when they need comfort, when they need to be recognized or delighted in, and they need us to help them make sense of the world. When an infant cries, when our baby cries and we comfort them, they learn that they can trust adults. They learn that they are a great baby who's deserving and worthy of love. They learn that their voice can help them meet needs. They learn that the world is safe, and when it's not, a grownup will help them.

[00:11:49.970] - Beth Smith Feger

And this cycle helps create an infant's ability to self regulate. And when we talk about self regulating, it's when we get sad or lonely or angry that we have the tools inside of us to bring ourselves back to a more regulated state. I like to use the hand model that Dan Siegel loves where we can show families. It's pretty easy to show families how our brain works, that the prefrontal cortex comes down over this limbic part of our brain and our spinal column. And that when we feel overwhelmed or we don't have great coping mechanisms, we can flip our lid and we live in this more primitive part of our brain. So what does this mean? I'm going to show you this. I don't know. Probably I can't show you this video, so I'm not going to show it to you. I'm going to tell you what it is. It's a little boy with a gallon of milk trying to pour it on top of his cereal, and he is not successful. However, his caregiver says, It's okay, bud, you can try it again, and gives him a much smaller bowl and a much smaller cup, and he successfully pours the milk into the cereal bowl.

[00:13:05.530] - Beth Smith Feger

The weight of the container for this little guy is too much. He doesn't have the skill and coordination he needs, and he's overwhelmed. Fortunately, he has a parent in there who's going to help him regulate. It's not going to be a big deal for him. He's going to be able to move through that. This way of helping our kids negotiate the world is what most parents are doing just from the get go. This is what we do as parents raising typical children. What we have to remember is for kids who haven't had these early experiences, they're going to need even more help with regulation. If a child is continually overwhelmed with stress, it's just like a gallon of hormones are being dumped on their amygdala, which is that brain stem. And what that does is it prevents them from being able to build neural pathways into their higher up brain, and they perceive danger everywhere, even when there's no danger.

[00:14:18.240] - Beth Smith Feger

So what about our brains? Our brains are created to be in relationships, but they're also designed to keep us safe. And that is really the most basic function of the brain is to keep us safe. It's also important to remember that we can change our brain, but it takes time and we need more than time. We need new strategies and we need lots of practice. So our families, our people, our community is going to need to help us help our kids. Our brains can store more information than any other brain in all of the animal kingdom. One of the things that we can do that no other species can do is we can connect our brains to one another so that we can solve problems that are bigger than any one brain can handle. That's part of how we build connections and make sense of the world. Here's a little image from Bruce Perry of how stimulus comes into our brain and what happens. We get input in our brains from our five senses, the world around us, and we also get input from inside our bodies. Our bodies give us information and then it sends it up the brain and we start to make sense of it. Before we can think about it, we have to determine if it's safe. And that happens at the very lowest levels of the brain. We have to think about it. Our body takes that information in and determines whether or not it's safe. If it's safe, then it proceeds up into our cortex and then we're able to make sense of it. Before we can think about it, we have to decide if it's safe.

[00:16:11.250] - Beth Smith Feger

This part of our brain is called the limbic system is scanning the world for danger four times per second. That's not once every four seconds, that's four times every second. When our limbic system is doing what it needs to do, we stay safe. We stay safe, and that's what our limbic brain does for us. This is where the fight, flight or freeze that we sometimes hear about is initiated. For kids who've experienced trauma, they have spent most of their lives living in this limbic brain, always trying to figure out if their world is safe. And because of that, they're much more inclined to see danger where we as grownups and people who haven't experienced trauma, we're not going to see danger there. But when we can get through that limbic brain to our thinking brain, we're going to see things like "good"

behavior. And I put good in quotation marks because I think it's the behavior that we think is what a kid needs to do. But we'll unpack that a little bit in a minute. But also impulse control and body regulation. They can regulate their body, they can control their impulses, they have insight, morality, empathy, they have flexibility in their responses, they can modulate their fear. It's just a ton of things that they need their prefrontal cortex to do. And for most people, even people who haven't experienced trauma, this part of our brain is not fully developed until we're in our 20s. So that's why you see teenagers doing a lot of what some people might call crazy stuff.

[00:18:01.310] - Beth Smith Feger

What's most important for us to know is that in order for kids to be successful, they need to feel safe. And that's beyond *being* safe. We can have a child who is safe, but if they don't feel safe, it's not the same thing. They're still going to be coming at the world from that limbic brain, from that lower form of their brain. They need to feel safe, they need to have connections, and they need to have strategies to manage their emotions. Everything is a skill that we can learn. One of the things that we can do for our families, one of the things that we can do for our kids, is start to use the language around some of these strategies, and also talk to our parents and our families and our friends about how to help our kids develop some of these skills.

[00:19:01.260] - Beth Smith Feger

The biggest skill that I think about that is often a struggle for our families when they're dealing with our kids is this idea of self regulation. I like to explain self regulation as it's the amount of stress that we can handle without freaking out. And all of us have a certain amount of stress that we can handle without freaking out. It's sometimes called a window of tolerance. And you can see on this slide, it looks almost like a road and there's a nice smooth wave. This is a healthy adult dealing with stress, right? That we were aroused because some stressful incident happens and we manage that stress and then we're calm again. And then we have another stressful encounter and the next thing happens, right? So that's what it looks like. And this is what we teach all kids, regardless of what their previous life experience has been. We want all kids to learn how to navigate the stressors of the world, right? The ones that everybody faces, us as adults, kids, people who've experienced trauma, all of us have stress that we need to learn how to manage. But what happens if you haven't had an opportunity to learn these skills, to be co-regulated with your parents, is we end up with something like this, right? And this is a person who doesn't always know how to respond. So their window of tolerance may be smaller, and events are going to trigger them in different ways. So that wild zigzag thing is, if somebody's ever asked you, that behavior seemed to come out of nowhere, that's what we're dealing with. We're dealing with a child whose nervous system doesn't know very well how to keep them regulated. And again, this is not bad behavior. These are not kids who are trying to be jerks. These are kids who are trying to get themselves regulated and keep themselves safe. And if our kids don't feel safe, they're going to do whatever they need to do to try to feel safe. And normally that looks like fighting, flighting or freezing. So they're going to get grumpy and yell or hit or be aggressive. They're going to run away, or as our therapists like to say, elope. They're going to do all of these things. That is the best coping strategy that our kids have. And that's why we need to, one, help them learn other coping strategies, and help them increase their window of tolerance so that not everything stresses them out so much.

[00:22:10.270] - Beth Smith Feger

For our families, that's the information that I would like my parents to take this, to listen to this and start to understand why we do things, why we don't put our kids in time out, why we give them another chance, all of our parenting work that we do that's focused around being trauma-informed. It all goes back to this is not bad behavior. This is a dysregulated child who needs help getting regulated again. And then we can deal with the behavior if we need to. But our first step as parents is always to get that kid back to a place where they feel safe. Just like in that cycle of security that we were talking about before, we always want them to know that we've got them, that we're going to keep them safe, that we're going to do the things they need to do to feel safe.

[00:23:08.220] - Beth Smith Feger

Okay. So that's the trauma-informed piece that I think every family, every friend of ours probably needs to know as they start to interact with us in our family. So what are some of the things that we

can do? Think that as we think about all of this brain science, we want our people to know that these kids aren't trying to push your buttons. They worry a lot about what is going to happen next. They need to feel good at something. So we need to set them up for success. We need people to know that they're really challenged by trying to stay self regulated. That's why we keep them close so we can help them stay regulated. It's a great idea to ask kids what they need to be able to get through the day or the event or the moment. We're Christmas at grandma and grandpa's house. Okay, bud, what do you need to get through today? And if the answer to that is I need to lay in my bed, then we need to do what we can to try to honor that and respect that. Even if a situation doesn't seem bad to you, it's the kid's perception that matters. So telling a kid not to worry, they don't have to be afraid or whatever the things are, as parents might do, just get over it, suck it up. Who knows what our families might say?

[00:24:37.680] - Beth Smith Feger

I think also trauma isn't always associated with violence. I think sometimes our families can assume that some terrible things have happened to our kids, and they may have, but it's different kinds of terrible things. And also, our families don't need to know what caused our child's trauma to be helpful. I always like to remember that kids are mostly doing the very best they can. There is no kid who arrives at grandma and grandpa's house and says, I'm going to blow this place up. They mostly are just trying to stay safe in their bodies. So for families, for people who are caring for our kids, we want them to remember that if they need to stay calm, right? If a kid is dysregulated, one of the best things we can do for that kid is to stay regulated, right? Anybody can be a person who says, I'm here, I'm calm, we're going to help walk through this, whatever this feeling or emotion is. Using soft eyes and a calm voice, clear boundaries and expectation. Movement is a great way to get kids regulated or help them stay regulated. I'm a big fan of chewing gum or sucking on a mint or sending on... I mean, all of the things that we know, like when I'm going to drop my kid off at grandma and grandpa's house, here's a bag of gum. The rule is he can chew as much as he wants as long as he throws it away in the trash can when he's done with it.

[00:26:18.680] - Beth Smith Feger

Setting our people up for success, giving them the tools they need so that they can hit it with our kids so they can really know what to do. Give them a calm down spot. And again, a place where there's something that they can do that's a sensory experience like playdough or I love a good rocking chair. All of the sensory stuff that we know that helps kids stay regulated. And again, it is not the best time to give them a lecture. I know my family is big on a lecture about our bad behavior and what we can do to change it. This is not the time for that. When a kid is dysregulated or upset, they don't need a lecture. What they need is practice getting regulated again, and we can help them with that. It's a skill they can learn.

[00:27:13.930] - Beth Smith Feger

Okay, for families, here are some do's and don'ts about helping out with your family who's raising an adopted or foster child. Quick do's and don'ts. Families, friends, ask how you can help. Don't assume you know what the parent or child may need. Respect the parent's wishes around interacting with their child. Don't question the parent's decisions. You may think it's perfectly fine for your kids to run over across the street and play games with their friends across the street. If my child can't manage that because that's too far away from me for them to stay regulated, and I say, Hey, you know what? My kiddo can't run across the street. He's going to have to stay in the front yard to play. Respect that. Respect that. Respect that the parent knows their child. Check in with parents before giving the child gifts, privileges, and permissions. Parents need to be the one who determine what is good and right for the kid to have. And the last thing we want to do as people who care for this family is to give the child permission to do something without checking with their parents. Know that it would be really lovely for my kid to have a doughnut, but if my kid is triggered by too much sugar, I may have to say no to that. I'm sad about that, too, but don't make me into a jerk by offering my kid a doughnut when they're not going to be able to have one.

[00:28:54.130] - Beth Smith Feger

The other thing I would say for our families is, guys, learn more about trauma. Learn what is happening and how we can help kids from that. But don't ask what trauma our child has experienced. That's a really private and personal question. And it's not one that most families feel comfortable

sharing with other people. And then the last are, apologize. Do apologize when you get it wrong. You're going to get it wrong. This is new and complicated. So when you get it wrong, just say, I'm really sorry. I do want to be helpful. What can I do different? And don't assume the behaviors you see when you interact with our kiddo is the same behavior that I'm dealing with at home. That's a huge issue that I think comes up a lot is, but they're so fine when we see them. Well, yeah, yes, they are. But the behavior that they're exhibiting at home may be really different. So for those of you who are caring for us, remember that.

[00:29:59.520] - Beth Smith Feger

Okay, this is not my favorite part, but I do think it's important for us to remember that there are things we can do when people don't listen. If people aren't respecting the things that we're asking them to do with and for our kids. First off, I like to try with assuming the best. If we ask clearly for what we need, hopefully, our people who care most about us will listen and respect this. If we tell them how they can support us, hopefully, they'll show up for us in ways that are really helpful. That's important for us. And then we respectfully teach people how to better support and show up for us, just like I did with my mom. Rather than taking all of the gifts, I would like you to just bring one gift. And that's, yes, I know you're disappointed, mom, that you can't bring a truckload of gifts to my family, but this is what we're doing that's best for our child. I also think sometimes you have to be really direct. So I've thought of a couple of things that I'm sure you've probably heard some of these things.

[00:31:08.520] - Beth Smith Feger

Okay, rather than say orphan, we say child placed for adoption or child in foster care. Rather than real parent, we might say first family or biological family. And these are things that, depending on how close the person is to us, you can be more or less direct about it. This is a good one. If this is so hard, why don't you just give them back? We could probably spend a whole hour unpacking that. But what would be more helpful to say is, it sounds like you're having a hard time. How can I support you? Yes, mom, this is my child. I love my child and it is hard and I am not going to give them back. They are my child. It sounds like you're having a hard time. How can I support you? Was their mom on drugs? Get that one sometimes. My child's story belongs to them. I don't feel comfortable sharing this. There's lots of these things that sometimes I think people don't understand sometimes how hurtful some of these comments can be. And I think when we have the bandwidth to do it, if we can teach them better ways to interact with us and our kids, it's helpful. But they were just a baby when you adopted them. They should be fine by now. And it doesn't matter if we got them when they were minutes old, months old, years old. Why aren't they over it? I really want them to be over it. That's what I hear a lot from our people. Trauma can happen even before a child is born. And the loss of a biological family is trauma. Trauma takes time to heal. These are things that people need to know, and we need to be able to share those with them.

[00:32:58.380] - Beth Smith Feger

And then this is the part that I really don't want to talk about, and that is, sometimes our people, our families are just not willing or able to support us in the ways we need. And sometimes in those cases, we need to put some pretty strict boundaries around them. So after my mom brought that bag filled with lots and lots and lots of gifts, the next Christmas, our family decided to take a family trip with just the four of us. And that's the boundary that we had to put around our family so that we could keep our kids and ourselves safe. It is probably for me, one of the hardest things I've had to do on my parenting journey is put some boundaries around how my family of origin interacts with my family, including my adoptive kids. It is not Man, I hate having to say that. I hate having to tell people, like, if you do everything right, your family, your people may not ever get it. And that puts you in a position of having to choose between keeping your kids safe and interacting with your family of origin. And it's a hard choice. And I know lots of people who have struggled with it. Gosh, I hate to end on a low note, but that's the end of what I have in terms of information for you guys. I would love to answer questions. I have my contact information. If you're interested in reaching out or getting in touch with us, we'd love to do that.

[00:35:18.440] - Melissa Corkum

Thank you so much, Beth. Will you do me a quick favor and just let everyone know a little bit about Fostering Hope and then how they can get in touch with your organization, and then we'll switch to

Q&A. Sure.

[00:35:32.530] - Lisa C. Qualls

Absolutely. So we are an organization that equips and supports parents and churches to care for kids who've experienced trauma. So we do a lot of training for parents and churches just around ways that they can support families. One of the really cool things that we do is we train and help certify babysitters. We know that a lot of people who are involved in foster care quit because they feel isolated. And training babysitters and then helping families get connected to babysitters is really one of the things that we do. So we're in Austin, but you can find a lot of our stuff online. We're at I amFosteringHope and I work as the program director here.

[00:36:18.980] - Melissa Corkum

Thank you so much for that. The babysitting certification that you do is, the audience, obviously, are folks who would be helping our families with respite, date nights and things like that. Is that a training that you all do virtually at all?

[00:36:36.560] - Beth Smith Feger

We're working on it. We're working on it. Part of what's been really exciting for us is we have partnerships with child placing agencies in our area so that we know that it meets all of the requirements for them to be verified by the child placing agencies for foster care folks. But we're also working with an organization called Babysitting Connection to get what we're calling trauma certified caregivers. Yes.

[00:37:08.170] - Melissa Corkum

That would be in the future a resource for folks who, maybe their adoption is finalized, and they can choose private babysitters but might want to send a grandma or grandpa or a babysitter or someone through a course to just help them come better prepared.

[00:37:28.210] - Beth Smith Feger

Yeah. And that's the hope, right? Because one of the things we always say in the training is a typical kid, if you say dinner is in 20 minutes and they say I'm hungry, you can say, well, you can just wait 20 minutes. For our kids, maybe you just need to say, Hey, here's the granola bar. You can eat that until it's time. So, yeah, we do a lot of that. It's been a really great way to get more folks involved in caring for families.

[00:37:56.090] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, we love that. And that was a great example. All right. Well, thank you so much for being here and we're going to roll into our Q&A.

[00:38:07.720] - Melissa Corkum

We are so thankful for the amazing guests who share their wisdom and expertise with us. Adoptive Parenting gives us both the challenge and the opportunity to keep learning new tools and perspectives.

[00:38:19.960] - Lisa C. Qualls

If you'd like to hear more from our guests and get support on this topic, all of our workshops, including the Q&A's, are available to folks inside our group coaching program called Reclaim Compassion. To learn more, go to reclaimcompassion.com.

[00:38:35.490] - Melissa Corkum

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 the [adoptionconnection.com/Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/adoptionconnection.com).

[00:38:51.670] - Lisa C. Qualls

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

[00:38:59.660] - Melissa Corkum

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