

[00:00:00.170] - Lisa Qualls

Hey, friends. This is Lisa today. I want to share portions of chapter 2 of *The Connected Parent*, which I had the honor of co-writing with Dr. Karyn Purvis. And chapter two is titled "Know Yourself."

[00:00:16.930] - Lisa Qualls

Just as our children don't arrive as blank slates, we come to parenting with our own unique histories. Let's be honest even the best childhood is not completely free of hardship. When I think back to my childhood, I'm a bit stunned to realize that even those in my small crowd of friends had their share of traumas with a capital T. The death of a parent, a mother with cancer, parental divorce, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, bullying and chronic anxiety are just some of the challenges that come to mind. More common challenges, traumas with a little T, impact children as well. These include things such as children moving houses, dating and breaking up, and simply not feeling like they belong. A therapist friend shared that she sees many children for whom moving is a significant trauma. I find this comforting because moving from the city to a small town in late elementary school was very difficult for me. I lost my bearings for a long time.

[00:01:24.570] - Lisa Qualls

How my friends and I coped with our big T and little T traumas had a lot to do with our attachment to our parents. Those of us who had a secure attachment, and whose parents provided a secure base, probably weathered the hardest parts of childhood far better than our friends who didn't have reliable support. Some parents who decide to adopt or care for foster children have experienced severe challenges in their childhoods. Abuse, neglect and adoption losses may be part of your own childhood story. Think back to your childhood. How were you parented? Did you experience safety and consistency from caring, healthy parents? Did you know you were precious and loved? Or were your parents distant, showing little emotion and affection? Did you seek assurance from other adults like teachers? Or were your friends your primary support and safe base? Did you have parents who were inconsistent, sometimes affectionate, and meeting your needs while the next day ignoring you and leaving you to figure things out on your own? When you cried or were having a hard time, were you unsure which version of your parent would show up to help if they did at all? Did you have parents with addictions or mental health challenges? The parenting we experienced continues to influence us into adulthood and in our own parenting.

[00:02:45.840] - Lisa Qualls

It gets even more interesting when we blend our attachment history with our partners. This may sound discouraging, but I have good news: we aren't trapped in our childhood attachment patterns and styles. What happened to us as children is not as important as how we've made sense of it as adults. We can't change our experiences, but when we're able to step back and view ourselves and our parents with compassion and insight, we form our life narrative. You can form secure attachments with your spouse and children, even if you didn't have secure attachments with your parents. Even more hopeful, this attachment healing doesn't need to come from your relationship with a parent. A safe connection with another trustworthy attuned adult can change your own attachment trajectory. A teacher, extended family member, pastor, or other person who becomes a safe base can make all the difference.

[00:03:42.630] - Lisa Qualls

I know a young man who grew up in a profoundly neglectful home. His family history included generations of addiction and abuse. He followed his parents footsteps into the world of drug addiction, and like the generations before him, he landed in jail. This was not uncommon for people in his family and came as no big surprise. While in jail, he reflected on the one stable relationship in his life, the one he shared with his grandparents on his father's side. They were a consistent, safe presence and his secure base in a tumultuous world. When life at home became unbearable, he moved in with them. When home got better, he moved back in with his parents. This cycle repeated itself many times. Now, as an older teen, he knew he didn't want to follow the path of his parents. He wanted a life like his grandparents. Although they didn't have a lot of money, there was plenty of food, the utilities weren't turned off due to lack of payment, and drugs and alcohol were not part of the daily diet.

[00:04:46.570] - Lisa Qualls

This young man is an overcomer. His attachment to his parents was far from secure, but he formed a secure attachment with his grandparents. Over and over, they met his needs. They became his secure base. He is also intentionally creating a different childhood for his younger siblings and someday, his own children. He desires to meet their needs time and time again, just as his grandparents met his. He plans to be their secure base and is already demonstrating it with his younger brothers. Just as he is changing the course of his family's history, we can change the course of ours. In addition to understanding attachment, we need to be aware of our triggers. Parents often identify their children's triggers, the things that start them on a downward behavior spiral. But we have triggers too. And sometimes they really get in the way of being the parents that we want to be.

[00:05:44.670] - Lisa Qualls

If disrespect makes your head feel like it might explode, explore it and be curious about your feelings. What about your child being disrespectful really bothers you? When you reflect on your childhood, do these feelings seem to make sense? Then learn to manage it with healthy coping skills. If you're adopting or fostering older kids, you can nearly count on a lack of respect.

[00:06:08.470] - Lisa Qualls

How about rejection by your child? Are you overly sensitive due to rejection in your own life? Do you find yourself desperate for your child's acceptance? Or do you turn away because they don't seem to want your love anyhow. My child once told me I would never be able to help anyone because I wasn't a good mom and I couldn't help her. Her words went straight to my heart, pulling up feelings of failure and inadequacy. My mind told me it was her pain talking, but my heart felt it deeply. This was a trigger for me. I wanted to back away, shield my heart and protect myself. But those coping mechanisms don't lead to connection. Knowing this was a trigger, acknowledging it, and reminding myself of the truth helped me stay present with my child. There are so many things that can pull us back into our childhood experiences. Our traumas and attachments to our parents or other adults do not have to determine the parents we become. How we make sense of it can make all the difference.

[00:07:13.850] - Lisa Qualls

And this is Dr. Purvis, writing now. At our institute parents who are struggling in their relationships with their children often lament that their child won't attach to them. These parents have a deep longing to have the kind of connection with their children that they see some of their friends and peers enjoying in their families. They are heartbroken when they experience disconnection and rejection from their children. Perhaps you've had a similar experience in your family. If so, I'd like to extend this gentle invitation: explore where you have come from and discover the messages you are sending to your children by the way you parent. Throughout this book, Lisa and I will often remind you to go back to the beginning of your child's experience. We'll ask you to consider the deficits your child felt in their early life, and we'll provide tools that will help you make up for those losses. In this chapter, we are asking you to do the same for yourself. To bring a child to a place of healing, you must know the path yourself. Many parents have never explored their own paths to healing, and some may even be unaware that they are carrying wounds from childhood.

[00:08:21.870] - Lisa Qualls

Most parents are not aware of their own attachment styles. We seem to think that because it's in our past, it no longer affects us. But in reality, every one of us speaks some words we've heard spoken, or we do some things to our children that were done to us when we were children. Every one of us has unconscious parenting strategies that become apparent when we reflect on the parenting we received. As we become insightful about our histories, we will probably choose to let go of some of those parenting strategies so that we can be most effective with our own children. Unless a parent has examined their own childhood and upbringing, they're likely to carry out those same patterns with their own children and repeat the same errors their parents may have made.

[00:09:07.550] - Lisa Qualls

Our purpose in asking parents to explore their histories is to help them be mindful and emotionally present, and then to bring a deep, rich, healing presence to their relationships with their children. I often say that it is only as I heal my own history that I can know the right path to lead a child to heal

their own history. So if you can't go to your own sadness, you can't lead your son to his. If you can't go to your own fear, you can't lead your daughter to hers. If you can't go to your own loss, you can't lead your teenager to theirs.

[00:09:41.540] - Lisa Qualls

If you were harmed, it's important to acknowledge and grieve that harm. If you had a parent who was an alcoholic, you must grieve trying to fix him or her and not being able to do it. If you've had losses as a young adult, you need to grieve those losses before you can help your child make sense of their own. It is only in the grieving and the owning of our history that we can move forward with a clear view of the child standing before us.

[00:10:07.890] - Lisa Qualls

As you begin this arduous important work, I urge you to find a trusted professional, such as a licensed counselor or social worker, to help you process your history. Once you've identified the areas of relationships that are more difficult for you, it's important to press even deeper and learn why this is the case. The reason I want to help parents go to these places is not to shame or blame them for their children's struggles, but so that they can guide children to that same place of healing. Here is a simplified example that resonates with many parents with whom I've worked. After reflecting on your history, perhaps you've realized that giving nurturing care is difficult for you. As you explore your past, maybe you realize that even though your parents were wonderful people, they struggled to be nurturing when you needed it. As a result, you may find it difficult to give nurturing care beyond instrumental care, when your child is hurt or upset. Big displays of emotion may feel uncomfortable for you because your needs were not met as a child. Furthermore, situations in which you feel that your emotions are dismissed are very difficult for you.

[00:11:14.950] - Lisa Qualls

Parents with this experience often find that disrespect from their children is a huge trigger because it makes them feel dismissed, just as they did when they were young children in need of nurturing care. This is just one example of how our childhood experiences impact our relationships as adults. It's important to become mindful of these experiences so that we can change the same trajectory for our children.

[00:11:39.550] - Lisa Qualls

And I'll read the end of this chapter to close, and this was my part. My friend Jen grew up in a family where achievement was highly valued. Any grade below an A was considered a sign of laziness. Her parents always seemed disappointed in her. She did not maintain a 4.0, but she was a good student. She chose to move across the country for college and changed her major a few times, trying to find the right balance of ambition and happiness. Her parents were disappointed to discover she was no longer planning a prestigious career and thought she was settling for something easier. Jen met Mark in her sophomore American literature class. He was kind and committed. She felt safe and comfortable with him. They married after graduation, and two years later had their first child, Henry. Henry was a fussy baby, and Jen often worried she wasn't meeting his needs very well. Sometimes she couldn't figure out how to comfort him, but most of the time she felt like she did a good job. One summer day, they took a hike with Henry in the backpack. A sun hat covered his nearly bald head and shielded his face from the sun. Henry fell asleep as they walked the trail. When they got back to the trailhead, Jen noticed that Henry's head had tipped to the side and left his cheek uncovered and exposed to the sun. His red cheek seemed to be a sign of her failure. Surely a good mom wouldn't allow her baby to get sunburned. Mark assured her it was simply an accident, but she was ashamed of what she perceived as her failure. A good friend saw Henry the next day and jokingly said, Bad mama. This struck Jen's heart with unreasonable force. She turned away with tears in her eyes.

[00:13:20.750] - Lisa Qualls

Two years later, they had a second son, Luke. He was smiley, happy and easy to console. He nursed well and loved being cuddled. Henry adored him most of the time, and the transition to a family of four seemed pretty easy. Jen and Mark enjoyed their little family and loved being parents. Several years had passed when they read an article in the local paper and became aware of the need for foster parents in their community. They attended an information meeting to learn more about foster

care and decided that becoming foster parents was something they could do. They had a sweet family, their boys were doing well in kindergarten and second grade, and life was ticking along nicely. Mark and Jen enjoyed the children and knew this was a good fit for them. Maybe they would even adopt a child they fostered. Who knew?

[00:14:08.270] - Lisa Qualls

The process of becoming licensed took longer than they expected. The training was good, but they were a little surprised by how detailed the home study was. Jen was frustrated by the amount of information the caseworker wanted about her childhood. That all happened years ago. Why did it matter so much? She was an adult now, and she had great relationships with her parents and siblings. Mark and Jen's first placement was a six year old girl. This little one wouldn't let Jen touch her. Only Mark could feed her or brush her hair before school. If Mark wasn't home, she tried to do everything herself and would scream at Jen, go away, I hate you.

[00:14:45.450] - Lisa Qualls

Jen had learned enough to know that this was not uncommon, but was surprised by how much it hurt her. After weeks of this, she felt completely rejected. When the screaming started, she began to think to herself, that's okay, I think I might hate you too. She was ashamed of her thoughts and couldn't confess this to anyone. This little girl had been hurt by the parents who were supposed to protect her. Her behavior was not surprising. Still, Jen felt daggers in her heart as the child continued to reject her, wanting only Mark. It took Mark's help for Jen to begin untangling her feelings. He knew her, loved her, and understood her heart.

[00:15:25.590] - Lisa Qualls

This experience led Jen to begin learning more about herself and exploring her reactions. She decided she wanted the help of a counselor. After four months, although it felt much longer, Jen's foster daughter began to trust her a little. She let Jen brush her hair without screaming and hiding. She sat closer when Jen read books aloud. One day, she asked Jen to show her how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Jen pulled a chair up to the counter for her foster daughter and with laughter and a little mess, they made a sandwich together. Jen found herself feeling a connection with her foster daughter that she hadn't felt before. She relaxed into the warmth of it.

[00:16:05.430] - Lisa Qualls

Though Jen's daughter sometimes continued to reject her and yell, I hate you, Jen was able to keep her emotions in check. Knowing this was about the child's big feelings and fears not her own. She grew to love this little girl and was sad to say goodbye when the little girl was reunified with her biological family. Exploring her childhood and relationship with her parents gave Jen insight into the struggles with her foster daughter. As Dr. Purvis says, she had to look back in order to move forward. This was not a quick fix or easy process, but was worth every counseling session, every tearful conversation with Mark, and even the discomfort of realizing her parents were only human too. They did the best they could with what they knew, and now Jen could build on their efforts. She knew she could be a better mom to all her kids with this new knowledge.

[00:16:59.650] - Lisa Qualls

I hope you enjoyed hearing portions of chapter 2 of *The Connected Parent*. We'll have a link to the book in the show notes of today's episode. And more than anything, I want you to know I really do believe you are a good parent, doing good work. You would not be listening to this podcast if you are not. I wish you all the very best.