

[00:00:00.240] - Lisa Qualls

This week we're bringing you a recording from a recent workshop that took place in The Village.

[00:00:05.660] - Melissa Corkum

In case you haven't heard about it, The Village is our membership community, where you can find support and training to meet your needs. For more information, head to the [Adoption Connection.com/Village](https://AdoptionConnection.com/Village).

[00:00:16.480] - Lisa Qualls

We hope you enjoy the workshop.

[00:00:22.390] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to our workshop Making Sense of Meltdowns. And my guest today is Jessica Sinarski. She is, I realized this morning, a three time guest. I think you are the only three time guests we've ever had Jessica.

[00:00:39.100] - Jessica Sinarski

Very honored.

[00:00:41.060] - Lisa Qualls

I'm just thrilled that you're here. So I wanted to just share a couple little things about Jessica personally. She and I have become friends. It all began with our very first interview. She is the author of numerous books, which she will tell you when she introduces herself more. But for those of you who are here live, you can see these are a couple of my favorites that I pulled off my shelf this morning. These are from her series about Riley the Brave, which is for children with early adversity. And just so you know, when we'll try to add this to the show notes, she was our guest on episode 107, which was helping children understand their big feelings. And then she was also our guest on episode 140, helpful Strategies for Hard School Mornings. So Jessica, you have a new book coming out. I'm sure you're going to tell us about all of that. Why don't you go ahead and take it from here and start by just introducing yourself and then take it away. And let me just say sorry, one last little thing. When Jessica is done presenting, then we will move into the live Q&A portion of today's presentation. Alright, thank you, Jessica.

[00:01:51.750] - Jessica Sinarski

Thanks Lisa. And thank you for the triple invitation. I really appreciate it. I love getting to talk and be a part of foster adoptive kinship communities. My whole career has been working with kids who've experienced early life trauma, separation, attachment, sort of injuries, and they're safe, big critters the grownups in their life, parents and caregivers and grandparents and teachers and counselors, and all of the adults who sort of wrap around to help kids heal. So what we're talking about today, I have been excited to put in picture book form because understanding the senses is both really complicated, but also really illuminating. Like once you sort of unpack sensory processing a little bit, and how our brains take in information and what that means for our functioning, for our everyday functioning, for our feelings, for our behavior, for our relationships, it's just so powerful. So we're diving in today to making sense of meltdowns. I know some of you will be listening later. So for those visual learners like me, I will describe what is on the screen so that you can get a visual. And then you can also see lots about this, both in the show notes as well as in the picture book *_Riley the Brave's Sensational Senses_*. So we're going to jump in.

[00:03:25.540] - Jessica Sinarski

So I titled this Making Sense of Meltdowns because I was thinking about, you know, what is it about sensory processing that drew me in originally. And one of the big things was realizing why so much of the sort of baffling behavior was happening in my home and with my clients. And so I think this quote from Winnie Dunn is really helpful to center us a little bit. "Our brains don't know anything unless they know it from our senses." "Our brains don't know anything unless they know it from our senses." So we're going to start today with a couple foundational truths that just guide a lot of how I work and how I make sense of things. No pun intended. So first, all behavior comes from the brain. All behavior comes from the brain. That might sound reductive, but I will explain why I think it's so important that

we know this. The brain gets information from outside, from our external facing five senses, from inside, from senses that we didn't learn about growing up and I didn't even learn about in college or grad school or places that you would think these things would come up.

[00:04:46.050] - Jessica Sinarski

We also, we get information from between. Our brains get lots of information from other humans. It's part of why relational trauma can have such a lasting impact, because we are wired for connection. And when those connections hurt in some way, or are disappointing in some way, that really can have a lasting impact on the brain. So another way to say that is, the processing of information coming into our brains is profoundly impacted by early life experiences. So I think most of you here are parenting or working with kiddos who have had some tough stuff happen early in life, and that has impacted how their brains interpret information. They're ready for that fight-flight-freeze response in a way that maybe a neurotypical brain wouldn't be. And I should say it's not just trauma that can impact how our brains process information. There's all kinds of neurodiversity that impact our sensory processing and our tendency toward anxiety or depression or some of those big behavioral responses. What is so empowering to me and to so many of the families and groups that I work with is that brains are dynamic and changing. We can take the shame and blame out of it. There is hope.

[00:06:14.460] - Jessica Sinarski

So we're going to break this down a little bit further today. So okay, all behavior comes from the brain. Well, we don't have magic goggles that let us see inside a brain. So what do we do with that information? Let's dig into where the brain, how that brain is deciding what to do. So we're thinking about big meltdowns or maybe shutdown or difficult behavior. And when we're involving the senses, we want to think about the outside five senses. You can probably name them with me. So we've got our sense of hearing, our auditory sense, sense of taste and smell, which work together a lot. We've got touch and our eyes, right? So we're getting information visually. So those are our external facing senses. So the sound in the background or how dim the lights are, or maybe if there's a buzz on your microphone or on your headphones, all of that information is going into your brain. In fact, 11 million bits of information is going into your brain every second. And it has to decide in milliseconds if you're safe enough to engage, to hang with me here and keep learning and growing or danger, danger, danger. I need to address that noise in the other room because my kids aren't going to be able to work it out themselves. Or gosh, I got to adjust this light because it's giving me a headache. Right? So we have our outside five senses.

[00:07:45.790] - Jessica Sinarski

Inside, we have three more senses that don't get talked about a lot. And these are really important senses for having our, what I talk about a lot is, our upstairs brain running the show. So for those of you here live, I'm just going to stop my screen share for a minute so you can see my face a little more clearly. So our internal senses, our hidden senses are proprioception. That's a big fancy word, but it actually I put it in the children's book. My publisher pushed back. I was like, are you sure you need that in there? And I said, yeah, we can make it fun. And so we have it sort of phonetically stated in the book. Proprioception helps your body feel connected to your brain. Proprioception is our sense of self in space. It gets information from our muscles and joints. So wherever you are, if you squeeze your hands together, you are getting some proprioceptive input.

[00:08:45.240] - Jessica Sinarski

It's how you know where the top stair is when you get that weird feeling like you thought the top of the stairs was there, but you're already at the top. Like that's your proprioceptive sense being like, ah, you know you're not where you thought you were. It's what lets us walk down a hallway without staring at the ground the whole time, because we know where our foot is going to land. When proprioception is out of whack, kids typically are seeking more. So proprioception is such a go-to sense for regulation. If you think about kids, especially, there is a lot of bouncing, crashing, banging, swishing, squeezing that's built into everyday life for a kiddo, especially thinking all the way back to infancy. If you think about a baby who's fussy, what do we do? We pick them up. We hold them so they're getting some proprioception there. They're getting squeezed a little bit, in a good way. We swaddle them. That's squeezing tight. We hold them close. We bounce or we sway. We pat their back. My oldest, the only move that seemed to settle him was sort of holding him in my hands, out in front of me and lifting my

hands up and down and up and down and up and down, and I got really strong arms. We called it the offering because it was the only thing that seemed to soothe him was that proprioceptive - I didn't know it was proprioceptive - but that proprioceptive input that he was getting from his muscles and joints when we did that.

[00:10:20.290] - Jessica Sinarski

The other sense that was involved, or another sense that was involved when we were doing that motion, is the vestibular sense, which in the book I talk about as your sense of balance. So this comes from your inner ear. If anyone's ever had an inner ear infection, you know how uncomfortable it is when your vestibular sense is off kilter. I tend to get motion sick. That's my vestibular sense being overzealous. Just really the car idling is enough for me to feel a little nauseated, right? The vestibular sense is one of the earliest to develop. So if we go way back further, even before infancy, into in utero, think about that baby in space, right? They're being jostled and moved, and upside down, and twisted around all day long. The same thing is true in early infancy. There's a lot of holding, swaying, swinging, moving, that tends to be very soothing. For kids who have experienced separation from their first mother, who have experienced maybe some difficulties in those early days and weeks and months, or maybe who had some chemical assaults in utero, who are dealing with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, or who had some mom was dealing with addiction when she was pregnant, in those situations, these senses are not getting all the same development that they might otherwise get. And that's not the only reason that that can happen.

[00:12:06.370] - Jessica Sinarski

So, as I mentioned, my oldest has well, maybe I haven't mentioned it yet. So two of my boys have some sensory processing challenges that aren't necessarily trauma related. We all have sensory preferences. And so one of my hopes in making this complex information really kid-friendly, is that we can befriend our senses. We can get to know this wacky world of sensory processing because it can help us all feel more calm and safe and in control. So the last sense that we're going to talk about - so we talked about proprioceptive, vestibular, and there's one more that's interoception. I'm guessing a number of you are parenting or working with kids who struggle knowing what their body is telling them. Like if they're too hot or too cold. Or if they have to go to the bathroom. Or just some of those basic, if they're hungry or not. Maybe eating/overeating to the point of way past satiation. Or not realizing that they're hungry until we're at complete meltdown. That's part of, what's happening there is a little bit of a disconnect with an internal sense called interoception. We could spend days on each of these senses and how it plays into all aspects of our lives. I promised you today short and sweet and user friendly, and so we won't do that, in case any of you are nervous. But I did want to give you, I want to give you that framework of these eight senses, and then I'm going to tell you how we can talk about them in a way that maybe feels a little more comfortable. So we have our five senses we all learned about in preschool. We have our internal senses and we also get interpersonal cues. Our brain "decides," and I put decides in quotes because a lot of this is happening pretty reactively or instinctually. Our brains choose behavior based on these inputs, based on outside, inside, and between. And so for those of you listening, what I'm showing on the screen is a picture of a mom and a baby, and baby is in distress. Baby is fussing, kind of has a hand jammed in the mouth. And mom is soothing. And I use this picture a lot and I'll ask participants, what is mom doing here?

[00:14:45.490] - Jessica Sinarski

And so, in fact, for those of you watching live, if you want to put in the chat, what are some of the things that you see mom doing here to soothe. Baby's in distress. So what I talk about a lot is like flipping your lid. Baby's downstairs brain is on. We're in that like danger, danger, danger mode. And mom is regulating. So mom is co-regulating by shushing or singing. Mom's not saying, be quiet, stop crying, because that's not going to do anything, right? Babies don't stop crying until their need is met. And as we're meeting babies needs, we are doing lots of sensory rich nurturing. So sometimes people will say, well, she's comforting the baby. Well, how do we know she's comforting the baby? Because as some of you are writing in here, she's holding the baby's head close. She's not like from across the room being like, hush, yeah, I know, I know. Right? From across the room. That's not going to work. She's hugging close, right? So we've got that touch, that tactile sense. Plus we've got some proprioception. She's pulling that baby in close. I immediately start like swaying or bouncing. I imagine that she's swaying and bouncing. She's being gentle. She's bringing her compassionate,

upstairs thinking brain to the situation, instead of expecting this baby to ask for food. Instead of crying about food, right? This is how brains and bodies develop. Early life is an incredibly sensory rich time. It's hopefully an incredibly sensory rich time. And a lot of us are trying to love on kids who maybe didn't have that same experience, or whose brains were sort of wired to defend against that kind of experience. Who it felt uncomfortable to have close contact, or were sort of used to providing for themselves or had lots of stress hormones in utero. And that's not a shame and blame on moms, there's just layer upon layer here that we're working through. But what that leads to, what that can lead to is a brain that is struggling to get information to make good decisions. So how I am hoping to help you bring this to your kids, hoping to help you be able to understand it, is there will be a little a way that you can get this little one pager called My Sensational Senses. It's also in the back of *Riley the Brave's S000ensational Senses*.

[00:17:36.750] - Jessica Sinarski

And for those of you who are listening and don't have the visual in front of you, I'm going to go through just a helpful way of understanding what each of our senses do. Because our senses are trying to keep us safe. Our brains are trying to keep us safe. And they get overzealous. They get sort of confused and muddled. So your sense of touch is sensed by the skin all over your body. It lets you explore with your hands and enjoy life. It also protects you from pain. And so some of our kids might be tactile defensive, some of our kids might struggle with touch. One of my boys, he was playing around and had like tucked a little piece of foam in the back of his pants to be like a tail. And he was sitting down to play with some Lego and all of a sudden he ripped the foam thing out and threw it on the ground and was like, now I can concentrate. He might not have said concentrate. This was almost a decade ago, but he couldn't focus. It threw him off to have this little piece of foam in the back of his pants even for doing something fun like playing with Legos.

[00:18:47.060] - Jessica Sinarski

So his sense of touch can get, can get wonky. And had he not been able to pull that out, that might have led to a meltdown because he's feeling frustrated by it, right? So the same thing can happen with our other senses.

[00:19:02.730] - Jessica Sinarski

Smell, it teams up with taste. It protects us from stinky things. It connects with emotions and memories. Taste allows me to enjoy food and helps protect me from poison. But one of my boys, when his taste and sense of smell are a little overzealous and scream danger, danger at any new food or at different textures or at certain smells. Ketchup on the table. You think it was like a fire that had broken out. And he needs to run from the danger of ketchup. Meanwhile, the other two kids love ketchup. So we've got these balances going on that can get really tricky.

[00:19:46.990] - Jessica Sinarski

Our sense of hearing helps us enjoy music and conversation. We're using our sense of hearing right now. It also tunes into danger signals, and is very sensitive to the tone of voice. Sight helps us plan what to do next and enjoy beauty, right? All kinds of wonderful things that sight can do. Its protective response is to alert us to danger. So some kids will walk into a room and the room feels too loud, like they might describe it that way. That classroom was too loud. It was too loud. And they're not even talking about the sound of it. But visually it's sort of overwhelming their senses and they go into protection mode. And when our senses go into protection mode, it looks like often bad behavior. It looks like defiance, it looks like aggression, it looks like shutdown. It looks like being spoiled or picky or difficult, right? That's what that overdrive looks and feels like.

[00:20:50.380] - Jessica Sinarski

And so my hope is to demystify this a little bit so that we can be on the same team with our kids, and talk about what is coming in through the senses that might be, that might be throwing us off. I also share here about the sense of balance. So it notices even small head movements. Like if you tick your head from side to side, you'll feel that vestibular sense kick in. It helps us feel stable and anchored, and it protects us from feeling wobbly and unsafe. Our proprioception, it comes from our muscles and joints, and it protects us from bumping into things or being too rough or not using the right amount of connection.

[00:21:32.370] - Jessica Sinarski

And so sometimes our kiddos who struggle with their sensory processing can seem like bowls in china closets, right? They're just bumping into everything. What the heck is going on? My son would jump onto his knees on the hardwood floor and we're like, don't do that. Why are you doing that? He was seeking more proprioception, his cup was not getting full. And it took some time and training and therapy, and really working together to figure out how we could help him feel safe and in control. And it's an ongoing process.

[00:22:14.340] - Jessica Sinarski

So we're going to get to some questions for those who are here live. Before we do that, for those who are listening, I want to share three ways that we can navigate this sensory world together. So first, let's get to know our senses. I want us to be curious together. My hope with *Riley the Brave's Sensational Senses*, is to make it safe to talk about how we're feeling and really to normalize that we all need help finding that safe, calm, in control, just right, regulated feelings. Especially kids who've experienced early life trauma or whose brains get a little extra protective. So it might look like the twelve year old that wants to be swaddled like his little baby cousin, right? And that's okay, we can do that. We don't have to be afraid of getting a little bit weird, right? Especially if we're doing it together. If we're making choices together about what sensory inputs are desirable, maybe want to be explored. I also want to in our being curious, I want to normalize the weird stuff. So for those of you who can't see my screen right now, I have a picture of my son laying on a cushion. His head is upside down off the cushion on the floor with headphones on connected to an audiobook. This is how he reads sometimes, and that's okay. When we get stuck on sit up, sit still, do it the adult way, we may be missing some of what our kids need to be able to develop those feeling and dealing skills. Now, I'm assuming he probably won't go to a work meeting and lay with his head on the floor. We'll get there, right? We'll do some of the social norms that need to be addressed in life. But for now, for his dyslexic brain, this is part of how he enjoys audiobooks. This is part of how he has developed a love for reading and great, let's roll with that, right? No shame, no blame. Let's work with the brains and the bodies in the room. All right.

[00:24:36.790] - Jessica Sinarski

So our second thing we can do is we can be proactive together. So I've put together some tools in the digital resource bundle that you can actually get for free, if you order the book before October 10. You might see some different dates out there. If you order before October 10, you will get a digital resource bundle for free to help you be proactive with your kiddo, to help you be curious together about what might be going on, which of these little sensory inputs that are sort of scattered throughout the book might feel good to try, right? What is maybe happening right before that meltdown starts. And as you have these interactions, I really hope that we do it with this sort of playful, accepting manner about us. That it's not, none of this is because something's wrong with you or broken. We just want to we want to empower you to know yourself and to feel safe and in control, right? I think that's kind of what we all want on some level. So if that way of interacting feels a little different to you, my second book in the Riley series, *Riley the Brave Makes It to School* is all about that playful, accepting, curious, empathic way of interacting that I've just seen be transformational for folks.

[00:26:06.340] - Jessica Sinarski

And as far as just some things to take with you right now, there are a lot of occupational therapists will, in jargony term, say, when in doubt, Go-Pro, meaning use proprioception. That for most humans, proprioceptive input, collaboratively, working together, never forced, is really enjoyable and regulating. So what that looks like in my home, at one point in this process, this sensory journey for us, was every night before bed we would do super slams, where we would, and my son loved it. So we'd sort of wrap him up and then kind of throw him down on the bed playfully. You know, maybe there's an extra squish at the end and maybe tickling. He's laughing the whole time and enjoying it. None of this is forced or punitive. And that was super regulating for him. So we would do that. He'd crawl under his weighted blanket and go SIGH, then he could relax into sleep. You'd think that it amp him up, but that was what let him relax into sleep. Maybe it's trying some steamrollers down the back. Or sometimes when kids are getting agitated, we'll see if they want some squishes or squeezes kind of even just like

down the arms or on the legs or the hands. Those proprioceptive inputs that send signals of safety, so the muscles and joints start communicating with the body in ways that they might have needed to since before that kiddo was born. Or maybe they're just wired to need a little bit extra. We all have preferences with how heavy the comforter is that we sleep with or what kind of straw we drink out of or cup. We have sensory preferences that we often accommodate in our lives. And what I'm hoping with this new book is to just make it more mainstream that we start young doing that with kids, teaching them about their senses and what they can do to feel safe and in control.

[00:28:15.340] - Jessica Sinarski

All right, one more thing that we're going to have to do on this sensory journey is be flexible. Still together eventually, but really it's more on us as the grownups to be flexible, because you'll have some grand success, right? Like I figured out that if one of my boys was sort of melting down and getting stuck that if we flipped on a podcast, it would sort of wake up his brain enough that he could then eat his meal. That the danger, danger, danger signal was just not working, I mean, he was in overload. But having an auditory distraction helped him feel calm enough to engage with the food. If somebody had told me this 15 years ago, I'd be like, what are you talking about? But now it's all I can see. And sometimes that's going to work and sometimes it's not. And that's okay. We also worked together to make his sort of like SOS plan when his senses are super out of whack, and it looks like this. So there's a little hand drawing of him taking three deep breaths, eating two pieces of gum, not swallowing, just chewing two pieces of gum, and then he has in the bottom picture a little like spray bottle and towel in his hand. Because honestly, most of the time our kids melt down when we ask them to do something, right. It's not like when they are getting to do their very favorite thing. It's at a transition point or when a demand is placed on them. And so in a time of calm, he and I got curious and thought how we could be proactive to help him get unstuck when his little brain gets stuck. And this is what we came up with. What we realized when we tried it out is that two pieces of gum needed to come first. He just couldn't even summon the strength to breathe until he had a little bit of oral and proprioceptive input from the gum. And even taste, actually, and smell, right? Gum is kind of magical in ways. And so I needed to be flexible and not get rigid on it happening just this way. And there are times it helps, and there are times it's still a real struggle for him. And so we use all our skills, we use all our tools. My hope with our time together today, and with the book and the resources that go with it, is to give you more tools, to give you some sensory tools in your toolbox, a lens to see behavior in that maybe looks a little bit different than what you learned in preschool.

[00:30:59.210] - Jessica Sinarski

So we are going to transition to Q&A shortly. Before we do, I just want to share where you can learn more and find more. You can find me online at Jessica Sinarski. And there's a website switcheroo coming, but probably as you're listening to this, you can still go to Rileythebrave.org. Bravebrains.com will still be around even after the website switch happens, but eventually down the road will redirect you to a website that will just make it so much easier for you to get the help you're looking for.

[00:31:45.110] - Lisa Qualls

If you're listening to this episode today on the podcast, I just want to tell you that the Q&A time we had with Jessica was just packed with great information. We had 30 minutes of Q&A, so she had lots of time to answer questions. If you want to hear more from Jessica, if you want to hear those questions, also, if you want to be able to attend all of our workshops, all of them live in our community called The Village. You can join The Village, just go to theAdoptionConnection.com/Village and enter the Code podcast to get 50 percent off your first month. You will love it.