

[00:00:00.790] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to this month's Mailbag episode where we answer your questions. Our first question comes from Lee. On one hand, I'm trying to be a supportive, loving, accepting, sensitive mother. And on the other hand, I'm trying to push my kids to not be victim symptoms of their past traumas and to not make excuses for their poor behaviors and choices. Our foster daughter's therapist is challenging me to be sensitive, patient, and soft toward her because she's not had the solid and safe childhood my bio children have had. Yet I'm struggling because I feel like I'm condoning wallowing in, self pity and victimhood, and I feel manipulated.

[00:00:38.570] - Melissa Corkum

Man, I totally feel this because I think before I really understood the effects of complex trauma, early Adversity, we've already talked about this here on the podcast. Like, my go to is high structure and I'm strong willed, and I have a lot of energy. And before I understood the differences in how people experience the world, I just thought, if I can do it, anyone can do it. If I can pull myself up by my bootstraps or meet a goal, then anyone should be able to do it. And so I can really relate to Lee's frustration. On the other hand, we went through a really hard season as a family with one of our kids that really stressed out my nervous system. And it was really the first time I had ever hit a solid wall where in my head I knew what I wanted to be doing. I had goals and my body wouldn't let me. And I think that was when I really started to expand my compassion for some of the hurdles and continued struggles that my kids struggle with is that I had finally had this micro experience of this disconnect, of kind of what I knew was the quote unquote right thing to do and what I was actually doing. And really understood how that chronic stress had impacted my nervous system. I think there is this balance of empathy for what our kids are doing. And then also we talk a lot about high structure and high nurture. So I don't know. Lisa, what are you thinking?

[00:02:21.350] - Lisa Qualls

Well, I'm thinking about also I went immediately to my thoughts about my experience as a mom as well. And just that sense, that feeling of hopelessness and that feeling of being trapped. And eventually we talk so much here about blocked care, but eventually that feeling of being trapped and almost controlled by our children's behavior and losing the ability to even think about what is the need this child is trying to have met behind this behavior, where we just begin to sort of shut down. It just makes it so hard to go on, and it makes it really hard to maintain a nurturing stance toward our kids and to have any insight into them. And again, like we say all the time, this is not about your character. This is not something you willingly choose. It's something that our brains do to protect us from this really confusing behavior of our kids. I would say, first of all, you just have to surround yourself with parents who understand, people who understand, because it helps so much to know you're not alone in this. There are so many parents experiencing something very, very similar.

[00:03:32.580] - Lisa Qualls

And secondly, I think Melissa may have said this, but I think you can be both the supportive, loving, nurturing mom and the parent who doesn't sort of encourage her kids to be victims. We don't want any of our kids to be the victim. We can support them in being empathetic for what they've experienced, but also helping them to believe that we believe that their whole lives are not determined by their circumstances. That they can do this hard work in therapy and they can overcome things. But I also want to note we do really love the enneagram as a tool for helping us understand one another, that we see life through different lenses. And when I read this, one of the first things I thought about is that some personality types are really drawn toward the melancholy, drawn and comfortable with sadness and can in unhealth really desire that victimhood mentality. And other enneagram types like you, Melissa, are very optimistic and strong, and we get past it and we move on. And so I think there are a whole bunch of different things at play here, from personality to blocked care to all these other things. So most of all, I would just say I hope you're surrounding yourself with community and support because you need it, Lee, and it's okay for you to need help for yourself so that you can be reminded that you're not alone and get ideas from other parents, too. There are so many wise and wonderful people out there.

[00:05:12.600] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, what I'm thinking about is kind of this parallel. Lisa, you read that the therapist was challenging

her to be more sensitive and patient. And so I think immediately I get the sense that there was some defensiveness there of like, but if I do that, then there will be this victimhood. And it's kind of ironic because I think really, I know sometimes therapists and professionals are listening to us. If a parent comes to you and is really struggling in this space to have curiosity around behavior, that is one of the telltale signs of blocked care. It's not wrong for us to be thinking, man, she doesn't understand what these kids have been through. She really needs to have more compassion. But to start, there is always going to be met with resistance. When parents are in that blocked care, what they need is empathy of yeah, I know it's really hard to parent kids with these types of behaviors. It's hard to feel manipulated. It's a long road, all of that empathy, and that allows the nervous system to kind of remain open and then gain that curiosity back and do the work of, can I make peace with radical acceptance with where we are in order to move forward?

[00:06:31.550] - Melissa Corkum

And the parallel to that is as parents, when we are kind of banging our heads against the wall with really repetitive behaviors with our kids. Lisa, what you were saying about the both end where we need to start, what we'd like to start with is addressing the behavior of, you can't do that. Why do you keep doing this? We already talked about that. All those things, and they come so easily out of my mouth because I've said all of those things. But just like we need that empathy first before we can move towards whatever the next challenge for us in parenting is. Our kids need our empathy to know that they're not alone. To know that we understand them. To know that we're validating what is probably a very real struggle. Even though from the outside looking in it might look like, well, You have everything you need. Why can't you just do it? That empathy does not invite them to victimhood necessarily, but it puts us in closer proximity to their nervous system and better relationship to them. And then from that place, as a team, we can help them in small steps, move toward what we believe that they're capable of.

[00:07:48.540] - Melissa Corkum

As long as we feel manipulated or are struggling to maintain curiosity about the behavior, it puts us in this defensive mode, and it puts us on opposite ends, kind of the battlefield. If you were versus kind of maintaining that I'm on your team mentality. I validate that it's been really hard. I see where you're struggling, and I'm here where you are, and I'm willing to walk with you towards the next thing.

[00:08:17.390] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, that's such a good point. I think when we are in a defensive state, our children also become defensive toward us, and so then it's really hard to help each other move forward in any kind of way in healing, because our kids have to feel so profoundly safe in order to heal.

[00:08:37.970] - Lisa Qualls

Okay, our next question comes from Katie, who writes, I feel like I've lowered the bar to the floor with our daughter. I no longer require her to do chores. She has special needs and has low IQ and low processing, so it just isn't worth the fight some days. I don't care when she wakes up on the weekends, and if she wants her iPad on weekends until her eyes melt out, then I just let it go for the sake of peace. But is my bar too low? Do I have zero expectations for her, and am I creating more problems? I don't know. But any time she's asked to do anything at all, it is a meltdown, argument, disrespect, and yelling. And it isn't like I give in, because I don't. I previously had a high bar in expectations until my husband and a friend of mine convinced me that my high standards were the problem. So I gradually lowered the bar until it couldn't be lowered anymore. And you know what? It hasn't helped a thing. If anything, it's worse. Expectations equal fits and meltdowns. No expectations, equal fits and meltdowns. So what do I do?

[00:09:40.910] - Melissa Corkum

So I had so many thoughts while reading this question. At the end she talked about success, kind of like what's working and what's not working, and that expectations or no expectations all led to fits and meltdowns. If you're ever in a parenting situation, especially kids with fragile nervous system and your definition of success is no sets or meltdowns, it doesn't matter how you play your cards, you will always fail like you're failing. It's just our kids have such a small window of tolerance, their nervous systems are not working in their favor and it doesn't matter what you do, there will always be fits and

meltdowns and probably some pushback, defensiveness, defiance, opposition, all of that kind of just comes with the territory. And it's not that it is like that forever or that it doesn't ebb and flow in terms of intensity. But if that's your measuring stick, I think that puts us on a path to be trying all the wrong things for the wrong reasons. I think the other part is that when we talked a little bit about this earlier in the episode, Dr. Purvis would always talk about how our kids need high structure and high nurture, both of those things simultaneously pretty much all the time to even have a half a chance of stability and felt safety.

[00:11:17.450] - Melissa Corkum

And so I think often with chores there's a lot of structure and not a lot of nurture. We kind of throw them out like assignments. You go do this, you go do this. It's your turn to do this. This is required before you do this. And I think we also think that they're so simple, like we're not asking that much. We do this primary brain task assessment and behavior plan in the Regulation Rescue, where it really helps parents break down what is required of the nervous system to do some of the expectations and things that we're asking of our kids. And a lot of times there's all these a-ha moments of how often the skills that are required to carry out a task, even as simple as getting ready for school, or getting ready for bed, or taking out the trash, require a ton of brain tasks that often in a previous assessment, the parent has already denoted are not strengths of their child. And so we start to put together that a lot of times our expectations really are challenging our kids. And Katie did mention that her daughter does have some special needs and low IQ and low processing. And so there's probably a lot of primary brain tasks there that she struggles with. And so chores, whatever that means, are probably not as simple as we are thinking that they are.

[00:12:45.700] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, I agree with that, Melissa. I think sometimes because the task seems so simple, we're like, how hard can it be? But really it could actually be hard. And so I think in these circumstances we actually have to have our child do chores with us side by side, instead of sending them off to do a chore, come with me, we're going to empty the dishwasher together. You put these cups away and I'm going to put the silverware away and just do them side by side. Because it could be your child's not capable. It could be for whatever reason, when the task is given her and she's supposed to just do it on her own when it's given to her, that her anxiety goes through the window and her ability to process and think goes down even lower. And I know how completely frustrating this is. I don't know if you said how old your daughter is, but it's really frustrating to have to help a 12 or 13 year old empty the dishwasher.

[00:13:43.190] - Lisa Qualls

But you know what, it's okay because we want to meet our kids where they are. I also have found personally that when I get too focused on wanting my child to complete tasks and wanting to maintain a certain level of where I've set the bar in my mind, and honestly I feel like I've set it pretty low myself. But when I get too focused on my child not meeting my expectations, the relationship suffers for sure. Because I am irritated. My child can sense I'm irritated. My nervous system gets more and more tense and prickly. My behavior gets more prickly as my nervous system gets more sort of activated by this. And the story I start telling myself is that my kid doesn't even respect me. I've told this child to do that. This child does not appreciate anything and doesn't respect me. And it just goes on and on in my mind, and it does nothing for my connection and relationship with my child. So I think, as we mentioned Dr. Purviis earlier, but we have to remember one of the things she said is we always have to put the connection, the relationship at the center of every interaction. And I know it's super hard to do. But we can make ourselves miserable or we can work toward connection. And even though it's hard sometimes to do, I think we want to choose connection.

[00:15:05.860] - Melissa Corkum

Well, and I think that's the other part about low bar. I think as someone who has a tendency towards dismissiveness anyway, it's easy for me to lower the bar and kind of an exasperated, I throw up my hands, fine, don't do anything, it's not worth the fight. And in that dismissiveness, it's like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I also get dismissive about our relationship. And so then I'm also distancing myself like, fine, do whatever you want. And do whatever you want, like Katie mentioned, might be my kid disappearing into the room with their screen forever. And so now the bar has been lowered and we've also lost relationship. So the structure has gone to the floor, but also so is the

nurture. And so I think when we lower the bar as best as we can, it should be in the name of giving more room and more margin for relationship building and connection. So I think I've talked about this before. I don't know if I've talked about it here on the podcast if I was talking about it in The Village, but our family has become obsessed with cornhole this year. It started in the spring, and my husband is the most obsessed.

[00:16:22.480] - Melissa Corkum

But it has created surprisingly, a lot of backyard together time. And even some of our kids who tend to be more melancholy, less likely to engage, have enjoyed playing. And part of me wonders if it's because it's so rhythmic and repetitive. So I have all this brain science. Like, of course it would make you feel better. Of course it would pull you out of your depressive state. Yeah. And there's a little bit of competition and it's teams and we mix the teams up. But anyway, we home school our youngest still, and he is pretty far behind academically. It's not his strong suit. And it could be really easy to say that academics needed to be our priority. Kind of parallel tours like this, task oriented. We have to get these things done. And I have talked before about how we really lowered the bar in terms of home schooling because our definition of success is not academics, it's actually relationship and a lot of other things. We have lowered the bar in school a ton this summer in order to let our youngest play a lot of cornhole with my husband. They play in the backyard whenever my husband isn't in a meeting.

[00:17:39.270] - Melissa Corkum

They play to relieve stress. They play to practice. They play just because the weather's nice. They go to tournaments together. They enter tournaments together. They spend all day playing. They spend all night playing. They drive long distances to play. They spend money to play.

[00:17:53.950] - Lisa Qualls

I love it. I think it's so wonderful. I really do.

[00:17:57.580] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. But it would be different if we had said, like, it's so hard to teach you. Fine, we're just not going to do a lot of school. And then let him kind of be buried in front of a mindless bad television or something. When we try to lower the bar for things that are tricky or we're getting resistance for, we try to replace them with something that's relationally beneficial or that might still help him. Like, we have turned it over to video games, but video games with a purpose, video games that challenge spatial skills and problem solving skills. So again, every situation we try to find that balance of high structure, high nurture. So if we need to say, you don't have to do, like, book work, school work today, you can have some video game time, or you can have 8 hours of video game time. That might be the high nurture piece, the high structure pieces. We choose the video game. These are the video games. Or we might not choose it, but here are two or three that we know will be beneficial. And maybe chores aren't the place where you can raise the structure right now in your relationship.

[00:19:02.510] - Melissa Corkum

Like, maybe that's still too triggering, maybe it's still too tricky. I have also said this before, chores are my trigger. So chores are certainly not how anyone's going to get on my good side is asking me to do a chore. Every rage I ever threw as a child is about chores. But maybe there's other places where you can stretch her window of tolerance and her frustration tolerance so that there's a little less screen time, a little more connection, a little bit more working towards some life skills or whatever.

[00:19:32.770] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, I like that. And I find, too, that when I'm really frustrated about a task that's not being accomplished, that I can offer help, but only if I truly in my heart and my body can offer without being ticked off. But I can say to my child, maybe whose room is completely out of control, hey, would it help you if I helped you gather up all your dirty clothes and take them up to the laundry room and I'll transfer the loads from the washer to the dryer after you get it started? Small things that I don't feel, I kind of say, being a sucker, but that's not exactly how we want to say it. But as long as I can do it genuinely from a good place in my heart, then I think it's connecting. And yes, my child may reject my help, but a lot of times if I can find something that's like the thing that feels insurmountable to them and offer just a little support, that will start the ball rolling in the direction that I want it to go.

[00:20:31.520] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. And I know this question was only tangentially about chores and more about lowering the bar, but since we mentioned chores so much, we do have two other episodes very specifically about chores. If you all are listening, thinking man, chores is the issue with the bar in our house, check out episode 27 Tips for Getting Chores Done and Episode 161, which was a replay on a workshop that Greg did on a new twist on how to think about chores. So we'll link those in the show notes. If you're driving, you can go back to them later, but just wanted to throw that out there as well.

[00:21:09.850] - Lisa Qualls

Okay, our third question comes from Adam. He asks, does anyone have insight to share about an adopted child with adopted siblings who don't look alike. We have a three year old black son, and I'm curious and maybe worried about creating more isolating feelings if we were to adopt a biracial child who could be white passing. We live in a diverse area, go to a black church, but our family is entirely white.

[00:21:35.890] - Lisa Qualls

So, Melissa, as an adoptee and a woman of color, I think you are the person to answer this question.

[00:21:42.970] - Melissa Corkum

Well, Adam, first of all, just the thoughtfulness of your question and mentioning how already intentional you all have been about providing racial mirrors and diverse community to your family, I think you're already headed in the right direction. Here's what I would say. I think this is tricky because I think personality plays a huge part into how we experience being a transracial adoptee or a person of color in a mostly white world. And you're probably not asking this, but there are no guarantees, right? Like, it could be that your son might be the only black person in your family, and he never has really much of an issue with it. It could be that you adopt another black child, and so he has a black sibling, and he still feels othered and frustrated at being a transracial adoptee, even with a sibling. So I don't think categorically that adopting a sibling of the same race as one of your other children necessarily decreases or lessens the burden that child could potentially feel. And also, I think it's always trickier to be the only person of color in a family. So I think it's a super personal decision, and there aren't any guarantees.

[00:23:14.480] - Melissa Corkum

I don't know if that's a super helpful answer. Especially, and I'm not saying that I think Adam's family is doing this, but it feels like a good moment to step on a soapbox for a minute and say, I think there aren't really checkboxes in transracial adoption. I think we constantly have to be reevaluating and thinking about and communicating with our kids who may be a different race than us without their experience. There's no magic formula to helping a child who's transracially adopted not have a certain experience or certain emotions or feelings about that. And so I think it's just a moving target all the time. We can't check the box that says we move to a black neighborhood and go to a black church and have a black pediatrician and send our kids to a black school. And so check, check, check. We did all the things. I think it just needs to be an open dialogue as our kids grow, and I think even as toddlers and school age children, our kids can give us insight about how they're experiencing that.

[00:24:18.370] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, just from personal experience. I have four children from Ethiopia, and we're otherwise white family. And of my kids who are still home, my teens, one of them is just wired toward, I don't know, he's actually a lot like Melissa. He's very overall happy and easy going and loves the world and loves everyone. And my other is more sensitive. And he's the one who would say when he was younger, I'd go to pick him up from a sports practice, and he'd take this long walk through the parking lot before he can get in the car. And when I finally asked him why, I said, I don't want anybody to know that my mom is the old white lady with gray hair, or something like that. I was like, okay, but my other kids are like, mom, and jumps in the car. So I do think there's an element that you're talking about of personality. But, yeah, I loved all that you shared there, Melissa. Thank you.

[00:25:16.830] - Melissa Corkum

Our final question is from Sam. I am considering Job Corps for my older teen, and I was wondering if you had pros or cons.

[00:25:26.570] - Lisa Qualls

Okay. So Job Corps, if you've never heard of it, is actually a federal program. And on its website it says it's the largest free residential education and job training program for young adults ages 16 to 24. So my understanding of it is more personal. One of my kids chose to do that. I would say that for a child who, for whatever reason, isn't going to choose college, who wants a vocational path and is looking for job training, if they're a young person who has some motivation to learn new things, it can be really positive, that they do get the skills that they needed. And what's really fantastic, of course, is that there is no fee for this, and the housing and food and all kinds of training is provided. So I would say that is a big upside to it. Another upside is they do take kids at 16. So if you have a child who absolutely refuses to be in your home, but they're still your kid, you're responsible for them, and you want good things for them, Job Corps is a great opportunity for those kids, too. And I know my child went after high school graduation. I don't know the statistics, but that might be a little bit the exception in this kid's experience. There were a number of other students or people in the program who hadn't graduated from high school, and so that was something they had to do in the process. But, Melissa, you did it with younger kids. Do you want to talk about your experience?

[00:27:05.390] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. So two of our kids went to Job Corps, and they did go before they graduated. They were 16 and 17 when they went. It doesn't spell this out very specifically on the website, but I know that when our kids went, and this has been six or seven years now, in order to be eligible to go, you either had to be below the poverty line in terms of your income requirements, or you had to have a special need of some sort. It didn't have to be a significant special need. It could be like a learning disability even. But of course, a lot of our kids already have multiple diagnoses to their names. One way to get around the income requirement, especially if your child is going after high school or just after they turn 18, is if you no longer claim them as a dependent, then they can apply as their own individual entity without your income as part of their application. And so there's very few 18 year olds that don't qualify just based on their income. But because of that, I think just know that they're in a demographic of a lot of the kids have early adversity. The ACE score among Job Corps participants is high. It is highly structured in some senses, where you have to get up by a certain time. There's kind of like chores to do. I would say it's kind of in between, like, military school and regular college. Where in college, no one's really making you do anything. Your room can be a mess, but there are inspections, and you have to keep your place reasonably tidy. And there's classes from nine to three or four every day. So it has a lot of structure, and you're there for a purpose. You're not just there to hang out, you're there to go get your education. But there's also a lot of unsupervised kind of open time. Now, when we sent our kids, because they were minors, they had to stay on campus unless they had express permission from us to leave. And so there was that type of structure that kind of helped us know that they were reasonably safe and hopefully making good decisions. But the other thing I think that can be tricky is if your child struggles with addiction, even smoking, or defiance, they have a pretty zero tolerance policy. And so the attrition rate is pretty high. At least it was when our kids were there. I think within the first month, like, half of their class had been dismissed.

[00:30:00.950] - Lisa Qualls

I don't think I knew that.

[00:30:03.050] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, so in some senses, that does kind of help the morale in some ways, because they don't keep kids that are really struggling there, they just remove them. And so eventually it kind of trickles down, but they're constantly kind of starting new classes of kids. So when our kids were going, this is well before COVID, I have no idea what it looks like now, but there was a new cohort of kids that came in almost every month. So it's kind of this constant, like, turnover. Our kids were super defiant with us, but tended to do okay at work, at school, in other situations. And so we felt pretty confident that at Job Corps they would be able to work within that system. We have another bonus child who kind of struggles with authority, kind of in all situations, in our house, and at jobs and at school. And so we had thought. About helping him apply to Job Corps at one point, and our kids were like, mom, I don't

think he's going to last very long. So I think you just have to know your kid. It certainly doesn't hurt to try. But if you do think that your child has a higher dropout or might not be successful, and one of your definitions of success is that you need them not to be in your house anymore, then I would say have a plan B.

[00:31:30.710] - Lisa Qualls

That's good advice. Yeah. And I think some kids are going to thrive in it because it's not academic. And so some of our kids who maybe aren't as successful academically might really kind of rise to the top in this kind of program, and that can feel really good for them. So it's really a different experience for every kid. Also, again, I don't know a ton about it, but even though it's a federal program, every state has their own admissions, and different states offer different kinds of training courses. So if you're interested in it, I would look into it and see if it's something that might work for your family.

[00:32:08.440] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. And you can cross state lines to go.

[00:32:11.080] - Lisa Qualls

You can.

[00:32:13.540] - Melissa Corkum

You don't have to the same because your child went out of state, and both of our kids went out of state. But if your child kind of just struggles at home in that attachment relationship but does well outside of the home, it can be a really great thing. Like one of our kids went on to do Advanced Job Corps. The opportunities that were afforded to him were just more than we could have ever asked or imagined. I mean, he's kind of like the poster child for a program like Job Corps. He did really, really well. And another one of our kids, you know, struggled a little bit more, and I wouldn't say it was a completely negative experience, but just wasn't able to take advantage of all of the things that Job Corps could have helped her accomplish.

[00:32:59.450] - Lisa Qualls

I'd say it's worth exploring if it sounds like it could be a good fit for your family and your teens or young adults. But just be aware of the pros and the cons. There will be some things that you'll probably think, gosh, I wish my child wasn't being exposed to this or that. So you have to decide what your priority is and what your definition of success is, as Melissa loves to say. So if you would like to submit a question for us to answer on the podcast, you can go to the website and the show notes of this episode at theadoptionconnection.com/196. You'll see a little button there where you can just push that and record a simple voice message for us that we will hear. And we would love to hear your questions. We really enjoy answering them.