

[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.

[00:00:10.450] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:19.190] - Lisa Qualls

Hey, friends, welcome to episode 153 of the Adoption Connection Podcast. You may have already heard us say it, but November is National Adoption Awareness Month, and so we are taking time every episode this month to really hear from adoptees and birth parents to give their voices some space for all of us to learn from them. So this week and next, we had conversations in our community, the Village. And the first one was questions for Melissa. Anything people wanted to ask her about being an adoptee. And then the second one, which you'll hear next week was a conversation with me. Anything people wanted to hear about from me as a birth mom. Today, you're going to hear Melissa answer questions that people ask live in our conversation, so you'll get to hear their voices as well. As you'll be able to tell, this is completely unscripted conversation.

[00:01:19.830] - Person 1

Are there things that you wish that your adopted parents had done differently? And I'm parenting young adults. Maybe emotionally more like teenagers, maybe specific if you want to to that age group.

[00:01:36.450] - Melissa Corkum

Well, I think, and I know this doesn't apply to your family, I think from a transracial perspective, I wish there had been more resources for navigating that because I don't think I understood. In hindsight, now I'm thinking, oh, there were a lot of things going on. I don't think there were available resources. I was just like, as a seven, I didn't dwell on it too much. I was like, I don't have an answer to that. Or I just didn't think, I thought maybe I was the only one thinking about it. And something happened recently that made me realize, so our family, not our whole family, but my husband and one of our daughters and me watched the Squid game. It's like that Netflix phenomenon. It's like a Korean drama. Full disclosure, it's super gory and not everyone's cup of tea. So I'm not necessarily recommending it, but one of the characters has kind of thick, really coarse, not super straight hair. We were almost the end of the show, and she really started to stand out to me. And I was like, oh, she's hair like mine. And all of a sudden, all these memories flooded back around my hair and how my sister and my best friend, both Korean, both adopted, have pin straight hair. Like, that's how it comes out of the shower. And my hair can do that, but it usually takes a couple of days to relax, or I have to flat iron it and then once it's flat ironed, it stays pretty straight. But I used to think maybe I wasn't 100% Korean because my hair didn't look like the other Koreans I knew. And so I was actually shocked a couple of years ago when my 23 and Me came back and said I was 99.9% Korean because I would have sworn to you, there had to have been some other reason that my hair was not pin straight and really coarse. Anyway, so there's a transracial piece. The young adult piece, Bruce Perry has been talking a lot about something called Dosing, which is talking about something people who have trauma or have hard emotions or big emotions can often only revisit that in short periods of time, and they kind of need multiple small doses over time rather than like, deep dives. I am a parent like this, but I think also my parents were kind of like all or nothing. They would get in the mood to have a big deep conversation, and they wanted to have this big, deep conversation at one time. Know know, that they'd see an opportunity to have a great conversation, and so they would dive in, and I didn't have a tolerance for that. So I would do all the coping mechanisms to get out of it, but I think I needed probably just small little pieces for my personality. I also think I needed my parents to underreact to a lot of what I was going through, not even necessarily adoption related, but if I shared, like, I had a crush on someone and someone had a big oh, my gosh, tell me all about that, like, I was probably not going to share ever again with you. But if I told you and you just kind of played it cool and almost acted like you didn't even know that that had happened, it was more likely that I would put more of that out into the world.

[00:04:52.690] - Person 1

That's really, really good to hear, because that's kind of more my natural bend. So it's always nice when it's what you're already doing. So I guess another question was, when you shared something personal about your past. And again, our situation is different, our children were in orphanages for many years before we met them, so they had lots of years of living apart from us, and so wondering, when they shared something about their past that was hard, whether that's like an injury that they received or something that they visually saw happen to somebody else, how do you recommend parents to react to that?

[00:05:42.890] - Melissa Corkum

This isn't part of my personal experience in terms of, like I don't have any memories pre- my adoption experience. I think it's been the experience of me just in terms of how I share things with my parents and then also working with so many parents and then also watching our children process things that happened before they came to us that we want to know our kids well enough to know, do they need kind of that emotional connection? Are they going to think about it more cerebrally? That's why we talk about the Enneagram so much here at the adoption connection because I think depending on what your core motivation is, what you're triad is, like, all these different pieces of personality, I think that's a little bit different for everyone. But also I think that's something that's relevant to this is, our kids need us to feel confident that we can respond or hold whatever it is in a way, right. So I think if we're, like, kind of choose your response and be confident in it and pick the one that if you're not sure what your child's needing from you, feels like the most universal. Thanks for sharing, do you want to talk more about that? Like, kind of giving it back to them. But I think if we act like we don't know, like, I don't know what to do with that, and they can tell, like, it rocked our boat, then that feels really insecure.

[00:07:23.870] - Person 1

That's really helpful.

[00:07:25.370] - Melissa Corkum

And even if the confident response is, I know someone who can help us explore that better together if you want to or something like that. I don't think we have to have all the answers, but I think we have to be confident enough to know what the next thing is, even if it's a "I'm not sure, but I know what" rather than like, "I don't know, I don't know," this panicky.

[00:07:51.810] - Person 2

Yes, I did have two questions. One, so my daughter's adoption was finally finalized, and when we made the announcement, I included like a little blurb of she's not lucky or blessed to have been adopted, like, this is hard too, you know? The only pushback I got from that was from another adoptee whose response was, "I feel very blessed to have been adopted." And so I was really surprised because I really put that line in for my family because that is a very common, like, "oh, you're so lucky." It's like something that I've heard a lot from extended family members, so I wanted to kind of nip that in the butt. My response to him was that she made the choice to be adopted, she was grateful to be adopted as opposed to aging out of the system, but her choice would have been to have been raised with her siblings and with biological family. And I felt like that was responded to well. But anyway, because you have been one of the adoptive voices that has been felt more positive about your experience, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you handle phrases like, oh, you're so lucky or blessed or things like that.

[00:09:35.170] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. I think that's a really good question. I was just talking to one of our kids about this yesterday way back when we did a podcast on the WISE up training that case provides and it's just a simple acronym that talks about four choices that adoptees have when someone says something to them or asks a question. So "W" is, you can just kind of walk away, like, feel like if you don't have the capacity or if you feel like it was asked in rudeness or if there's not a teachable moment there. "I" am just saying it's private, so you could say that's not a part of my story that I talk about a whole lot. "S" is share a part of your story so you can respond by sharing experience that you're willing to share. And "E" is educate in a broad sense, not necessarily a personal, this is how it applies to me. And so I think if someone were to say to me, you're so blessed or so lucky, I would probably choose educate on a

grand scheme, because while I certainly appreciate and feel a lot of gratitude for my story, I also want to recognize that that's not everyone's situation. Even though I think there's room for adoptee gratitude, so I might say something like, "I feel really blessed by my story and how I was raised, but it's important to know that every adoptee's story is different. And even though I have come to terms with and I feel a lot of gratitude about where I've ended up, it also starts with that lost conversation, right? Like it still means I left a country and a family." And so I think there's a couple of ways that you could talk about that. And I think the other thing is, I think adoptees don't want to be expected to feel gratitude, but I certainly think that there's room for it if they want to. It's not like we can't feel gratitude, which I think sometimes is the ultimatum. It feels like there's not room for both/and, like, there isn't room for gratitude or positive feelings because there's so much conversation about loss when really, what we want to do is provide permission for all adoptees to experience their story in whatever way that is. And so we want to try not to project how they will feel, but leave space for. So, if I do talk about gratitude for my adoption, like publicly, I try to always disclose it with, "this is my experience, and I understand that not everyone has that experience." So same thing, like with adoption announcements, like in your daughter's case, like, she felt really blessed to be able to choose this instead of aging out, but we understand that maybe not everyone would experience this way or she'll have seasons. We have seasons, I think, too. Sometimes we have seasons of deeper gratitude, and other times we have seasons of deeper loss.

[00:12:53.150] - Person 2

Thank you. That is wise words. I think it was your story about going on when you went for a birth right trip and not finding all the answers that you wanted. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit to that, too. We are exploring some birth family things and my greatest fear is I'm pretty sure that my daughter is going to be disappointed with what we find. So I was wondering if you would mind sharing a little bit about that experience.

[00:13:38.310] - Melissa Corkum

I think having a relationship with someone who can guide her through all of that. And I was just reading or listening to something that talked about how even if we are capable of holding space for that for our kids, there's a different relationship with a third party, like counselor or therapist or mentor even than a parent relationship. So we, as adoptive parents, literally cannot be the end all be all for our kids. It's not that we're incapable or that there's something wrong with us, it just wasn't even meant to be that way. And especially, I think with our young adults, they need other people, safe people, who can speak into their lives and help them process all of that big stuff. If you don't already have that relationship, she should have a relationship with someone she knows how to process big feelings with, anticipating that there's going to be big feelings around the search, whether they're good or bad. I think it's just a landmine of really big feelings and as much as possible, trying to get her to maybe narrate and bring to life some of that what she's expecting and mauling over in her head so that maybe proactively you can start thinking or asking, well, what would happen if this? How would you think you would process that? Do you think you'll be really disappointed if we don't do that? Just kind of throwing out those possibilities so they don't blindsides her and kind of thinking ahead of what that experience might be like so you can prepare her for maybe many different possibilities.

[00:15:26.830] - Person 1

So as an adoptee, how would you counsel an adoptive mom to ask this question or to answer this question? So you meet somebody out and you're starting up like, small-talk conversation and you're describing your family. You know, I have two daughters that are 23 and then running on down through the lines of kids all down to four and they're like, "oh, so you have twins?" Which I don't, I have two 23 year olds who came to our family separately. My natural inclination is to share a bit of that story. I guess maybe it comes a little bit back to that wise idea, but as an adopted, how would you want me to respond to that? "So you have twins?"

[00:16:12.190] - Melissa Corkum

So this is an ongoing debate in our family between the different generations of adopted people. It's an interesting question because in a transracial family, when people are eventually going to meet all of us, we have told our kids that the fact that they came to our family through adoption is just kind of like what we consider public record information, right? Like, we try to protect their stories as much as

possible and let them share what they want to share, but also, there's some things that are just kind of public knowledge and in our family because some of us are Korean and some of us are Ethiopian, and some of us are mixed, and some of us are Caucasian, the adoption part isn't really like a private part of your story. Similarly, I had a child who was like, "Why have you told the whole world that we're home schooled?" Also not like, this is also kind of public information. We don't talk about the details of it, but the fact that you either go to public school or you're homeschooled isn't one of the things that we're going to go out of our way to protect about your story. Just like, there are some things about our story that don't have to do with adoption. There's eight of us. Again, public information, guys, there's only so much we can do in terms of privacy. So kind of talking about that, like, we want to honor their stories. And I don't know if your daughter would mind how you answer this conversation, but I think there are some things that we can generally say like, "oh, well, our oldest two daughters actually joined our family through adoption from two different families," I think would be sufficient enough. Like, that's kind of public information, in grand scheme of things. We have similar things, right. Because I'm a 39 year old with a two and a half year old granddaughter. We often get, "you don't look old enough to have a 23 year old," et cetera, right. And so then we have to say, "oh, well, actually, some of our children joined us through adoption," right. And so I don't have to tell intimate details of their story, but I think that is a pretty safe way. Also, your girls are old enough. Or maybe it would be worth posing that question to them and see if they have a feeling one way or the other, but I do feel like that language is pretty safe.

[00:18:49.570] - Person 1

Thank you. That takes a weight off my shoulders, so I appreciate hearing that.

[00:18:56.230] - Person 2

I really appreciate, too, talking about, like, what about our family is just public information. I think that's a really non-emotional way to talk about it. These are just the things that are facts and these are the facts that are available to everyone. As a single mom, my daughter's transracially adopted, too, but people just assume that her dad was dark skinned. And when they asked me, I always just say, "I don't know." I kind of play it off, but I think she gets away a little bit more than some other families because there's not a dad in the picture, but yea.

[00:19:40.330] - Melissa Corkum

We even had that. My mom got that a lot if she had all three of us out in public. People would say to her, "oh, your husband must be Asian." And so the interesting thing about how you answer a question like that is, you can decide to kind of shrug and walk away and not correct. And if you're a tired mum with three kids in the grocery store, that probably, and depending on your personality, that may seem like the easiest way out. I'm naturally an educator, and I also feel like, when I think about this really deeply, I think, no, I want someone to stop and say, oh, our kids joined us through adoption. Because I think if someone is immediately assuming that a white woman with three Korean kids has to have an Asian, actually, they wouldn't even say Asian, they would say Chinese, has to be married, like that's the only way that that can happen, then that person needs their world expanded to know that there's lots of different ways that families can be built. Now, this is my personality coming out here and my need to kind of throw education out into the world. So I think there's that piece. To kind of circle back around to how we answer these questions and how we talk about what's private and what's not, and I'm on really shaky ground here, I think, putting this out into the world, but I think sometimes when we overthink some of these things about, well, if I even breathe the word adoption or talk about how our kids came to us, and I group that in with some of the more intimate, private details of their story that 100% should be theirs, I feel like it's almost a form of projection. Like, if we never think about my kids education status, home school or private school, like that never occurred to me as like that's part of their story that needed to be protected. Or I never think about saying, "oh, yeah. She's the youngest of X kids." Like, there's certain details of our family story that nothing to do with adoption that I never think twice about sharing. The fact that I'm married, the fact that we live with my parents, all of these things that, again, if you know us in any sort of proximity, will be really, really apparent. And so I think when we throw adoption and we get to adoption and we put the breaks on and we're like, erhhhh. Wait, what about that? How do we respond to that? It almost projects us, like, extra weight that adoption is, again, so much different than any other part of who we are. Is the fact that we have to have long conversations about what is appropriate person first language for being an adoptee, but we

don't have those about my third grade son, right? Like, we put a lot of other qualifiers and adjectives in front of our kids, and when we all of a sudden put a red light and be like, oh, should adoption be that? I think sometimes it puts more weight on it. It puts a lot of pressure on the adopted part of our personality when, what if it could be part of who we are in equal parts of all the other pieces that make up who we are? And again, my personality, and I know that where we go to school and the fact that we have great loss because of adoption does maybe change that equation, but I think it's something to think about, especially when we're looking at our kids individual personalities that we're not projecting, if we always have a full stop when we start talking about adoption, are we projecting to them that all of a sudden adoption has to mean more to them than maybe they would have naturally thought of it as?

[00:23:39.190] - Lisa Qualls

It seems like there's this balance between kind of privacy and secrecy or something. Like, the fact that a child came to us through adoption is, like you're saying, it's not really private so much, but I guess it would depend a lot on the kid, too, and how they feel. Like in my family, it's really, really obvious since I have all four of my children who are adopted are from Ethiopia. But yeah, it's an interesting balance, I think.

[00:24:14.110] - Melissa Corkum

And I also think as the world is more and more seemingly diverse, I think the answer to that question doesn't really become like adopted people over here and the rest of the world. It's like we probably shouldn't be making assumptions around a lot of things. And those questions maybe should be more common. You know, tell me about your family because we don't know. There's so many step families, and adoption, foster care, kinship, right? Like the assumption that a nuclear family, two parents, kids by birth, that that's normal and everything else needs an explanation, I think, also has turned into something that could be problematic in our culture.

[00:25:05.710] - Person 1

Can you all think of a podcast that you have done, or maybe another resource that would be a good springboard for an adoptive parent and a teenager, you know, a fairly immature adoptee to sit down and listen to that would be a springboard for conversation?

[00:25:30.010] - Melissa Corkum

So, two things, maybe a book. We did a podcast with, it was co-authored by two folks. I feel like their names were Veronica and Shelby, but I'm wondering now if that was like the first and last name, but they did a book. I think it was called Adoptee Voices? I'll get back to you, Ashley. We'll put it in the show notes if you're listening to the podcast, and we'll put it in the comments under this video if you're watching in the Village group. And it was a collection of just reflections on adoption from people who had been fostered to adopt, infinite adoptions, transracially, like all over the place. And each entry is more or less short, like some are super short, and then some are maybe like a page and a half. So, that might be an interesting read to just read one every once in a while and kind of see anything there that you resonate with or what do you think? There's also a really cool YouTube video. I'll also put the link in all the places where there were a bunch of adoptees, and I think they were in a gym and there were kind of like the answers to typical survey questions. There was like a line for never, a line for most of the time, sometimes, like, all those typical survey questions. And so someone in the background of the video is asking a question like, do you, like, for example, did you feel like you belonged in your family growing? Up or something like that. And then the adoptees would stand on the answer that resonated with them the most. And I think they also maybe ask some follow up questions of like, if there was a whole bunch of people in one place and one adopted in the other, they would say, could you tell us a little bit more about that? It's one of my favorite adoptee videos because it shows the diversity of experience rather than just kind of blanket statements saying, all adoptees feel this way. All adoptees missed their birth mom on their birthday, all adoptees this. And so it really gave a good representation, a visual of how people have different things. So even just watching that together and kind of going through each question and seeing where your adoptee might fall would be an interesting conversation, I think.

[00:28:04.010] - Person 1

Yeah, no, that's great. I gave her that book that you referenced, and I saw her take it with her to school, but I didn't have the guts or the courage to kind of follow up and be like, are you reading that? Is there anything of interest? So maybe next time I see it, like in her room or something, just like, referencing it and, hey, if there's anything you ever want to talk about, or if there's one that you read, that's really interesting, I'd love to hear about it. Would that be welcome, you think?

[00:28:40.670] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. You know, your daughter better than I do. I think the invitation is great, and I would probably leave it there just because I'm thinking when I was a teenager, if my mom had given me that book, I probably would have been super curious, and I would have read it. But if I thought that she was giving it to me to read so we could talk about it, I probably wouldn't have been super excited. And I probably would have read it with different eyes. So I think always having the invitation, but not, I think, I tell a lot of parents of young adults like, invitation without expectation is really an art that is a hard balance to strike as a parent. I have struggled with it, but when we were able to strike that, my husband came to it much more naturally than me. We saw really beautiful things happen with our relationship with our young adults.

[00:29:42.350] - Person 1

How about the new Oprah Bruce Perry book would you give that to your adoptee?

[00:29:49.970] - Melissa Corkum

I actually think that book is just really good reading for the whole world for everyone. So I don't know that I would give it to her and say, I think you should be this as an adoptee. I just think you should start giving it to everybody and also include her.

[00:30:04.190] - Lisa Qualls

It can be your Christmas gift for everybody in your family. We are reading it as a group together in the Hope Circle in the Village.

[00:30:13.490] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. And I think because this isn't a joke, I really do believe everyone should read that book. I thought it was so well done, and it has so many reminders to just humanity in general. And so I do think also, if you were talking about it all the time, but you were talking about it to everyone, and then she also happened to get a copy, she'd be like, mom is giving this to everyone. And then she may or may not read it, obviously you can't control that. But I do think that book should be mandatory reading for life.

[00:30:51.570] - Lisa Qualls

In addition to this live conversation, we did have some questions left for us in our Facebook group, and one of them came from Holly, who asked, "Melissa, you mentioned that you raged as a teen. Would you be willing to share how that resolved? What did your parents do that did or did not help?"

[00:31:09.930] - Melissa Corkum

Yes, I've been pretty open about the fact that I was a rager as a kid. I don't know that it was teen, it was definitely like grade school. And if you've been following the podcast for any length of time, you know that it was pretty much always about chores. I hate cleaning, I hate the mundaneness of it, I hate that you have to do it after you've already done it, and so, like so many of our kids, had a reaction that maybe didn't fit the ask. The ask was pick up your stuff off of your bedroom floor and the response was like, I mean, hours friends, of kicking beds, banging things, screaming. I remember it all. So Holly asked how that resolved. Really, it resolved, I think, over time by just my mom not requiring me to clean my room anymore as I got older. And I've always been quick to anger and I think as I got older, I learned how to mitigate it, how to not put myself in situations that frankly made me angry because as I got older, I had more autonomy over my life. And what happened was that when I found myself parenting kids with really big behaviors that triggered me and made me angry is it revealed these huge cracks in my own mental health and my own emotional intelligence because I had never learned great coping mechanisms, healthy coping mechanisms for managing really big, angry feelings. And so I was in my 30s before I really started, I think, to get a handle on my anger issues. And it was necessitated by being a parent to kids with really big behaviors. And I think it just

highlights how important it is for us as parents, whether we're adoptees or just people with buttons that can be pushed, that we have our own support system as adoptive parents, and also again, recognizing that our adoptees' stories aren't over and we want them to kind of have it all figured out. I'll speak for myself, I want my kids to pretty much have it all figured out before they leave under the protective covering of our house. I really wanted my kids to have a lot of things figured out by, like, 18 when they didn't have to listen to us anymore. But I think just understanding that if we can maintain a relationship with our kids, regardless of the amount of healing that they are/aren't able to do, then we're able to support them when they're ready. My parents and I have a great relationship. We actually share a house with them, and so it meant that I had all the support that I needed, both for my husband, for my parents to get what I needed later in life when I was actually ready to deal with all those issues.

[00:34:28.950] - Lisa Qualls

So as you were talking, I was just thinking about all that we've learned from the Enneagram. How has the Enneagram helped you understand those rages? Has that shed some light on it for you in addition to sort of processing some of your adoptee stuff?

[00:34:46.050] - Melissa Corkum

Well, I think it has. So I identify as a seven on the Enneagram. And for those of you who aren't familiar with the Enneagram, sevens are here for all the fun and not for the negative. We reframe things in real time, often to reframe them as finding the silver lining and we're kind of eternal optimists, but we also don't love the mundane. In fact, I think our worst fear is being stuck in the mundane. And for me, chores feel like the mundane. I think it explains a lot of why, to this day, I despise repetitive, what I think are mundane chores. And I also have a really strong move to eight, which is my wing or my neighbor on the Enneagram. And eights are really friendly with anger, they're not afraid to show their anger. So I think that has helped me understand a little bit better and also kind of, without using the Enneagram as an excuse, understand my relationship with the mundane still to this day, and then figure out, is this something that needs to be, quote, unquote fixed? Or is this a growth point, or are there ways I can mitigate it? And it turns out that if you don't like doing tourism as an adult, you can make a choice to funnel some of your finances if you have enough to do that towards paying someone to do them for you, which is we have a young adult daughter who lives with us, and she is much better at chores than I am, and she hates them much less. And so she's helping us out in that way. We have shared a different house with our parents and the one we're currently in now with my parents, and we're currently in now and for a long time, I had an agreement with my mom that I would cook because she was kind of sick of trying to figure out what to make every night, and she would clean, and she thinks cleaning is cathartic and she enjoys it. And so I think also again, using our words to negotiate our needs and finding ways to have compromises and realizing that we're all different and not everyone, we all have gifts to bring. And so I think figuring out how to negotiate that and recognizing people's motivations and personalities has been really helpful.

[00:37:12.650] - Lisa Qualls

Well, I hope you enjoyed this conversation. As you can hear, people had lots of different kinds of questions. And as you already know, Melissa is a wealth of information. So thank you, Melissa, for answering all those questions for us. If you found this interesting and these are conversations you'd like to be having, as always, we invite you to join us in the village, our community. You can find information about it at theadoptionconnection.com/village. We also want to invite you to follow us this month on Instagram, where we are posting almost daily. We're following prompts, we're joining with other members of the Adoption Triad to write about our own thoughts about different topics related to adoption. You can follow us on Instagram @postadoptionresources and hear what we have to say, and we'd love to hear your thoughts as well.

[00:38:08.150] - Melissa Corkum

Also, if you're looking for relevant links from this week's episode, you can head to the show notes for those at theadoptionconnection.com/153. Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. You can find us on Instagram as @postadoptionresources or better yet, join our free Facebook community at theadoptionconnection.com/facebook.

[00:38:33.590] - Lisa Qualls

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

[00:38:41.810] - Melissa Corkum

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