

[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,

[00:00:10.430] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:19.110] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to this month's Mailbag episode where we answer your questions. Our first question today is this. We have an adopted daughter who is six. She only has challenging behaviors at home, and we don't get any negative feedback from teachers, the bus driver or other parents. She is well behaved at school. So it's hard to understand sometimes that these big behaviors come from complex developmental trauma and not willful disobedience. Do the behaviors only happening at home stem from an attachment issue? Is this common to only have behaviors at home and not out in the world? And are other parents experiencing this, too? Well, first of all, we can guarantee other parents are experiencing this. Melissa, why don't you start us off?

[00:01:01.670] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, this is actually a super common question, which is one of the reasons why we thought this would be a great one to address on the podcast, because we do think there are a lot of folks out there probably listening, going, yes, that's my kid, now tell me all the things. That's the first thing you're not alone. The second thing is I think there are a lot of factors at play. And so we'll talk about the ones that come to mind, but just know that it is really tricky to tease all of this out sometimes. And so I always joke that if I ever write my memoir, it's going to be called Check your logic at the door. We apply so much traditional logic sometimes these situations and we just can't figure out like this just doesn't make sense. But so I'll start talking from a polyvagal brain science perspective. And then, Lisa, maybe you can talk a little bit about the attachment part, because I think there's both things that could be happening. Often we'll think, well, good behavior in other places is a positive. Like, at least there are places where our child can behave, which is definitely one way to look at it because we're currently working with the family right now whose son has been kicked out of double digit amount of schools. Like he struggles everywhere. And so that's its own different kind of challenging. But from a polyvagal perspective, there's three different physiological states that our nervous system can be in. One is what we call the top of the polyvagal ladder; and it's like safe, engaged. Think about your nervous system being really open, kind of vulnerable, willing to connect. And then there's an activated state where you're actively feeling fearful for some reason, logical or not. And so you actively either fight or try to flee the situation. And so sometimes that looks like getting really argumentative or running out of the classroom or some of those behaviors. But then there's also the very bottom of the polyvagal ladder, which is a collapse in your dorsal vagal part of your nervous system. We're also hearing this called when we hear fight, flight, freeze. And then there's another one called fawn now. And this is kind of like what I call flying under the radar. I think in our kids looks like hyperobidience, like they know how to kind of follow along at school to be under the radar. And it's kind of a survival mechanism. And so sometimes, and this probably doesn't feel like great news, our kids are safe enough around us to act out, to show what they're really feeling on the inside, but they might be too afraid to let those feelings out at school, which doesn't sound like we have the better end of the deal, but it could be a felt safety issue.

[00:03:49.550] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah. This question, my first thought is, well, thank goodness there's some place where she is doing well, where she's functioning well. She can make it through a school day, which is really, really a gift. But we do know that for many of our children, home and family is the scariest, hardest thing. It's one thing to have a teacher who you want to have like you. It's another thing altogether to have parents, when your experience of parents is that they either aren't safe or they leave. And so it can be a very frightening thing for a child to trust a parent. And so I think sometimes when you ask if it's an attachment issue, well, I think there's some relevance to that because we are always trying to build secure attachment with our kids, but it puts a lot of expectation on them. It's hard, hard work for them. I remember our therapist telling me, Lisa, the hardest thing Kalikan does every single day is be in a family. She felt comfortable in a group environment like school, where the expectation was that she

would do what the other children were doing. But home and having a mother and having someone meeting her needs was much more difficult for her. And because attachment is so difficult, it's not about you. Like, she doesn't like her teacher more than she likes you. It's more that the role of the mother or the father is the hardest to receive and to trust. And so she's more reactive with you than she is with less personal relationships. I think all you can do is just put things in place to support her behaviors at home and try to help her stay regulated and connected to the best of your ability. But I know as a mom and as a parent, this can be really discouraging. And after a while, it really does get difficult to remain sort of open hearted and sensitive to our kids when we feel like we get the worst behavior every single day. So I would encourage you if you have never done our compassion challenge. It is a free challenge you can find it on our website at the adoptionconnection/compassion, and it will take you through some simple steps to begin renewing compassion for your child. We talk a lot about blocked care. You'll get an introduction to that as well. So anybody listening who's feeling discouraged and like, gosh, you're just running out of all those good feelings towards your kids. I would definitely encourage you to check that out.

[00:06:25.880] - Lisa Qualls

Okay. Our second question comes from Michael. He says, when will our 14 year old adopted daughter, who came to us at the age of nine, begin to show some indication that she feels safe with my husband and I as her dad's? It's been a little over four years, and we know it takes time. We're just wondering what thoughts you might have about this.

[00:06:45.690] - Melissa Corkum

Wow. This is a hard question to answer because the answer is probably not easy to swallow, which is sometimes it can take a lifetime to build up felt safety after so many years. I know that I even struggle with issues around felt safety, and I was adopted as an infant. These changes to our nervous system are super impactful. All that being said, there's also a ton of hope and a lot of resilience in the nervous system. So I would say have some grace for yourself and your daughter, but also be realistic that even if we think about this from a really plain math numbers perspective, she's still only been with you, like, the amount of time she's been with you is still only half the time, roughly, that she wasn't with you. And not that there's anything magic about crossing that what we call equilibrium point. But I think it helps put it in perspective. The nervous system starts to build a confirmation bias in itself based on its past experiences. And so there are potentially nine years of experiences that your daughter has had where maybe adults haven't been safe or they've let her down or it's been hard to connect. And so the nervous system is going to take a while to switch that confirmation bias that adults that are supposed to keep her safe really will keep her safe. So I know five years feels like a long time, and you probably feel like, it feels like she's been here forever. I don't know why she doesn't act like it, but it is a long process for the nervous system to change confirmation bias. And so we would just encourage you to keep at it. Because it doesn't mean that what you're doing isn't working. Sometimes I talk about those, like at splash pads where there's like one giant big red bucket at the top and there's like, this dribble of water into it. And at some point it gets heavy enough to dump all the water all over the kids underneath. And so the care and the connection that you both are pouring into her matter. But sometimes it just takes a long time for there to be enough cumulative positive experiences to kind of tip that felt safety bucket in the other direction.

[00:09:08.930] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah. And I think that attachment and healing of these deep, deep wounds, I do think it's a lifelong process. I don't think that our kids are just going to, if we do everything right, that all of a sudden, miraculously, they're going to feel safe, they're going to be secure. I think it's a very long journey. And a lot of us get to the point where our kids are like your daughter's, 14 these teen years, and we think, oh, my goodness, we only have a few more years and we get a little panicky. And we think if we don't accomplish this, if we don't have this deep connection, she doesn't trust us and feel completely safe by the time she graduates from high school, it is never going to happen. And Melissa and I can both attest to the fact that you will continue building relationship with your daughter throughout her lifetime. But especially like all those years in young adulthood, late teens, young adulthood, you will have many opportunities to be her secure base that she can trust, her safe haven that she can go to. I know with one of my adopted kids who's a young adult, it's been very, very hard to trust that anybody's ever going to take care of her and really consistently be there for her. But she's had a couple of

experiences in the last couple of years where we've been able to be a safe haven for her, and it has continued to build our relationship with her just little by little by little. And I think also we have to have a lot of peace that it is not our job to heal our kids. We are not the ultimate healers. I really believe that God is the ultimate healer. Our job is to facilitate that by being safe for them and let God do the work that he's going to do.

[00:10:56.290] - Melissa Corkum

The other thing I would say is it's a really tricky thing when you're trying to build healthy attachment with a teenager because your relationship with her is only five years old. So if we think about attachment years right, like, we think about how young a relationship is with a small child, and probably she's probably not quite 14, maybe in her social and emotional development, which is pretty common. But chronologically she's 14. And so there are other things that are starting to happen in the nervous system at 14 for neurotypical kids where they're starting to pull away and start to learn how to become more independent from their caretakers. And that's natural at 14. And so I think it is like 14 to 19 are tricky years to still be trying to build attachment because like, a five year old is not really pulling away the same way the 14 year old is. And so, like Lisa said, there is something else that happens developmentally, where it seems that young adult children in our family usually happens around between 20 and 24, where they kind of realize how much they do need parents. And so rather than pulling away, they kind of tend to circle back and reattach to the family after they've kind of had their chance to do life on their own. So I also would take into account that you're also entering into an age where naturally the nervous system is starting to create some separation anyway.

[00:12:29.230] - Lisa Qualls

Okay. And I have to say one last thing as well about this. There's something really beautiful about attachment, and that is that we don't have to stay in the attachment style that we had when we were young. We can continue to heal our attachment wounds. And there's something called earned secure attachment. And that is coming into secure attachment more as an adult, sometimes through a relationship with a very trusted friend or a spouse. I think relationship with God can be part of it, too. But I remind myself that even if I did not have the attachment relationship I had hoped for and wanted with one of my adult children in particular right now, that I hope I'm laying the groundwork for my child to become earned secure in the future and to be able to have secure attachment with her own children. Because that's what really matters here for me at this point with a young adult. So I just think there's a lot of hope and many years to continue building a beautiful relationship with her okay. Our third question today, why does our five year old daughter lash out at us? We will ask her a question calmly or talk to her, and she'll just fly off the handle. She'll randomly say she doesn't like her sister or calls her mean when her sister isn't even doing anything. These random outbursts are causing us to lose patience and compassion as we are yelled at constantly for no reason.

[00:14:06.110] - Melissa Corkum

It's just hard. Sometimes all it's just hard. But in terms of an explanation and to answer the question, it sounds like and of course, we don't have all the information, but it sounds like she has what we call a really low frustration tolerance. And some of you are probably thinking like, well, but basically what that means is because of her past experience, and I know we've said this kind of ad nauseam, her nervous system is fragile. It is hypervigilant, super protective. It has learned through early experiences that the world isn't safe. And that doesn't mean you're not safe. It just means that when her nervous system was building a paradigm around what the world was like, her early experiences told her nervous system the world might be dangerous, unpredictable. So that's the pattern that you enter into. And like we mentioned a couple of minutes ago, it just takes a long time for the nervous system to change its mind about some of these things. And so sometimes it helps to think about this behavior coming from that very primitive, protective part of the brain. So if we think about an infant who has a need, they cry. And that's probably the way God made them for a reason, because we don't get offended when babies cry because there's no mean words attached to that. The problem is, as our kids get older, their nervous systems are still kind of more like infants because they're still building this foundation of attachment and felt safety. But they have these, because there's immaturity, right? Their emotional part of their nervous system is younger than their speech and language part of their nervous system, which might be different than their social part of their nervous system, which is different than their chronological age. Your daughter has the words, potentially of a five year old, but

the emotional capacity and regulation may be closer to an infant. And so rather than just crying because of this regulation, she's able to put words to that. And the thing is, the words aren't even I think we did another podcast about this, about what to do about mean words. It's not even the words that are really what your daughter is trying to say. It's that she's so dysregulated, and that's just kind of how it's coming out of her body. And so it can be helpful to think like if she were crying like an infant and she had a need, how would I respond? Lisa also mentioned the Compassion Challenge. These are the situations where we find that parents get frustrated for good reason because it's hard day in and day out, but that this is kind of ripe breeding ground for blocked care. And once we as parents find ourselves in blocked care, the downward spiral kind of accelerates. And it's really hard to keep our open mindedness, our curiosity about behaviors, our compassion on board. So we would really encourage you to kind of think about this from two perspectives. One, how to care for your own nervous system through this stage of life where your daughter has a really small window of tolerance. So take the Compassion Challenge if you haven't already. Jump into overcoming blocked care coaching group, jump into the Village where we talk about blocked care at our gatherings. And from a perspective for your daughter., and this wasn't exactly part of the question, but I'm guessing you may also be wondering, how do we change it? We have a program here called the Regulation Rescue, and it's really designed for the whole family because we find, at this point in time, everyone's a little bit dysregulated. If you've been living with a five year old who's always dysregulated, then everyone probably is. But we do a therapeutic listening protocol during that intensive with families called the Safe and Sound Protocol. And we'll put links t all of this in the show notes. But that program could really help you help your daughter increase her window of tolerance so that you can help her move through the stage a little bit more quickly so that you're not kind of in this constant state of having to listen to her dysregulation and live through her dysregulation all the time, which we know is really hard.

[00:18:46.250] - Lisa Qualls

Yes, we do. I know I was thinking while Melissa was talking, one of the most important things we can do in situations like this is to find the things that help us stay calm and regulated, because our nervous systems are communicating with each other. And so even if we keep a calm expression on our face, if internally we are very riled up intense, our child's nervous system can sense that as well. And so taking good care for your own regulation, your own calm, making sure you have the capacity to cope with her big feelings,, is going to be really important. One of the things Melissa was talking about, thinking of her as a newborn or a young baby, I think in situations like this, the more you can bring her close, the better. And in terms of asking her questions or making requests, bring her close, make connection with her first before you make the request and see if you can help her remain in a calm state. And there are so many things you can help her stay regulated. I mean, you can go all the way back to the beginning of making sure you're empowering her body's needs and connecting with her all those sorts of things. And again, we don't know all the details. But as hard as it is, I would draw her close, be her regulating presence. She's not going to regulate herself, so you're going to have to co regulate her with you. If you have simple things like a rocking chair or physical activity you can do with her to help her calm, I think that that always helps. And then in terms of her sister, I don't know how old the sister is, if the sister's younger or older, but I would just make really sure that you're supporting the sister. One of the things I learned early on, and this is more about when one child physically harms another, is to comfort the injured child first before you address the child with behaviors. So if there are things going on with the sister, just make sure the sister feels seen and safe and make sure she's getting connection from you. And the other daughter is not just getting correction. So make sure everybody is feeling seen and safe in the family.

[00:21:03.860] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. The other thing I would say is, like I already said earlier in this episode, logic doesn't really apply. And so you're probably thinking like, I don't understand why we're making reasonable requests in a calm manner and the reaction from our child does not match the input, right? And so again, I would say there is something we can't always put our fingers on it because the nervous system is so complicated and so complex. But something about that request is pushing her beyond her frustration tolerance. It could be that your tone of voice or the quality of your voice subconsciously reminds her of a birth parent or someone from her past, and she might not even be able to put words to that. It could be that there's an auditory processing disorder, and so a question, she knows that it requires an

answer, but she knows it's going to take her so long to figure out what you just said, that there's so much nervousness around saying the right thing that it just pushes her again outside of her frustration tolerance. So it could be 47 different other things. But I just wanted to say that there's nothing necessarily that you can do better because so many of the triggers are so invisible. All of this felt safety is so illogical, which is so hard for my engineering brain. But you're not the only one to ask this question or have this experience.

[00:22:39.930] - Lisa Qualls

It's so funny that we have spent a lot of time on this question because there really is so much to say. Like, if we were sitting and having a conversation, we could ask a lot of questions. Dysregulated children and stress on parents, that is what's happening in many families every day. So we just want you to know, of course, we keep saying that you're not alone and you really, really aren't. I hope you're getting support either in real life or in a group like our Village. Just not growing too discouraged in the face of these challenging behaviors. All right. Our last question today is how do you pray for your children? And what are some scriptures you've stood on during seasons of turmoil and uncertainty?

[00:23:20.970] - Melissa Corkum

I love this question.

[00:23:22.360] - Lisa Qualls

I like it, too. It's a good one. It's a good one. You know, it's interesting. I've prayed for my kids over the years in so many ways, so many different ways. And I will say that when life was at the very, very hardest, quite literally, my prayers for my children were Lord of mercy, Lord of mercy, because I couldn't even put it to words. Things were so difficult at some stages in our parenting that my brain couldn't really form fully developed thoughts. And so there are so many different ways to pray. But I would say that one thing that has helped me a lot is to choose very simple passages of scripture and commit them to memory and pray them over and over and over. Some of you listening, like me, have a lot of children. Now if I had hours every day to spend in prayer, I could probably Journal my prayers for every single one. But I don't do that. And so what I have found to be very helpful, especially when I don't even quite know what to pray, is I literally just in my mind, hold my child before the Lord and think, Lord, I present my child to you here's my child. They're all the needs. And I just in my mind, just hold them in loving presence of God and know that the Holy Spirit is working, even when I don't have the words. And, you know, a lot of prayer, I sometimes think if I say all the right words, that if I pray it right, then God will answer it. And honestly, it's not that at all. It's just trusting our children to the Lord. I also am really reminded that, and this isn't even part of this question, but it comes to mind that again, this is a long journey and we can get really caught up in fear for our kids. And fear doesn't lead us to good places for ourselves or for our kids. I often say the worst parenting I've ever done is when I've parented out of fear. We want to parent as much as possible from a place of peace and surrender to the Lord that he is a good father to them. Practical things I've done, because I have a lot of kids, I've sometimes prayed a general prayer for all my kids and then divided them up. This is going to sound hilarious, but dividing them up by days of the week. So on Mondays I do more concentrated prayer for these kids. On Tuesdays I do more concentrated prayer for these kids. And of course a kid in crisis then consumes all my prayer life. But another thing I've done, very small and practical, is I got some wooden beads and put them on a piece of leather string and each bead represented one of my kids. And it was just like a visual way to work my way through my kids. Because what tends to happen is, if I start with the youngest and go up to the oldest or the oldest and go down to the youngest, I spend a lot of time on whoever I start with and I get less and less time to pray for the kids at the other end of the line. When I use these beads, I'll literally move one like an Abacus. After I pray for one kid, I move their bead to the other side. And so if I get interrupted, I can set it down and I kind of know where I left off. So it's just a small thing and I'm not doing it right now. But it's something that I have done in the past in terms of recalling to mind each child and not forgetting and also not forgetting the ones that aren't in big crisis, right? Like those kids need our prayers too.

[00:26:59.850] - Melissa Corkum

I will say one thing that's been a really sweet ritual and we're doing it. We haven't done a great job of doing it with our granddaughter who is living with us. But when the kids were younger and we had more of a bedtime routine, of course, everyone's teenagers now, so everyone goes to bed when they

want to or whatever. But we had a ritual of laying hands on them and blessing them with the same blessing every night. And again, there's rhythm, repetition. There's something really regulating about these rituals. Our teenagers sometimes used to roll their eyes at it and all these things. But as the kids are getting older or now that some of them are parents, I think they have these sweet mem.. like, yeah, bless Ava like you used to bless me. I think there's something sweet about it, too. So if your kids are still young enough to start a ritual like that, I think even if they kind of don't immediately love it, it builds this kind of sweetness that they can remember back on, even if they never tell you. I loved it when you blessed me. So we've done that.

[00:28:07.260] - Lisa Qualls

I have a routine with my teens. We started it, of course, when they were much younger, but they still tolerate it. So I like that. But when they leave for school in the morning, I try to put my hands on them and pray very briefly because they're always in a hurry to get out the door. And then we pray the Shema together. The Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might. And love your neighbor as yourself. And sometimes my son will be literally running out the door to catch the bus and he'll be yelling it back to me across the lawn as he leaves for school. But I'm just thankful that that is deep within him. So there are all these sweet things that we can do. I think you also asked about scriptures you stood on during seasons of turmoil. Another thing we can do is we can pray scripture over our children. We can choose a simple Psalm like the 23rd Psalm and just pray it over them. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. But be praying it for them because again, sometimes our brains are so tired, it's really hard to put words to things. And in terms of scriptures that have been helpful to me during seasons of turmoil, so very many. So I recently wrote out Psalm 103, just really slowly, a few verses a day in my Journal because that's just such a beautiful Psalm that encourages me. And also Colossians 3, starting at verse 12 as God's Chosen Ones, Holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. And it goes on. It's a whole beautiful passage from 12 to 17. That's really beautiful. Do you have one that you want to share? I have one I'll wrap up with.

[00:30:01.990] - Melissa Corkum

Okay. yeah. One that I have written out multiple times over the past couple of years and have committed to memory, nice and short, is Romans 12:12, which says, Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

[00:30:16.310] - Lisa Qualls

That's a really, really good one. And I'll just close with this 1 Corinthians 15:58, therefore my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

[00:30:33.990] - Melissa Corkum

Amen. Well thanks for joining us for this mailbag episode. If you have a question that you would like us to answer, go to theadoptionconnection.com/179. At the bottom of that post you'll see a cute little widget where you can press a button and record a question right to us and we can play it back here and answer it for you on a future mailbag episode. So we appreciate all of you who have submitted questions.

[00:31:01.410] - 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 @theadoptionconnection.com/facebook.

[00:31:11.740] - Lisa Qualls

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

[00:31:24.690] - Melissa Corkum

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