

[00:00:00.840] - Melissa Corkum

Is your parenting journey turning out differently than you imagined? It's never too late to begin your family's transformation journey.

[00:00:09.290] - Lisa C. Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Wise podcast, formerly the Adoption Connection podcast, where you'll rediscover the confident and connected parent you long to be. I'm Lisa C. Qualls.

[00:00:21.350] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you. Welcome to this month's Mailbag episode, where we answer listener questions. Our first question comes from Marnie.

[00:00:37.370] - Marnie

I just recently read on a TBRI Facebook group, somebody mentioned something called PDA, Pathological Demand Avoidance. As I've read about it, I wonder if it applies to my daughter. I'm wondering if you guys have any resources around it. I'm not totally sure if my daughter fits the profile exactly. But definitely with us at home, I would say any request, no matter how you phrase it, is met with a no. The simplest things, brush your teeth to do your homework or eat dinner. Almost everything is no. But she seems to function okay at school. I'm just curious if you guys have any recommendations about pathological demand avoidance and/or just children that are so resistant to just the dailiness of life and how to stay positive as a parent. I find that I'll be like, Yeah, I got this. I'm using my TBI skills. Then it's just like, I can't.

[00:01:52.530] - Melissa Corkum

This is a great question because I think it's something that we're hearing a lot more about. I would say it's a newer diagnosis, and we're not experts in PDA, so I'm going to disclaim that you definitely want to reach out to a qualified professional who can talk to you more about the actual diagnosis and for additional resources than what we're going to talk about here. But regardless of whatever diagnosis we're thinking about for our kids, especially the more behavioral one, we are really big fans of trying to bring it back to just the basics of the nervous system and the brain. We know that the brain is the control center for everything that happens, and we're learning more and more about the nervous system and the other parts of our body that impact our ability to stay regulated and make good decisions and have frustration tolerance. I think when we frame it like that, what we do know about kids who look like they could have PDA is that they have really fragile nervous systems. That fragility means that their nervous system jumps out of connection to protection mode very, very quickly. That their nervous system loses that sense of felt safety very easily.

[00:03:20.900] - Melissa Corkum

That their stress response system takes over very easily. I think regardless of whether or not you can get a formal diagnosis keeping that idea of this fragile nervous system. We're coming off a holiday season a couple of months ago. I'm thinking about if you had a really fragile Christmas ball in your ornament collection, you would treat it a certain way. You wouldn't toss it into the ornament box and expect it not to shatter. I think the same thing goes with our kids. If we can get out of thinking of their behavior as just trying to be difficult, annoying, all of those behavioral definitions and think, Man, they are just having a hard time a lot or all the time.

[00:04:12.300] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah. Just like your child's nervous system may be very, very fragile, your nervous system has possibly become very fragile as well. And so your capacity to be flexible in your thinking, your capacity to stay regulated when your child is not just gets so diminished. Because when we fundamentally feel unsafe in our child's presence, then we move from connection mode to protection mode as well. And so then you have two people interacting who are both in a fear response in this protection mode. And not a lot good happens when we're there. One way to stay positive is to truly, truly take care of yourself. I think learning what you can and gaining the skills for parenting your child, super, super important. But also learning how to increase your own capacity by taking good care is about the only way I know to stay positive. And to really keep yourself going when the days feel very long and very, very hard. And putting a community around yourself, we talk about it all the time, the importance of

community and how beautiful is it when we actually have people locally around us who can be our community. But even a virtual community, even people that we know online, can make all the difference.

[00:05:39.890] - Lisa C. Qualls

I know that's how both Melissa and I survived, because back in the day when our kids were younger and we were really in the thick of it, the online communities, primarily back then, on Facebook, way back, it was in the blogs, that helped us so much. And not so much joining together with other parents just to complain about our kids, but to encourage one another and to say, I'm learning this, and this is how I'm managing the difficulties that I'm experiencing. I think it's key to staying positive. I also do want to mention one resource that we are aware of. We have not watched this yet, but I'm going to share it with you because I've heard really good things. There's a website called [neurodivergentinsights.com](http://neurodivergentinsights.com). In her section on trainings, she has a training specifically about PDA. It's a 90-minute master class with Dr. Neff, N-E-F-F. Then she has another psychologist in this recording with her. And I checked, it's only \$29. Let me tell you, if you get one amazing good thing out of this workshop, it will be worth every penny of \$29. Again, if you actually do watch it, we'd love to hear from you, but it's Dr. Neff, N-E-F-F, and she is also on Instagram as [neurodivergent insights](https://www.instagram.com/neurodivergentinsights). There's a resource. We'd love to know if it turns out to be helpful.

[00:07:19.230] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I think the other thing to tag on to what Lisa said about nervous system care, that's what we know about the nervous system is that it can be resilient with the right cues, the right support. I think half of this is that radical acceptance about the fragility of the nervous system. The other part is knowing that there are things that we can do to help our kids grow their window of their tolerance of frustration. Those are the types of things that we get into the nitty-gritty on, the really practicals inside of Reclaim Compassion. If looking for really specific ways to care for your nervous system and to help increase your child's window of tolerance is of interest to anyone listening, whether you feel like your kid has the signs of PDA or not, we encourage you to join us inside of Reclaim Compassion.

[00:08:23.740] - Lisa C. Qualls

Our next question comes from Marcella.

[00:08:26.160] - Marcella

Hi. I wonder if you have any wisdom to share about parenting a teenage daughter with borderline personality disorder. We've been through a lot as parents, but this youngest child of ours who is adopted is really making me, unfortunately, feel like quite a failure there, and I've just never been treated by anyone the way that she treats me. We've done a lot of counseling, and the struggle is still there. I'm sure appreciate any wisdom or encouragement you could share. Thank you.

[00:09:05.970] - Lisa C. Qualls

Marcella, that's a really good question, and certainly one that we hear all too often. Melissa and I have talked about us quite a bit. I think many of us came to connected parenting, feeling like we needed to be really gentle and connected, and that is all true. But I think some of us missed the whole part about also having boundaries and expectations. And so I think a lot of parents accept a lot of abuse and disrespect. And there's one thing when we're talking about little children, but when we're talking about teenagers, especially, I really think it's okay to set boundaries and say, You know what? When you speak to me this way, I am going to walk out of the room because I cannot have a conversation with you. If it's a disrespect thing. But I know what it feels like to just feel like every day you're living in an environment where you are treated so poorly early. I think, again, this is what I said in our last question, but you really have to surround yourself with people who are going to speak truth to you about who you are. If you have a teenager with mental illness, their concept of who you are is not accurate.

[00:10:34.140] - Lisa C. Qualls

You are a wonderful person, and you are a mom doing your very, very best. And I don't know what your belief system is, but I just believe you are beloved by God. You are created in His image. He loves you. And so I think for me, pressing into my faith and my relationship with God and holding to what I know

to be true, surrounding myself with scripture that tells me what is true about who I am, and then making sure I have people in my life speaking truth to me and reflecting back to me my value. We talk about looking in our children's eyes and reflecting to them their preciousness. Well, we need that, too. And we need to remember that we are precious and cared for. So setting those boundaries and making sure that you are caring for yourself is super, super important.

[00:11:40.420] - Melissa Corkum

The part that jumped out at me in Marcella's question was, I feel like such a failure.

[00:11:46.220] - Lisa C. Qualls

Oh, yes.

[00:11:47.670] - Melissa Corkum

I relate to that so much. And one of the first things we have people do when they get into our group coaching program is define what success is going to be. I had the privilege of giving a TED Talk about this a couple of years ago. The key is that we have to define success by something that we can control. It's so tempting to define success or measure our value as parents based on how well our kids are doing, on their behaviors, on what we envisioned success for them to look like. We can influence a lot of those things, but we, unfortunately, don't have control over those things. You're not a failure if you are parenting a child with a mental illness. You're not a failure if your child is struggling to make their way in the world. You're not a failure if your child needs extra time to get out into the world and become, I wouldn't even say independent, right? Interdependent. You're not a failure if your child can't hold a job, or if your child comes home pregnant, or if your child ends up incarcerated. There's so many things that we say, I've made the bar really low. I just don't want them to end up in prison. No one wants that, and unfortunately, we don't have control over that.

[00:13:21.000] - Melissa Corkum

So I think One huge thing, especially in this particular situation, is you have to redefine success around things like, how am I taking care of myself in a way where I can show up for my child without needing anything in return? How can I interact with an individual whose reality might be different than mine and hold space, agree to disagree. Those are the types of things that we personally have had to learn as we've navigated being parents to teens and young adults, some who are fairly neurotypical and some who have ongoing mental health challenges. But regardless, I think what we've realized along the way is they're each their own individual people, and our expectations do not become reality in so many ways, shapes and forms on this parenting journey, both as adoptive parents and as parents of kids by birth.

[00:14:40.430] - Lisa C. Qualls

Yeah, back to the failure, the very word failure here. This is exactly why we are always telling you you're a good parent doing good work. And we mean that because I know in my own journey, I did feel so much like a failure. And I was really worried about people judging me, and I just thought I'd totally lost the mom that I was. I found my way back. We can find our way back to the parent that we know we can be, and we just have to always remember that what is being reflected back to us by our children is not necessarily the truth. The truth is that you are a good mom and you are doing good work.

[00:15:25.920] - Melissa Corkum

Our last question comes from Jennifer. "What if things don't get better?" When we heard this, we were like, Man, we could almost do an entire episode just on this question. I think it's being asked by many of you. Earlier this year, I listened to a podcast that was really, I think meant more for entrepreneurs, but it was by two psychologists, and they were talking about the difference between gain thinking and gap thinking. Basically, living in the gain is looking backwards at how far you've come; and living in the gap is looking to the future and feeling like a failure because you're not further along to where you thought you would be. I immediately just thought about myself as a parent. I am a more natural criticizer than encourager, and I am more likely to live in the gap rather than the gain. I've been reflecting a lot around that, and I think this is relevant because when I find myself in that mental space, when will this ever get better? For all of our kids, I can find places where there have been

improvements, and in some, in instances, improvements where I didn't think improvement was possible five or six years ago.

[00:16:50.760] - Melissa Corkum

Now, does that mean we've arrived or that my reality reflects my expectations or that there's not a huge gap to think about? It doesn't mean that, but it does mean that I can stay motivated to keep going when I do consider all the gains that we have made over the last year, two years, three years, four years, five years, decade.

[00:17:18.060] - Lisa C. Qualls

I think for me, when I think about the question, what if it doesn't get better? I like Melissa, what you're saying about partly reflecting back and seeing where it actually has, because when we're in the thick of it, it is hard to see. It really is. But I think for some of us, it might not get better. And so if it doesn't, how am I going to be okay if my child's behavior and our relationship doesn't improve or change the ways that I hoped it would? And the idea of radical acceptance, like this is our circumstance, this is my child, this is who I am, this is our life. Can I choose to radically accept that this is it, still with hope for healing and hope for change. But if I can accept it instead of staying in this fearful state of, What if it doesn't get better? This is me. I can get anxious and start spinning in my mind, Oh, my gosh. What if it doesn't get better? What if tomorrow is as bad as it was today? Instead of just saying, I am going to accept that this is my life, this is my child.

[00:18:27.820] - Lisa C. Qualls

So how do I live a healthy and happy life? Maybe happy is not the right word. Maybe joy. How do I have joy even in the hard? There are a lot of people suffering in this world and for all kinds of different reasons. Sometimes in this parenting journey, it is true suffering. So how do we have joy in the suffering? And again, for me, so much of it comes down to my faith. Can I trust God that he is with me in this, that I am not alone, that he is with me in this, that he is my source of strength, he is my source of hope and of joy? And then can I make choices to focus on those things. One of the first things we do in our community is we have people do this exercise called Points of Joy. And we bring it up from time to time because it is incredible the power and the transformation that happens when parents do Points of joy, and it's the simplest thing. Everybody listening, you should do this. But we just have people start out by making a list of things that give them joy.

[00:19:41.280] - Lisa C. Qualls

And they could be tiny things, something that just sparks that tiny bit of joy in your heart. It could be something big. But we ask people just brainstorm, just like, dump them out one after another. These things that give you joy, whether it's drinking from a particular mug, having your coffee or tea in the morning in this particular mug that just something something in your heart says, I like this mug, or is it lighting a special candle, a special lotion that you just really enjoy the fragrance? It can be so simple, so small, but it's noticing these things that give you joy. And then it can be the bigger things, too, like having coffee with a friend or going for a walk, going away for a date, whatever it is. And then we ask parents to try to incorporate seven points of joy every day. And you can do the same thing more than once a day. If it's using that favorite mug, you can count it more than once. And you can do the same thing day to day. So we're not saying you have to come up with 50 different things, seven brand new different things every day, but just really intentionally choosing things that give you joy every single day. And it just begins to fill us, fill our souls, and calm our nervous systems. And it helps us see joy. It changes the way we look at things. So that's a very it's a very simple, simple thing, but I think it matters. I think we have to look for joy in our circumstances, even when it's really, really hard.

[00:21:11.290] - Melissa Corkum

I agree with that. I think so much of where we direct our mind to go impacts how we experience whatever we're experiencing, whether it's, quote, unquote, getting better or not. The other thing is, as you were saying, at least I was thinking, if I just settle myself in, Okay, what if this doesn't get better? What would I practically change? What different boundaries would I set for myself? What do I need to grieve? I think there's so much grief work in this entire journey. We've talked about this a lot. On a really practical note, I don't know how old your child is, but just universally. We, of course, cannot make any guarantees about any situation. But I will say on a generality is that when parents are doing

their grief work, when they're defining success by what they can control, when they're setting healthy boundaries, when they're caring for their nervous system, when they are offering opportunities for connection, and we can never make our kids take those up. But when we're doing those things, even when it feels like nothing can ever get better, we have seen this in families that we walk alongside. We've seen it in our own families.

[00:22:43.630] - Melissa Corkum

There is something That happens as your kids develop more of their prefrontal cortex, and it happens somewhere in the range of 19 to 25 or something like that, that we see shifts and young adults are better able to appreciate all those hard years we put in with them. They start to understand maybe why we parented the way that we did, why we set boundaries that they didn't like. Also, a lot of times, those kids have moved out either on good terms or bad terms, and so there's not as much proximity. A lot of times that gives space for our relationships to grow. And they may not be what we dreamt for them to be, but they are decidedly better than it was when they were 15, 16, 17.

[00:23:44.160] - Lisa C. Qualls  
Absolutely. Yeah.

[00:23:45.460] - Melissa Corkum

I mean, our youngest is 17. Lisa, your youngest is 17 right now. Our oldest is almost 26. Your oldest is 36. We have been able to gain some perspective of there are moments where we thought, Will this ever get better? And we've come to places of radical acceptance. We've done a lot of grief work, and we've also been surprised by relationships that got nominally better as the kids got older.

[00:24:21.920] - Lisa C. Qualls

It's true. It's very, very hopeful. We gathered as a family for Christmas, all of us, and it was encouraging to me that some of the things that were so difficult and some of the relationships that were so difficult with some maturity, with some time, with not all living together in the same house, things have definitely gotten better. And I think when the days feel really long and really dark, we just have to remember that the sun will rise again tomorrow and that there's always hope for a new day. And so hold on and keep hoping for it to get better, but in a way that doesn't make you anxious but gives you some peace?

[00:25:03.320] - Melissa Corkum

Well, if you would like us to answer your question on a future Mailbag episode, we would encourage you to pop over to the show notes for this episode at [adoptionwise.org/237](https://adoptionwise.org/237). You'll see our little recording widget there. It's really easy. I think it's almost like a single touch thing, and you can go ahead and record your question to us. We would love to answer it here on the podcast. Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our Instagram handle is [@adoptionwise](https://www.instagram.com/adoptionwise). Or better yet, join our free Facebook community [@adoptionwise.org/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/adoptionwise.org/facebook).

[00:25:42.960] - Lisa C. Qualls

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

[00:25:52.260] - Melissa Corkum

Music for the podcast is composed by Oleksandr Oleksandrov.