

[00:00:00.540] - Lisa Qualls

Hi friends. Welcome to episode 201 of the Adoption Connection podcasts. Today we are sharing some of our best holiday tips and ideas and actually comments from people in our free Facebook group and our other groups. You know, every year we want to do a great holiday episode for you, and we always do it so late in the holiday season that we're not sure it's quite as useful as it could have been if we had gotten a good head start. So this year, that is what we are doing for you. So Melissa, you want to start with the first question?

[00:00:31.320] - Melissa Corkum

Our first question is from Courtney. How do I balance the kids needing some downtime and rest with the fact that when they are too still or resting, they end up with anticipation and anxiety about what's coming, which causes big behaviors?

[00:00:45.190] - Lisa Qualls

Well, first of all, we had a great response to this question right in our group, from Amy Lou. Amy Lou said, we survived by having structure in place. Great advice, Amy, because we were going to say that too. We survived by having structure in place. Camps, YMCA, some fun activities. But with ten days off, we make sure to fill some days so we can have respite and enjoy the time as well. And another mom responded: same. Good reminder that we need to start working on this - plans, routines, et cetera. And I need to find a college helper to take my youngest to do things. Okay, so right there and the answers from within the group, you have some really great thoughts. First of all, we know we can minimize our kids anxiety when we put enough structure around things. And so even if you're going to have lots of activities, maybe every single day, you still have a little quiet hour. Except of course, maybe like Christmas Day at the grandparents or something. But generally speaking, over the break, you're going to have a little quiet hour or you're going to stick with your good early bedtime.

[00:01:46.830] - Lisa Qualls

Whatever it is that makes your kids feel safe and helps things to be predictable in your family, put that structure in place. Don't just drift into a free for all. And for some of us who are parents before we adopted, it could be that those breaks, those holiday breaks were times we all kind of kick back and relaxed and that just may not be possible with a family that you have right now. I know it really, really changed for my family. Yes. Put structure in place. Plan some fun activities. If there are camps or things that can happen, that's a great way to fill some of those long days around the holidays. And I love the reminder that we can get started on this now. So it is definitely time to get started. If you want to hire a college student like she mentioned, to take her youngest child to do fun activities, to make plans, this is a great time to get started. So you are not trying to manage scramble at the end while you're also trying to get ready for the actual holiday.

[00:02:47.490] - Melissa Corkum

I think having a good respite plan, whatever that looks like, whether it's hiring someone, training kids with someone, we have lots of good advice in other episodes around kind of how to solve the child care problem, camps, all those things. I also think maybe downtime and rest time isn't necessarily free or unplanned time. So maybe downtime could be back rub time or foot rub time or bubble bath time. Something that does kind of restore our kids, isn't too over stimulating, may have some inherent regulatory properties like rocking or swinging, but isn't just a free for all, like 'just go sit on your bed and entertain yourself' kind of time. I also think we might want to think about what our kids are anticipating or having anxiety about. Sometimes it's gifts, and we're going to talk about gifts in a second. But there might be ways to also just alleviate kind of the hype of the holiday so there's less of that anticipatory anxiety.

[00:03:59.060] - Lisa Qualls

Yeah, good point. I was just thinking when you were commenting about that quiet time, rest time. In our family, we've always had a big basket of Christmas books, picture books in particular. And so for young kids, that's always been really delightful to be able to look through the Christmas books instead of just all the regular books we had. So it's just kind of a sweet thing to think about. Depending on the ages of your kids, if you don't already have a collection of Christmas books, that's a fun thing to start.

[00:04:30.090] - Lisa Qualls

Okay, gift giving. So Marlene said gift giving is triggering at our house. Our youngest needs to know what they are getting in advance and decide what he wants - always over our budget. Our middle wants lots of little gifts. Our oldest hates all gifts and only wants money. I'm considering a trip in lieu of gifts. Yes, I love that idea, but I'm going to go on. I'm going to read Mary's comment, too. She said, I'd love any input on gifts for my daughter. She's never happy with what we get her. We've just come to expect that. She sabotages to protect herself from disappointment by giving us unattainable gift ideas. So we get her what we know she'll use most. But it sure can make Christmas Day a bit of a downer. Gifts are a big thing, and they can be really hard, and I think they can be hard for children who have no adversity, no trauma, kids who are neurotypical, whatever. I think gifts, there's just so much hype around it all, and so it can just be an emotional experience for lots and lots of kids. I would just share that for kids who are really highly anxious about gifts. I have one child in particular like that. I have more than one, but one in particular that I'm thinking of right now. And gifts have been so anxiety provoking so as to make everybody miserable. Like, not just this child is miserable because that misery spills over onto everybody else on the holiday. And so one year, I took this child shopping for his own Christmas gifts. And we went, we picked them all out together, and then I wrapped them. He was a little disappointed that I even wrapped them. He wanted me to just give them to him. Then, like, a week before Christmas, I said, okay, no, I'm going to stand on this one thing. You get to pick them out, but I'm still going to wrap them and put them under the tree. For him, he could tolerate that. But there was no surprise, and he was much, much happier.

[00:06:24.280] - Lisa Qualls

And then again, the same child for his birthday one year, he had a very particular basketball backpack that he wanted, and it was reasonably expensive, so it was his one big present. We're not really big gift people in our family, so I had some little things, and I had this one big present. I got him exactly what he wanted. So our tradition in our family on birthdays is that we all gather as a family. We have a family birthday dinner. After dinner, we all leave the table, we open gifts, then we come back to the table for the birthday cake. Like, we do it the same, we've been doing it the same for 35 years. But this year, all the big kids were there, and we're all around the table, everybody's having a great time. But I can see that my child is not happy. He's not having a good time. He's not enjoying this amazing meal I made for him that he had picked out. And finally I realized, he kept asking me, so did you get it? Did you get the backpack? Did you get the color I want? Like, all these questions. And finally I looked in and I said, would you feel better if you just opened it right now rather than waiting till after dinner? And he said yes. Okay, I know this isn't a Christmas story, but follow with me. So I went upstairs, got his gifts, brought them down, handed him as one main gift, and I just called down to the end of the table, hey, guys, your brother is going to open his present now. And so he just opened it. No fanfare, but it was exactly what he wanted. And once he opened it, it's like he just calmed down and he ate dinner, and he opened the other two little things later, and we did cake. But for me, my expectation is that I want to do it a certain way. And I'm sure a lot of us experience this with Christmas too. We have a way that we want to do the gifts. But it's so much easier and better if we can be flexible in our thinking in order to meet our kids needs, because he thoroughly enjoyed that present and used it until he wore it out. But the anticipation of waiting to open it was miserable, and I was able to eliminate it in just one quick decision.

[00:08:37.260] - Melissa Corkum

It makes me think, Lisa, of a family that I've worked with. The anticipation is like the worst part of the holiday season for their son. And so they actually started putting up, like she would preempt the anxiety by putting up a Christmas tree before he would even start anticipating it. I think they do it on Halloween now or something like crazy, and they actually do gifts like they do Christmas as soon as the anticipation starts, just to get it over with. And then there's something about the fact that the experience for their family is already over that allows them to ride through the rest of the craziness of the holiday season with just that much less anxiety. So I think we have to be really creative, think outside of the box, and that can be easier for some of us. And for some of us, that means a lot of grieving around what can't be, what has to be different. But if you can think outside of the box, sometimes there are some really fantastic solutions out there. The other thing I think that's important to remember is, Lisa, the story you just told, the getting of the gift was like such a relief because it was exactly what he wanted.

[00:09:46.560] - Melissa Corkum

And some of our kids and I think Mary Lynn said this, some of our kids, because of their self protectiveness and because of their histories, are just kind of chronically discontent or dissatisfied. We kind of have to have this understanding of that, and kind of prepare ourselves that that is just part of the experience that our child has. And so use something other than your child's reaction to measure how gift giving, or the holiday, or whatever the thing is, goes. Like there are kids that you could get them literally everything on their list, even if it's extravagant, and they would still feel the sense of, like, it wasn't enough or it wasn't what they want, because that feeling of discontentment is much, much deeper than the surface level of what they're telling you. The scapegoat of, I didn't get what I wanted, I didn't get what was on my list. They just kind of have this discontentment in their soul because it can be hard to feel content, because it can feel vulnerable. And that's hard when you've had trauma. And so we just want to give you permission to not chase the need to satisfy your kids all the time, especially around holidays, especially around gifts. I mean, you're going to obviously do your best, but try not to measure your success based on your child's reaction, especially when, you know, this child just struggles to feel safe and feel content.

[00:11:21.710] - Lisa Qualls

That's a really, really good point. Well, and not to mention, we know that for a lot of our kids, holidays bring up a lot of grief. And so whatever it is you give them, if deep in their heart they're thinking, but I want to be with my real family, they probably won't say 'first family,' whatever they would say... If that's what they're feeling deep in their heart on Christmas Day, it's okay for them to feel those feelings. And the gifts just may not be the thing that's going to make them feel happy right now. So we can acknowledge that as well.

[00:11:53.670] - Lisa Qualls

Okay, here's a really quick question from Rebecca. How do we find festive foods that are not full of sugar? Melissa, you had a really quick answer. Mine was charcuterie boards. And actually, I will just say before I let Melissa answer this, you can make really fun kid friendly boards with fun cheeses. The cheese cut in fun shapes, and all the fun fancy little meats that you don't normally buy. And you can think of all kinds of fun little things that the kids would like on a board that wouldn't be sweet.

[00:12:20.980] - Melissa Corkum

So I want to just put a plug in for a book that we used a lot when one of our kids was on a grain free diet. And it's by Danielle Walker. And she I think her website is against all grain. And so she has a series of cookbooks out that all have really friendly kind of whole foods. Like if they use sugar, it's like honey or coconut sugar or maple syrup. And she has a beautiful holiday cookbook. It's called *Celebrations*. And it goes kind of, I don't know if it's month by month, but definitely season by season. So like, the first set of recipes are like things that are kind of stereotypical New Year's foods. And then she has like a Super Bowl party section, and Valentine's Day, and so kind of year by year, like all the major holidays that we would celebrate. And so there's kind of a grain-free, healthier, alternative way to make a lot of our favorite festive foods. And so it's a little bit of work in terms of if you're going to do the cooking, but it may be something you can pawn off or something maybe that you could invite your child to do with you. Her recipe testing goes above and beyond, and pretty much everything we've ever tried out of her books has been so tasty, and like a really good option for those festive foods that you might not be able to eat if your child has a more restrictive diet. So if you want a link to that book, we actually have a brand new Amazon shop. You can get there by going to the Adoption Connection.com/Amazon and see a collection of our favorite resources right there. And Danielle's cook book will be right there, easy for you to find.

[00:14:04.050] - Lisa Qualls

Okay, our last question today comes from Katie. She says, I struggle feeling joyful during holidays because it's the beginning of trauma season. Do you have any tips on being present and not resenting what's coming? That feeling of foreboding, right? Where our brains are predicting that things have not gone well in the past and so things won't go well this time. And that makes a lot of sense because our body stores all this stuff, all these experiences. I guess first of all, I would say I would think really hard about what are the things that have not gone well? And maybe even take a little time and brainstorm

and write them down. What have been the really difficult things? And then I would look at that list and anything that's not essential, I would just literally eliminate it, cross it off. And I mean, it could be something that's hard to cross off, like going to grandparents house or something like that. But anything that you can eliminate, I would eliminate. And the things that you cannot, I would really ask myself, okay, these are the hard parts about this. How can I change it to make it better? Such as the gift giving that we just talked about. Or the food thing that we just talked about. But of course there's only so much that you can control, you can only do your best. And so I would take really good care of yourself so that being present comes from within you, and is not based on the external, what your kid is doing, what is happening in your home. If you can be grounded in your own health and wellbeing, that will help a whole lot. And Melissa, I know you've got suggestions about that.

[00:15:50.700] - Melissa Corkum

So the first part I struggle feeling joyful during the holidays. We do something with folks whenever they're doing a group with us, whether it be the Regulation Rescue or an Overcoming Blocked Care group. And we call it points of joy. And it's just a really simple exercise where you brainstorm a whole list. We encourage 50 things that bring you joy and you start incorporating them into your routine. Because we can kind of create joy even in the midst of really hard seasons for ourselves. And it could be remembering to drink your coffee hot in the morning. It could be diffusing your favorite essential oil. It could be going for a walk or just taking a minute to enjoy the snow on the ground or the sun in the sky. They don't have to be super time consuming or super expensive, but they just are a reminder. When folks do this exercise, it's kind of this reminder of how much joy there is in our lives. We tend to focus or define our day by the huge meltdown or the really hard thing. But when we can also remember, oh, I did seven things that bring a smile to my face today too. It kind of helps to balance that negative confirmation bias that, you know, everything is hard, everything is hard.

[00:17:14.790] - Melissa Corkum

And then just on being present, it is a practice. I mean, it's why they call it a practice of meditation. It is really hard, but we can practice even outside of the moment. So, you know, it's just early November now. So before you start into the holiday season, start giving your nervous system the practice of the neuro pathway of how to just notice what's happening right in the moment. People used to ask me how we were doing when things were really hard, and it would cause me to be mindful right in that moment, right? Like, I would take a deep breath and I would think, well, right the second things are okay, you know, I'm talking to you, or It's quiet for a hot second. And so I started answering that question kind of moment by moment, instead of like, the big picture, how are we? Because that was kind of depressing and hard for people to hear. But I would kind of just and I didn't want to just say a flippant like, we're fine, because we kind of weren't. But I could say, well, right in this very second, I'm doing okay. And so I think this practice of taking things in smaller slices, moment by moment. And I think when we add points of joy to that, then we give ourselves half a chance to work our way through the tough parts of the holiday season. Just one little moment and then one little point of joy at a time.

[00:18:37.760] - Lisa Qualls

That's so good. I just want to add to, you know, you mentioned things about beauty, and Dr. Curt Thompson says we need to put ourselves in the path of oncoming beauty. And so whatever is beautiful to you, whether it's a lit candle, whether it's the lights on your tree, whatever it is that is beautiful, surround yourself with those little things. Maybe they need to be unbreakable. Maybe you have to put them up high. But you need beauty, and beauty is good for your soul, and it's joyful. So surround yourself with even small bits of beauty and bring nature inside this great time of year to go gather up pine cones from your trees and put them in a basket or whatever it is, but just surround yourself with a little bit of beauty.

[00:19:25.920] - Lisa Qualls

So we hope this has been helpful to all of you. We are anticipating the holidays along with you, the easy and the hard and the good and the maybe the challenges. But we hope that if you want more support during the holidays, you would think about joining us in The Village. We have so many wonderful gatherings going on in there where you will find parents who are experiencing life very similarly to you.

[00:19:50.110] - Melissa Corkum

So if you want to join us in The Village, and we really hope you will, you can go to theadoptionconnection.com/village and use the code 'podcast' to get off your first month.

[00:20:02.310] - Lisa Qualls

And remember to check out our brand new Amazon shop at theadoptionconnection.com/amazon where we are putting all of our favorites, our books, our resources, everything we love.