

[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.

[00:00:10.410] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:19.050] - Melissa Corkum

Hi, friends. If you have been listening to us here at the Adoption Connection for a while, you know that we really value hearing stories from all sides of the adoption triad. And we particularly love it when we're able to connect with guests who kind of hold two seats on that triad, who hold two roles on the triad. And so this week, we have the privilege of hearing from my friend Jennifer Woolley, who is both a birth mom and an adaptive mom and hopefully will also get a chance to explore a little bit about how knowing her dominant type has kind of shaped how she experiences that and is able to process that. Before we jump in, we wanted to give you a heads up that we do talk about some of our topics in this episode, so you might want to grab some earbuds or wait until you don't have young ears listening. So, Jennifer, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:08.630] - Jennifer Woolley

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:10.480] - Melissa Corkum

So would you just briefly introduce yourself to our folks? Like, where do you live? Who makes up your family? What do your days look like?

[00:01:21.870] - Jennifer Woolley

Yeah. So I'm Jennifer Woolley. I am married for almost 18 years now. I live in Houston, Texas, and I am raising two boys that are nine and eleven, and they are both adopted. I am a former nurse, but a stay at home mom now. And so I've become the PTO mom and the baseball mom and all of that fun stuff.

[00:01:45.630] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, those are fun, busy ages.

[00:01:49.050] - Jennifer Woolley

Yeah.

[00:01:49.880] - Melissa Corkum

So we're just going to jump right in. Can you just kind of walk us through your story of being a birth mom and kind of how you came to make an adoption plan for your son?

[00:01:59.790] - Jennifer Woolley

So I found out I was pregnant a month after I graduated from high school. I was not dating the father of the baby. My senior year, I actually had had an abortion and was really grieving that loss and that pregnancy and really struggling. It's kind of what had started the spiral. The reason I was pregnant again to begin with. That abortion had really caused me to grieve quite a bit and to process this pregnancy. And so I knew now that this wasn't just some lump of tissue. I knew that this was a child, and I wanted to do everything I could to give this child the best chance at life. And I had supportive family. I had parents who would have helped me raise him, but I knew that I couldn't give him the family that he deserves. And I really wanted him to have the stability of mom, dad, siblings, pets, all of that. And if I had chosen to raise him then I would have been sharing custody with this man who I didn't know very well. And I just wanted more than that for my son. So I was connected with an adoption agency through my Church. And so I went to them and they did my first pregnancy test and counseled me through the pregnancy. And when I was about eight months, I decided that adoption was the best option for him and the best chance to give him all of those things that I wanted for him. So I was able to choose his parents from some profiles of the agency. And I met them for the first time in January, and he was born in the next February or the next month. So it was intended to be an

open adoption. And that was the only thing, I think, that gave me the strength to be able to make that choice was to know that I would still get to be a part of his life and to see him grow and to know that he was healthy and happy. And that was a comfort to me to know that I would be able to it wasn't goodbye. It was just that I wasn't going to be able to parent him, but he would still always know how much I loved him and wanted to be a part of his life.

[00:04:34.190] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. I can't imagine making those decisions. When you talk about thinking about his life and what you wanted for him. And I don't know if you've ever thought about this. And I think about all of the folks who identify as dominant type two on the Enneagram, and one of the things that I think is our strengths are also sometimes our weakest points, but strength is always thinking about other people and what they need and putting themselves in their shoes. And that's not the way that I come about the world all the time, which sounds terrible to say. Right. But I think my first thought would be like, what do I want in this situation? Or what's either the most convenient or what would fulfill something for me? And so as you look back and think about that, have you ever thought about how the two's tendency to kind of always think about the needs of other people influence your decision? Is there any part of you that really did want to parent and was just thinking like, but that's not what he needs?

[00:05:42.680] - Jennifer Woolley

Yeah. I mean, 100% of me wanted to parent. I absolutely wanted to parent him. But 100% of me also knew that I was willing to do anything and everything for this child. And if that meant that I didn't get to be a part of his life so that he would have the life that I felt like he deserved, that was never a question for me. I think as moms, that's what we do as a mother, we are willing to sacrifice anything and everything for our children. And so being a birth mother is no different. We are still mothers. It's just a different kind of decision and being willing to do that for our children. When I was thinking about, I could not fit into an Enneagram any better than a two. Everything you read, I check I definitely fit in that box. And I was thinking about it and how it affected my decision. And it absolutely when it comes to him wanting to do what was right for him in spite of my own feelings 100%. One thing, though, that I do hear some birth mother's say and I don't feel this personally, but I hear a lot of people say I knew this was never my child and that God was just using me, that this was always their baby and I did it for them. That is not my feeling in my heart. I think there was a time in my grief process where I kind of said that because I felt like it helped me rationalize it and process it, and it made it sound more understandable to other people. It made them be able for me to just say I knew he was never mine and he was always theirs and I wanted to help this family. This was never about the adoptive parents. Never. This was never about helping someone have a family that they couldn't have biologically or giving them this gift. It has always been about him and giving him that gift for me. So that's one thing that just kind of never sits well with me when I hear people say because it wasn't my job to provide this family for him. I'm thankful that in the brokenness of my situation that our paths crossed in a way that's the way that their family was built and in a way that gave him something that I could not. But the two in me was not trying to help an infertile couple have a baby. I was trying to give him the life that I felt like he deserved to have.

[00:08:19.510] - Melissa Corkum

Thank you for sharing that. I think that's really important. And I think as an adoptee right, everyone has their own stories, and I think it's just really important to give space to all of those possibilities. And it just helps us. I think as people not in your position to open our minds to things that we never maybe have even given half a thought or half a second to, and just to appreciate all the different stories and perspectives that especially birth moms come to in this kind of crazy adoption journey and how there are so many kind of these both and situations. Like you said, 100% of you really wanted to raise him and parent him and be in the everyday, and yet you also wanted something different in terms of what his immediate family would look like. It's hard to kind of imagine those existing at the same time. And yet that's what we kind of wrestle with everyday is these kind of crazy both ends when I hear about birth mother stories and I listen to the anguish of what it's like to decide not to parent. I think that birth mothers are sometimes the most unlikely adoptive mothers because you understand the kind of gravity of what it means to be interested with someone else's child and what it means as a birth mother to not be parenting your child every day. Can you tell us a little bit about how you're joining to becoming an adoptive mom?

[00:10:03.260] - Jennifer Woolley

Yes. So my husband and I got married and decided that we would start a family. I think we've been married about three years when we started trying. I assumed that it would come very easily for me. I had been pregnant twice, both of those had been unplanned pregnancies. And so once we started trying, I just assumed it would happen. And after a few months, it did not. And I was actually working. I went on to nursing school after I placed my son, and I was working in labor and delivery, and I was also working for the OB who delivered my son. He had been kind of instrumental in that journey. And so I just went into his office, and I was like, do all the tests. So very early on in the process, much sooner than most people walking through infertility, we were able to get a diagnosis of male infertility. And so we went through a couple of years of fertility treatments. We did two full IVF cycles that failed, and we were pretty lost at that point because adoption was not an option for me. The open adoption that I had intended was closed by the adoptive parents, and I was no longer in contact with my son and with them. There was no one big reason why that happened that I am aware of. It just kind of gradually waned. And then all of a sudden they stopped responding. So I was really grieving and very much hurt by adoption and by the process. And so I was not at all interested in pursuing adoption. We had talked about embryo adoption. There was just something in me that so desperately needed to be pregnant and to carry a child, not to replace the son that I had given birth to. But I just felt like for my healing and for that next step in the journey, I needed to be able to experience carrying a pregnancy, doing all the things, giving birth and not having to say goodbye to that child, getting to bring that child home. And so that was something that was very important to me. Through that, along the way, multiple situations came into our lives where asking us to consider adoption. And I just, no. My answer was no. I didn't even think about it, didn't talk about it, didn't pray about it. So finally we just had this moment where if we don't even talk about this, if we don't even look into this, we were just kind of spinning our wheels. And so we had an opportunity to meet with a girl who was about twelve weeks pregnant, and she was looking to place her child for adoption. And we're like, you know what? Let's just meet with her. It can't hurt anything. And so we sat down at a Starbucks with this girl, and our hearts were changed in that hour. I don't know how to explain it. It was just supernatural. I went from, there is no chance I could ever adopt, I could ever love a birth mom, I could ever face a birth mom to, oh, my gosh, I love this girl, and I can love her in a way that most adoptive moms can't. Not should I not adopt, like, I have this incredible opportunity to love her. I thought I couldn't adopt because I knew what she was feeling, and then I realized I should adopt because I knew what she was feeling or I could. And so I knew that if we were going to do this, I wanted her to have the same support and education and advocacy that I had had through my adoption agency. And so we actually took her back to the agency that I had placed through. They agreed to facilitate the adoption, even though we were already matched. And so she went through months of counseling and all of the same things that I had done as a birth mom. And then we had to start the process that every other adoptive parent would do when we did all the home studies and became approved parents through this agency. And we walked through that whole pregnancy with her, and we had baby showers, and we fixed her nursery, and we named our little girl. Her name is Sarah and had closets full of pink. And at 38 weeks, she called to tell us that she had decided to parent.

[00:14:44.750] - Lisa Qualls

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[00:15:04.670] - Melissa Corkum

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[00:15:42.090] - Jennifer Woolley

She called to tell us that she had decided to parent. We were so devastated because we felt like this hadn't been what we wanted, it hadn't been what we thought. And yet it had seemed so clear that this

is what we were supposed to do. And then we are here and we lost this baby. I don't know how else, I mean, we were just so confused, like, what are we doing? And though I understood for her, I understood her grief, her pain. I walked through that pregnancy with her crying harder than she did at every appointment because I felt it for her. I remembered. And I was literally in the same building that I had walked through my pregnancy with. And so I couldn't be angry with her because I understood and I knew at 38 weeks how much I wanted to say, forget it, call it off, I'm not doing this. I can't do this. And so I couldn't blame her for that, but I thought, what is going. At that point, it had been twelve years since I placed my son about, and the woman who had canceled me through my whole pregnancy was still the same person who was canceling this birth mom. And she had become a second mom to me. I was very close to her. And so she called me one day through this process and said, hey, a girl came in yesterday. She's 37 weeks, she's expecting a baby boy, and she's chosen you. And I was like, what? Wait, I'm not ready. I didn't say you could show my profile. I don't know if we're doing this anymore. I think we're done. And she said, you need to pray about it. I just know that this is your son. And so the next Friday, we met her, and the next Thursday, we were meeting our son. The way it all happened, now looking back, there's no way I would have ever walked back into that agency and said, I'm ready to adopt. Sign me up. I'm here. This building had held the memories of my deepest pain and deepest hurt. And so I would have never kind of, quote, willingly gone back there. But I feel like we walked the path that we had to walk through Sarah, through losing her to get us in the place where we were supposed to be to meet our son, Ben. Then 21 months later, we adopted a second son through the same agency. So now both of our boys are adopted through that agency. And it is as hard as I thought it would be. Their placements were incredibly painful, seeing their birth mom's pain, feeling their birth mom's pain. I think as adoptive moms, we all have this deep love and compassion for birth moms and for what they're going through and for their loss and their pain, but it was so real for me to experience that moment again and to feel, you know, I felt like I'm taking their child away from them because I know that's how they felt. And this guilt of here, my family is growing, and this is supposed to be the most joyous day of my life. And to know how much she was hurting and that this is the worst day of her life. That's a lot to try to carry in the process at the same time. And I've said that I worried that the pain would override the joy and that I wouldn't feel the joy. And then I worried that I'd have so much joy that I wouldn't feel my pain and my grief and I would forget. And I've learned that it's not true. It's not possible. I mean, I am able to feel all of the joy and all of the love and all of the compassion and still grieve and hurt for her and know what she's going through and feel her pain all at the same time, which is hard to explain, but I'm learning eleven years into the journey how to balance all of that.

[00:20:17.530] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, it's a lot to hold. Are you able to have open adoptions with either of your sons?

[00:20:22.970] - Jennifer Woolley

We do. We have open adoptions with both of them. With one of my son's birth moms, we have a great relationship. We text, we see them several times a year. Anytime there's something that I would share with a grandparent, I also share with birth mom. She's more family, so that's really cool. I'm glad we have that. With my younger son's birth mom, it's a little more complicated. She is still grieving. I think she's probably never really processed her choice, and she's still making bad choices in her life. And so as much as I want openness, I also have to protect my son. And so balancing that has been a little more of a challenge. We did see her about a year ago, so we don't see her as regularly, but I send communication. His communication with her is a little bit less. I'm hopeful that at some point when she's in a better place, that relationship will grow. But we do communicate as much as possible.

[00:21:31.130] - Melissa Corkum

Is there anything else you would add to how you're being a birth mom and kind of understanding what that journey is like has shaped your perspective or kind of practically how you're walking out being an adoptive mom, other than obviously openness is really important.

[00:21:45.830] - Jennifer Woolley

Definitely with the openness, just understanding the importance of the promises that I made to those birth moms and for their own grief and their own journey, being able to fulfill those promises and to maintain openness to the extent that it's healthy and with boundaries. But for my son, I don't want

them to ever doubt that they are loved and that they are wanted. I don't want them to ever for 1 second feel like their birth moms did not want them or did not love them because I feel like our children's self worth so depends on that. As adoptees, I think there's that tendency to feel that, and that's a constant struggle, no matter how much you hear, like, I wasn't wanted, I was rejected. And so being able to tell our adopted children how much they are loved, I think is so important for me. My sons get to see my grief. They get to see firsthand how much I want to be a part of my child's life, that I honor his choices if he doesn't want that, that I honor his adoptive parents, but that my desire is to be a part of his life and that he's not a decision I made 23 years ago and walked away from. There are pictures of him in our home. We talk about him. We pray for him. They see how much a part of me he still is and always has been and my love for him. And so my hope is that as a birth mom, when they see that in my life, they're able to understand fully their birth mom's love for them and to know that they weren't rejected, they weren't discarded. It's not something that happened to their birth mom and that she doesn't think of them, that they are a part of her. And so I think it's a unique gift that I'm able to give them just for them to be able to see that and to fully understand that and also just to know the importance of honoring their birth moms and their choice to give them life, to give them this life. And so even when the relationship isn't there, just finding opportunities and seeing the importance of being able to say, we're so thankful for her and we're so thankful for the choice that she made. And I lost my mom at a very young age. And so that's kind of a part also of my story of so desperately needing to know my identity biologically and finding confirmation in why I am the way that I am. And so that's another perspective I have with my boys. But I often am trying to give them those pieces of your eyes are so beautifully almond shaped, Joe. You have eyes just like your birth mom, and you get those beautiful eyes from her. He's very smart and all of these things and just trying to be able to tie that back to their birth family and their biological roots and that they are that way for a reason. And we don't know either of their birth fathers. We've never met them, but we just still include them in the conversation. We don't know your birth father and what he's like. But I wonder if you're so athletic because he's athletic. And maybe you get this from him. And so just giving them those pieces of their roots, I think, is so important because that validates and letting them know it's okay to talk about that. It's okay to wonder, do you have your mom's eyes? Because you don't have my eyes. So do you have your birth mom's eyes? Giving them that space to wonder those things and to ask those questions and know that it's not going to offend me. It's not going to hurt my feelings. I think gives them that room and that space to be validated in those ways.

[00:26:06.450] - Melissa Corkum

Do you think, you know, if there are birth moms listening who haven't adopted, how has been an adoptive mom on this side of your story? Has that changed at all, how you've processed that experience of being a birth mom?

[00:26:26.510] - Jennifer Woolley

I think so. It's hard to separate the two because I am both, I would assume, for the positive because of my unique perspective, it's certainly given me a space to be able to kind of talk about my perspective. And in that process, I've had to figure out what my perspective is. And so to be able to share it, I've had to process it and I've had to deal with it and really work through some things. And so I think from that aspect, it has, but it also has helped me. I think I used to struggle as a birth mom with some of the decisions that she made and not understanding. And I just kept thinking why I can't understand because I'm not an adoptive mom. And so now I am an adoptive mom and I feel like I can better understand. So on the flip side of that, I think that has given me also the perspective that as an adoptive mom, I have to give my birth mom some Grace, and I have to kind of understand what they're walking through and when there is a tendency to get frustrated with a choice or a word choice or something that's hurtful and just to remember that at one point I was an 18 year old kid who was grieving the loss of my child. And I probably said some really hurtful things or stupid things. And so remembering that and wishing that I had been given that same Grace helps me to, I think, process some of my own grief and then also be more forgiving from where they're coming from. But I do think it's helped me to process it, to grieve and to really give a voice to my story.

[00:28:34.870] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, we didn't talk about this beforehand, but talked a lot about grief. And obviously, you've had a lot of parts of your story that need grieving. How do you think that experience or what have you learned

about grief that you think is helping your boys as they process the grief of not living with birth parents?

[00:28:58.030] - Jennifer Woolley

Other than what, and it sounds cliche, but what a process it all is. I think there's such a misconception, especially for birth moms, even in my family, some older family members that I have say like, oh, that's a decision you made. You need to grieve that. You need to deal with it, and you need to move on. You made it, you can't change it. And at least in this case, that's not a one time decision. It was a lifelong decision that I was making to walk through and how that's ever evolving and changing at different stages in his life. There are different things that I grieve missing out on certain things and that it can be cyclical, that there can be things that spark that I never really understood was this kind of grief trauma. Why can I not get out of bed in February? And I want to cry all the time. It's a date on the calendar, but it's very real. And there are things that have the power to kind of rip open those wounds that you're working desperately to heal. So I think being able to show my son that it's okay that maybe you weren't grieving yesterday or felt like you're grieving yesterday and you're okay with this and that today you are. That's normal. That's okay. And maybe this one thing, it just hits you, that it's making you sad that your birth family isn't a part of this. And maybe you didn't think of that last birthday or last milestone, but now you do, and that's normal. I think I didn't really understand that until probably recently, and also maybe just that it's healthy. I also wasn't really taught how to grieve the loss of my mom growing up. And I think I'm just kind of now as an adult and as a mom processing a lot of that grief, and I've seen my brother grieved very differently than I did. So just the importance of walking through that process and talking about things and being honest with our feelings and our emotions and letting people be there to help you through that.

[00:31:29.410] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I think that's really important. We historically as a Western culture, have not done grief well, and we all have something to grieve, even if there hasn't been a super tangible loss. And of course, adoption stories on all sides of the triad are kind of rife with all different types of grief, both tangible and kind of these disenfranchised types of losses. So I think it is really important to remember that it's not kind of like a one and done deal. We're kind of never finished grieving some of these things. You mentioned a little bit about letting our kids know often how much they were wanted and loved by their birth mothers, even if they chose not to parent. Is there anything else you would want adoptive parents to know that don't have the same perspective in how they're telling their children their stories or filling in gaps if there's a lot of unknowns, whether it's an international adoption, there's so many reasons in adoption where there might not be as much information or as much openness. Do you have any other practical words of wisdom for parents listening?

[00:32:50.650] - Jennifer Woolley

And I think that the other big thing that I've just really learned through this journey is and I learned this again with losing my mom at an early age. I was kind of made to feel like loving her made it some sort of competition with my family that was still alive. And so I felt like I was dishonoring other people by wanting to know her and by loving her and missing her and acknowledging that she was my mother and that she lived and she was a part of my life. And then with the struggles with my son's adoptive parents and that broken relationship has just really taught me that with my boys, it does not have to be a competition. It's not like they're going to run out of love or they only have so much space in their hearts or in their lives for one of us that they have to pick and choose. And so they are capable of loving and honoring birth family for their role in their life and wanting to know about them and just acknowledging them as a part of their life and a very real and important part of their life. And that doesn't take away from me as their mom. I don't have to be threatened by that. They still love me. They're different roles. They're not competing roles. They're two separate roles. And so I think it's really important to be able to give our children that freedom, to be able to have room for everyone and to know that they don't have to worry that I'm going to be upset if they want to know about her. And I think that's not for my sake and not for the adoptive parents sake or birth mom's sake, for my children's sake, to know that they have that. I think I would have probably grieved a lot differently if I had had that freedom with my mom and not worried about hurting someone. So that's something that is really important for us, even if you don't know much about her and aren't able to fill in those links for them, just being able to reassure them that she loved you, she carried you, she took care of you

while she had you and then chose life for you and gave you the opportunity to have this life, whether she chose that or didn't intend to, that I think that we can still honor her for that life and just for who she is and that they are a part of her. So just acknowledging that the good things in our children and saying, like I said, I wonder if you get that from her and if we don't know, just allowing them that room in their own brains to maybe fill in their own blanks for themselves with the positive because there is a lot of loss and a lot of negatives. And so being able to foster just those positive attributes, and I hope that she's like you in that way. I hope that you got that from her. I wonder if you did and just kind of allowing their hearts to heal, to have those pieces of the puzzle, even if they're made up.

[00:36:28.630] - Melissa Corkum

We need to give the birth parents in our children's lives, even if we don't know kind of the benefit of the doubt and speak with a lot of compassion and kindness and I think that honors both them and our kids and I think that's really helpful. So, Jennifer, thank you for sharing your story, for your vulnerability, speaking from your perspective and allowing others to gain wisdom from your lived experience. It's a lot to hold and carry for one person, but also fun to watch the incredible amount of redemption that's kind of come over the years. If people want to connect with you, is there a good way that they can connect?

[00:37:18.430] - Jennifer Woolley

I'm not on a ton of social media, but Instagram is probably the thing I'm most active on. I'm @holland513 is my handle and I share bits and pieces of my story there. I am still hopefully waiting for a relationship with the son that I placed. He is 23, so I always want to honor him and that his faith and his privacy and that this is his story to tell. So I do share my heart as a birth mom. I'm hopeful that someday I will get to share a story of our reunification and our relationship, but for now, I'm still hopeful for that. But I do try to share my perspective so that adoptive parents and other birth moms can just kind of see through the eyes of my story. And I think as adoptive parents, it helps us to love our children, our adopted children better when we see them through the eyes of their birth mom and their love for them.

[00:38:26.330] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, well, thank you again so much for being here. I appreciate you a lot.

[00:38:31.330] - Jennifer Woolley

Thank you so much.

[00:38:33.770] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:38:48.830] - Lisa Qualls

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

[00:38:57.050] - Melissa Corkum

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