

[00:00:01.195] - Lisa Qualls

Welcome to The Adoption Connection podcast, where we share resources by and for adoptive and foster moms. I'm Lisa Qualls.

[00:00:09.085] - Melissa Corkum

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

[00:00:14.095] - Lisa Qualls

Hello, friends. Welcome to Episode 125 of The Adoption Connection podcast. Today we are going to be talking about the therapeutic value of playing games. So, Melissa, I am curious, what was your favorite game as a child?

[00:00:29.785] - Melissa Corkum

OK, you're going to laugh at me. I know we played games as a kid, I, I just don't have, you know, my future thinking self just doesn't remember a ton, but our family has to go to games in general and they are aggravation, which I feel like no one's ever heard of. It's something my husband introduced me to. It's kind of like sorry but with marbles.

[00:00:51.955] - Lisa Qualls

I know that game.

[00:00:52.925] - Melissa Corkum

Do you? Yeah, I never heard of it before I met him, but our family is obsessed with it. So much so that Patrick built a modular aggravation board so that it doesn't matter how many people are playing, there's never an empty like home set. And then we're also a huge fan of Train Dominoes.

[00:01:12.685] - Lisa Qualls

Nice. Well, I was thinking what my favorite game was as a child, and we did play a fair number of games, but my strongest memories of playing games are with my grandmother, my Nana. She loved to play cards. It's a really special memory, but every time we were together, she would get out the cards and she taught us card games. And my favorite card game was Kings Corners. And that was just when I loved and I loved being with my grandmother and felt very connected to her through the fact that she was willing to give her time and attention to me while playing cards.

[00:01:49.265] - Melissa Corkum

Oh, I love that. Well, this week's guest is a gaming expert extraordinaire, and honestly, when he reached out and told me kind of what his practice was all about, my imagination just couldn't get around like how playing Sorry together as a family could be as therapeutic as he claimed it was going to be. But he talks about so much more in the gaming world. I mean, there's just, you don't know what you don't know, right, until you reach out and talk to people who are experts in these things. So our guest this week is Jack Berkenstock Jr. He's a master's level therapist with over twenty four years in the Human Services field. And he has worked with children, adolescents and adults, both in residential treatment facility settings and in community based treatments. He is one of the founders and the executive director of a nonprofit called the Bodhana Group which he's going to tell you a little bit more about. Before we jump into this episode, we want to just let you know that Jack and I do talk about some pretty mature themes in this interview. So if you have young ears listening, you might want to pause this and either listen on earbuds or save it to a time when you can listen in private. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Jack.

[00:03:02.865] - Melissa Corkum

Hi, Jack, welcome to The Adoption Connection podcast.

[00:03:05.985] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Hello. Thanks for having me.

[00:03:08.055] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, well, we are really excited. One of the themes that we often talk about here at The Adoption

Connection is how, what we call playful engagement can be such a great way to keep everyone's nervous system open and really increase the connection we have with our kids. So we're really excited for you to expand a role a little bit into options that can be used in kind of this avenue of playful engagement.

[00:03:31.185] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Oh, well, I'll have plenty of those. I'll have plenty of opportunities to talk about recommendations on many sides of the tabletop spectrum.

[00:03:40.185] - Melissa Corkum

So perfect. Well, before we get into all of that, let's just kind of start with the basics. Will you share a little bit about your group, the Bodhana Group, and tell us kind of what that means and how it came to be?

[00:03:51.885] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Sure thing. So Bodhana is a Sanskrit word that means leading to an awakening or an understanding. So one of the reasons that we had kind of chosen this is initially Bodhana was formed from a bunch of us who had worked together in a residential treatment facility for preadolescent and adolescent males who were either victims of sexual abuse or persons who had problematic sexual behavior. So we wanted to provide some sort of treatment system or support system to kind of lead people to an understanding of the impact of the cycle and, you know, how this starts. So we had originally looked at things like mindfulness practice and so that's kind of where we we got the name Bodhana. Also, I'm a practicing Buddhist myself, but as we kind of started forming and we kind of wanted to provide like all of our trainings and our support on things like compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, we kind of found that the market that we were trying to connect to, wasn't really there. Like they had started to shut down a lot of like, you know, in state facilities and such within Pennsylvania, which is where we're based. So we were going more into like a different direction. So we said, "OK, what are we going to do? We're a nonprofit. We got we got great minds here." So we hit upon the idea of, you know, nonprofits need fundraisers and we didn't have a car or any star golfers on our squad. So we said, "Why don't we run a fundraising event? We were all gamers. We, we all have played board games for years and years." And so we hit upon the idea of running a con that we called "save against fear." And save against fear was named because in Dungeons and Dragons you make what's called a saving throw and it's a dice roll that you make to conquer like a spell effect or some type of magical effect that comes at you. And we wanted people through this event to make their saving through against the fear of talking about sexual abuse of, you know, coming forth if if you had been impacted in that way or, you know, if you know of someone, you know, just conquering that fear so we can get this out in the open and people can get help on both sides of that treatment coin. When we started safe against fear, it was a great event. And it actually it led to a lot of discussions from people in the gaming industry about people having sent letters and over the years about how role playing in very difficult settings helped them conquer internal traumas and to work through emotional material through the presentation of using like a fictionalized representation of themselves. So I would beat the monsters in the game that led to me beating them metaphorically within myself. We were like, hey, wait a minute, maybe there's something there. So, you know, all of us then at that time, after the facility had shut down, we were all unemployed. So we kind of turned our focus and our attention to analyzing gaming in our own lives and what that had meant to us, whether it was like me getting through my parents divorce and a lot of the disharmony that had been there, whether it was another one of our board members and founders who had lost his mother to cancer when he was very young. So we really looked at what are all the aspects of gaming that can be beneficial and helpful and this started us on our theoretical path. And we talked about the model and we pontificated about it and we we tried to analyze it, again from that therapist mode of, OK, if people are getting this benefit and we had gotten this benefit without the aid of a trained counselor or therapist, imagine what you could do with, and I hesitate to use this phrase, but if you therapeutically weaponized the process of play, you know, if you really directed the stories that you told, the challenges that you developed and, you know, even with the selection of specific games, how can you really bring this to a beneficial, intentional impact? And that was kind of the impetus for Bodhana kind of changing our face from, you know, what we had done to this idea of therapeutic and intentional gaming. We offer training and consultation for practitioners, for agencies, we run private pay and funded groups through grants. Our goal is the St.

Jude's model. We believe that parents and families, especially those who are low income, they should not have to pay for this. So we actually seek companies and investors who would like to sponsor groups and we can run a group for six kids for an entire year for less than six thousand dollars, which comparatively, if you're talking about typical rates for insurance, those group, that group would cost well over ten thousand. So our goal is let's run it just to pay our facilitators. We're not, we don't intend to be millionaires by doing this. We we intend on getting a good service out there that, as we talk, not only is a good form of adjunct therapy, but it's also a tremendous skill building opportunity that leads to a lot of independence. So we also have what we would call a rapid turnaround model within the industry and within the field.

[00:08:57.945] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I can already imagine that there's listeners out there with their wheels turning because especially what you shared in terms of sexual abuse victims and trauma, unfortunately, a lot of kids in the adoption and foster care community have that as a part of their story. And it seems like, well it's hard to get really competent services for lots of things in the adoption and trauma world. When a child starts to sexually act out on those behaviors, I think, one, they hit us in a much scarier fear based way. So as parents, right, like those things really kind of, you know, we might be able to get our minds around trying to navigate lying or stealing or something like that, but, you know, when other siblings become victims and all kinds of things, you know, our own fear drastically increases. And then it seems like the types of resources that are specifically capable of handling those situations also, you know, drastically decrease. So I know there's people out there, you know, you have their their attention, their ears perked up because there just needs to be more people I think, one, with your heart for service, but I also love that you saw an opportunity, right, I think some of the best providers, services, all of those things, you know, you almost came across this accidentally, it sounds. And, and here you are and so just what a phenomenal, you know, happy accident, I guess.

[00:10:29.025] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Well it, well it, I mean it's, it's a truth that you find with most things that most of our inventions and innovations are not actually initially the purpose they were sought for. Like if we look at something like microwaves and how we use them for cooking, they're, you know, the very ubiquitous. They're in every home, they've been around since the 50s and the 60s since the first radar range was I think Amanah put it out. I used to sell appliances, can you tell? But it actually was discovered quite accidentally where a person who is working with Magna Trons and microwaves, he had a candy bar that was sitting on the shelf and the microwaves literally cooked and melted the bar and other and he was like, "What? Like, I, where-." And he was like, wait a minute. And he kind of looked over and checked that the microwaves were causing the molecules within to heat up. So he was like, wait a minute, we might have something else here. So it was it was an accident that they found a purpose for kind of afterwards. And we were all, we had always been looking for unique treatment solutions because a lot of Bodhana's trainings that we still can offer for agencies and people, one of our favorites that we actually used to offer for a local adoption agency is one that we call problematic versus natural. And it was the whole idea of it was kind of our don't freak out parents training, that there are certain behaviors like, oh, my gosh, you know, little Joey was, you know, touching themselves at the dinner table in front of company. It's like, OK, relax, you don't have a serial killer on your hands here. You have a child who's naturally exploring their body and a pleasure response that, you know, until we put guilt on top of it as adults with preconceived notions of maybe our own experience of sexuality, there is no inherent understanding from a child. We give them that understanding. So before we maybe overreact to this, let's try to put it in context. You know, even something as playing doctor, as an example, you know, people like, oh, my gosh, you know, look at something, I'm going to freak out and I need to send this kid to counseling. No, you just need to talk about boundaries and you need to talk about private versus public. And they need to talk about what intimate means. Don't be afraid of those conversations. But again, sex as just one topic in all this is made so taboo that we don't talk about it. So I think in general, one of the things that kind of just to parlay is back over to the games, because, believe me, I've been doing this kind of work with sexually problematic for about twenty years of my career in addition to the gaming world. So I could talk about that for days. But I think that finding a way to communicate and finding a way to discuss difficult material, I think is one of the real beauties that led us to gaming because it is something that is less invasive than traditional talk therapy. We can build a lot of these problematic conversations that, you

know, one of the biggest errors that a lot of people make when confronting on things like this that, you know, I think it's like ninety two percent of most problematic behaviors of that nature happen by family or someone that is known to the victim. So when we talk about, well, why didn't you just tell me, well, what if it's Uncle Dave or what if it's dad? You know, you can't have that conversation because now I'm the one who broke up the family or something like that. So we can use metaphor and story and allegory within a fantasy setting or a sci fi setting. We can create characters and situations that can bring about emotional catharsis, emotional exploration, even practicing very good skills like, you know, the whole thing of self advocacy. Will you have the character be the person that delivers the speech to the crowd to rally the troops? You know, that's an advocacy exercise which, beautiful thing about the brain, it doesn't know the difference between real and not real, but if you're practicing a skill and you're really immersed in that character portrayal, your brain is still learning, your brain is still growing using all of those wonderful chemicals. It's still developing, but it's just using the game to do that, which is so, so less frightening than a person sitting across from me going, "So tell me about your failures. Tell me about how you messed up this week." You know, it's it's more OK, so you did this this week in school. I can create a character now that you have to encounter in the adventure and now by your encountering them, I can raise those questions. It's pretend. It's play. So we have a safe distance now that we can talk about this. And that's just I mean, that's just some of the nuance that goes into this. There's a lot of depth to this model of gaming.

[00:15:04.435] - Melissa Corkum

Can you tell us a little bit more about how you define tabletop gaming? You know, you've already mentioned Dungeons and Dragons and some more fantasy games. Does this also apply to, like, Sorry and Parcheesi?

[00:15:18.265] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Well, well, it definitely can. And that's a very interesting question. There is we use, tabletop is basically anything that also is referred to as analog gaming. So this would be gaming that is not electronic in nature because there are also for anybody out there who's savvy at video games, there's also what they call JRPG which is like Japanese or turn based role playing games. There are role playing exercises that we find in psychotherapy and, you know, so in terms of RPG and tabletop, we're talking about anything that is typically played over a table that bases a lot of it's kind of merit, I guess, over just interaction between the participants over the top of the table so it can include board games like, Sorry, Parcheesi, Monopoly. Now say that we've definitely gotten a lot more savvy in the board game universe. There are tons of great games out there that really do help develop very specific skills. And I'm trying to think of some good examples. There are so many games that are out there. There's one game example called Junk Art which is you have a bunch of different plastic pieces and your whole goal might be to have the highest stack possible. So you all have the same pieces, but you need to stack them now. So it's a dexterity based game which is, also incorporates like math and physics. But, you know, it's also patience and dealing with failure, so it develops resilience. When your tower falls over, you don't throw the whole table out the window, right, it's just try again, you can do that, you know. I mean and I think Sorry is a good old school example of "Really? You sent me back to start again?" You know, that frequent arguments around the home, right? But, yeah, anything that is played on the table, we we look at it as being not only, it's inherently good for building certain skills and role playing games because you're using a lot more creativity, those I mean, we talk on our website we have our heroes of the game which are these little cute chibby characters that we have and each character has a certain area that we believe is an inherent benefit to the gaming practice and the gaming hobby.

[00:17:40.235] - Lisa Qualls

We're interrupting this interview to ask you to do us a favor. Really, it's not for us, but for adoptive and foster parents just like you.

[00:17:48.305] - Melissa Corkum

If you find our podcast helpful, pause this episode and revisit your podcast app where you can rate and review the show. Honestly, this isn't about making us feel good. This is about other parents finding confidence, hope and friends who understand.

[00:18:03.335] - Lisa Qualls

Thanks so much for helping us get the word out. We really appreciate you.

[00:18:07.325] - Melissa Corkum

Now back to the conversation.

[00:18:13.345] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

And each character has a certain area that we believe is an inherent benefit to the gaming practice in the gaming hobby, so that's again, resilience, critical thinking, dexterity, education, social skills, creativity and expression, initiative, taking, you know, risk reward, mechanics, compassion and empathy. So there's a ton of skills that we believe in finding the right game for the right reason. So like, for example, one thing we do is we run monthly, well at least pre-covid, we would run monthly gaming groups. They were kind of like social club groups for children and families who experience autism. And our whole goal was like we didn't start out and go, OK, kids and parents, we're going to work on our reciprocal communication skills, so practice that eye contact, right? It was OK, parents, come here for a second. So we know that your child is, as you told us, that they're very routine oriented. So what we're going to do is we're going to try to introduce some new games to the table to kind of break with routine. You might see a little bit of "But I like this game. I want to play this game." OK, can we just try this new one today? And so we're going to use games and playing games even here's some difficult rules that we might have to learn. So you know what? Maybe we learned wrong the first time and that happened once or twice. And the parent, like I saw their fear when all of a sudden we were like, oh, jeez, we I'm sorry. We really misread that rule. It's a very common thing at the table. We're going to have to start over. And the kid kind of looked at me like, what are you talking about Willis? And the mom looked at me like, oh, my lord, it's going to explode, this is going to be horrible. It's horrible. I said, you know what? This happens so much sometimes in games like we read the rules and we thought we understood them, but it was just a mistake. But, hey, nobody won or nobody lost. We just got to start over together so we'll learn it the right way. What do you think? The kid is like, "Well that makes sense." And the mom was just like, "What kind of wizard are you?" And I was like, "I'm not. I'm not a wizard." We just normalized this experience of, eh, stuff happens. But we use the game and the excitement and the eagerness to play that game as a way to develop that skill of go pick a game. You pick it this week and let's try to find people to play. And we even run these events in local game stores. So now we also normalize the gaming hobby. We also provide that child in that family with a natural support system that you can go to a local game store. They have libraries of games. They have people that will teach you the games. But it also provides context for the child of how to engage in an atmosphere. So it's not, well, I read a social story, then I go to the mall. It's like, well, we go to the game store, you see people losing graciously. You see people playing, you see people doing this. It it normalizes everything. So gaming is, becomes a communication system. And it, and it also becomes an ambassadorship upon itself to bring more opportunities for skills.

[00:21:08.815] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, it's so fascinating. I could probably talk with you for hours. And we did reach out to our community before our conversation just with a little teaser about the topic. And of course, there are tons of questions. So I'm going to ask one that I have just about our experience and then we'll jump into some of the questions from our community. We have a daughter who we think has, has used fantasy as a way of coping and you alluded a little bit to that. You know, like either things are so hard or she needed an escapism of some sort. And so she would kind of escape. And she has a fantastically vivid imagination. She would kind of escape into her imagination as a way of coping. But what we think might have happened is she did that so often that now her, the actual reality that maybe you and I might experience and her reality don't always seem to match up. And maybe she's blurred those lines. And so what that has brought about is a lot of confabulation where maybe she experiences something and then she tells it back and we're like, a "That is not the way that the rest of the world kind of experienced that." And so I hear you also saying that fantasy and imagination, especially roleplaying games, can be really therapeutic in helping to cope. What have you seen either for kids who have kind of this confabulation going on where they're not sure when they're quite in fantasy or reality or how do you kind of prevent fantasy and imagination as a coping mechanism becoming kind of problematic?

[00:22:43.715] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Interesting question because one of the things that was around and this is, again, I'm kind of a grandpa gamer here, I'm approaching 50. So I was around during the era of the satanic panic and where people talked about the evils of role playing games and one of the very big things that's always been a point of contention is the idea of escapism and whether it's healthy to promote well you're in this fan. And people remember if you ever saw the Mazes and Monsters movie with Tom Hanks where like, you know, this person that, you know, he took the deep dive into the fantasy and he and he was lost. Well, I can't say that there aren't people who that may be a problem for. One of the things that that we've seen is, I mean, escapism is is a fairly I would say it's a very therapeutic concept, I mean, the whole basis of why we take vacations. It's why we play video games. It's a simulated reality. It's one of the reasons why-

[00:23:34.935] - Melissa Corkum

Why I escape with Hallmark Channel every weekend, right?

[00:23:39.435] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

It never, never fails to amaze me. If you see all the Hallmark movie posters, literally, they're carbon copies of each other. It's astounding. I have to share the link with you sometime. Anyway, there there are a lot of safeguards that we try to build in because there is, I mean, especially given, you know, if a person is dealing with a very high amount of stress, and right now we're definitely in times that fit that bill, it is very tempting. Now, one of the things that we do in the game and just as kind of an example here, it's not product placement or anything, but there's a game called Buckmeier which is a DnD light game, so it uses Dungeons and Dragons rules. But the whole setting is you are playing the part of anthropomorphic dogs and cats, birds or lizards, because there's extensions, of course. But one of the one of the interesting things about this, when people say, why aren't you afraid that, like, a kid will over identify with their character? Well, we have a lot of grounding tools that we use when we play games. So it's not just like you would see in Hollywood or in TV shows where they talk about role playing games where it's just everybody's wearing cloaks and there's candles everywhere. And there's like, you know, don't bring that new watch in here because, you know, it's not like a you know, it's not like Ren Faire. We have a lot of grounding tools, like a lot of looking up rules, a lot of, you know, calling for things like, OK, it's time for an initiative role if we go into combat. And that's a role to see who roles highest, to see who goes first in the order. So with elements like that throughout the fabric of the game, we provide more than enough opportunity to say, OK, this is a game and we're playing in this game. So we use and with some kids that we feel that need more of that grounding. We will often make a lot of the discussion points of between what you are feeling and what is your character feeling. And this is actually, it's a concept that is talked about in the therapeutic gaming realm that it's called bleed. And the whole concept is about how much of my character identity bleeds into my real world? Like, what did I take away from these adventures? Did I like it? Did I not like it? Did I, did I learned something? You know, much like if I watch a movie or a TV show that resonates with me, some of that character identity connection is going to bleed into me. Conversely, when I create something, anything, it contains a part of myself. We can't create without putting a part of ourselves in it as the parent of that creation. So we are very attentive to this idea of bleed. And I would say in this example, I would probably ask more player based questions rather than character based questions, just as a way to kind of further separate the line between what your character would feel versus what you would feel, almost kind of stating you're not them. This is this is a role that you're playing. This is a character that you're playing. Because, again, with the idea of escapism, it's always what is preferable about the escape, what is preferable to fantasy, and one of the very common things, like even if you're talking about like delusions or illusions or anything like that, is always to ground the person in contemporary situation. Very simple of like, where are you? What's going on? Hey, could you grab me that thing over there? You know, something that's physical in the real world. We just draw more attention and focus to it. And I will say there were at least maybe one or two people that we've worked with over the five years we've been running groups that we've had to have a talk with the parent and just say maybe this isn't the most appropriate form of engagement for your child. And it's not that they can't maybe get to that point, but they're really over identifying with the fantasy. So, yeah, there are some safeguards as with any other practice, you know, those results may vary. So so, yeah, I would say that, I mean, recommendations for that. I would say place systems that have more intense rules, even using things like maps and minis, which are now three dimensional representations. So

now, it even becomes more of a strategy board game experience and even board games are a little bit easier in terms of that. But also in some ways you could kind of use role playing maybe to enhance the creativity and then talk about where those creations come from, like, oh, is there somebody like who would I be in that world? Or, you know, who does that remind you of? You know, again, connecting the fantasy back over to the reality is, is probably one of the biggest safeguards.

[00:28:04.275] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, I think that's really helpful. OK, so, you know, when we mentioned games in the group, most people went to more board games where there's like winners and losers and, you know, there were I think their wheels were spinning about the therapeutic benefits of what that could be. And of course, the first question that everyone asked, and you already alluded to this a little bit, which is what are your suggestions for kids who don't win or lose graciously? Right, like our kids have such a tiny window of tolerance for frustration. And you already mentioned the Sorry thing where you go back to, you know, you go back to start. We play a version of that game in our house. I don't know how widely available or public it even is. It's called aggravation. I kind of think my in-laws made it up, but it's kind of like a marble version of sorry on this like homemade wooden board. And it has a lot of Sorry like aspects where, you know, if you land on someone, they go back to start and all of these things and we call it aggravation because it gets the point, right, where you've tried to make your way around the board so many times and someone keep sending you home and you're so aggravated. So, besides maybe entering into maybe more role playing games where there's not this as, maybe I'm wrong about there being winners and losers and bored in role playing games, but what are your suggestions for kind of easing kids in who have such a tiny window of tolerance?

[00:29:25.935] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Well, honestly, one of the biggest things that is when I mentioned earlier about kind of the change in the Renaissance, if you will, or I think we're in our ninth renaissance in the game hobby. One of the biggest things that's really been increasingly popular in the board game realm right now, and this is if you looking at, you know, newer style games and I'll and I'll name a couple is what we call cooperative play. And there are even some games that we call them co-opappetitive because they're cooperatively competitive. And I found that with certain games, it builds a child's resilience to losing when you lose as a team because in this way it's it also, for example, there's a game called Harry Potter Battle for Hogwarts. It's what we call a deck builder game. And the whole idea is everybody starts with the basic same array of cards. And those cards usually have like a purchasing mechanic or credits on them that you can buy higher cards to improve your deck. And the way the game plays is, and it's from a company called USAopoly, where it basically, you play through the years of Hogwarts of the books. So like first chapter or first adventure is you and Quirrell is one of the bad guys, but you have like Crabbe and Goyle and Malfoy and so all the characters are represented. But the interesting thing about it is it is a completely cooperative game where you need to communicate with other players around the table to strategize, to say, OK, we know we have this bad guy coming up that we need to defeat. So I have this many cards. How many of these do you have? OK, so we'll save that action for your turn like you have cross table, but you're not playing against any other player. You're all playing together against the mechanics that have actually been built into the game themselves. So now when you lose, it's the scenario of the game that you're losing to. So it kind of takes some of the emotional punch out of losing to a human because now you're losing to the game. Not that that can't be frustrating in and of itself, but the the idea of co-operative play has become immensely popular as games like Castle Panic, where you have these armies invading the central castle and the whole deal is these orcs and goblins are going to knock over your walls and break down your castle. Well, this game, you have to actually trade cards with other players. And again, I look at that and go, wow, that's great. So now we're talking about collaboration, communication, cooperation, sharing the victory, not always having to have the spotlight. So, you know, it's very healthy play and there's a ton of cooperative games out there. And one of the good things, again, it depersonalizes that that whole idea of I lost. Well, we lost. So can we do better? So now you also have a support system to kind of help you through that. There are tons, it used to be a thing that if you had a game that was based on an intellectual property, like if it was the Pacman board game or, but now you have the Marvel deck builder which is called Marvel Legendary. So now if you have a child who's really into superheroes, that's another cooperative deck builder game that is all set against the Marvel backdrop. There's a Harry Potter, there's fantasy. There are so many. There's at least, I think 1500 new board games that are produced every year. The trick,

because a lot of people and I know kind of one of the questions is like, so what game would you recommend for a blah, blah, blah? Wow, is that a deep question.

[00:33:00.165] - Melissa Corkum

You could probably go into consulting over that, Jack. Just, you know.

[00:33:03.765] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

We have because a lot of times people say, "Well, I have a 13 year old girl. What board game would you recommend?" And I'm like, eh, could you tell me a lot about your child? Could you tell me what are they into? Are there genres that they like or are there TV shows or cartoons that they enjoy? Do they have siblings they'll be playing the game with? What's their cognitive level? What's their developmental level? What's their maturity level? Are there any topics that you as a family would prefer not to see? Because, I mean, there there is a game that's good for teens. It's called Dead of Winter. It's a very emotionally impactful zombie themed game where you're in charge of a settlement and you have like situations of, OK, these bunch of starving people are coming to your settlement and they want to come in because they're starving and cold and hungry. You have limited resources. Do you turn them away? And so now you have like some empathy building, right? Because you're talking about choice and consequence and all that stuff. But the theme may not be appropriate for what you as a parent want for your child. So I might make a recommendation because this is a really awesome game, but there's a ton of questions that go into it. So I say to folks all the time, do research. And I mean, honestly, one of the projects that we're working on is we actually have our heroes of the game that I talked about earlier. We have a game grading system that we're working on that we basically want people to rate games on what skills that they can build. So we want to eventually use this to provide a resource to parents just a free online dateable search engine. So you could look up each of the child genre interests, skills that you want to develop in your child. And there are companies out there like Blue Orange Games is a wonderfully great developmental family based company. Game Right Games, Hoba is a German based company that actually you could spot him in the store, they're big yellow boxes, but they actually print the skills and the age ranges on the box itself. So if you go through and you're looking like, oh, this helps work with critical thinking and sequencing and color matching, like we've we've gotten a lot more savvy to the beneficial aspects. So that question of "What game?" There's a lot that goes into that.

[00:35:17.395] - Melissa Corkum

No, I think it's perfect because I think it is individualized. And you've also hit on something just to go back to the collaborative gaming, we talk a lot from a parent model at The Adoption Connection about instead of kind of getting into control battles with your kids, that we need to think about staying on the same team as them. And I talk to a lot of parents about, you know, what's going to be your kind of common enemy, right? Because nothing brings people together like a common enemy. So rather than it being like mom against kid, what if it's mom against mom plus kid against X, Y, Z behavior or mom plus kid against, you know, the effects of trauma or something like that. And so we see a lot of, you know, really big gains in families when it's a it's a simple it's a tricky mindset shift sometimes, but a really powerful one.

[00:36:09.865] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Yeah. And I would say, not only the collaborative play, but if we talk about something like role playing, like one of the games I have behind me here is a game called No Thank You, Evil. And the game is actually it's designed by a company called Nanticoke Game Shanor Germein. She designed the game to be very rules like it's designed for actually kids ages five and up. And it's a what we would call an open world role playing system where you can, there's four lands in the world of Storia. There's Out The Window which is like your outer space stories and you're like, you know, going to search over the sea stories. There's Behind the Bookcase or Behind the Bookshelf which is kind of like your, you know, it's anything that's published. It's comic book stories, superhero stories. There's Under the Bed which is where all the scary stories happen because that's where the monsters live, right? But the game is really cool in that kids can create anything that they want. So even when they make the character, they pick, like well I want to be a wizard. What kind of wizard? You could be a cotton candy wizard, you could be a bubble wizard, you could be a chocolate cake wizard, whatever you want to do. And it gives these kids unlimited creativity by saying their character blank is a blank, blank who blanks.

Adjective, noun that verbs. So I might be a quick pirate that arghhs. So what that might mean is I'm quick, so I get a bonus to anything involving dexterity or movement or running. I'm a pirate, so with a kid, just imaginative play. What does a pirate sound like? What does a pirate do? And who arghhs might mean, any time like pirate uses an exaggerated arr word, I get a bonus to my role. You know, so I want to arrrun up the hill. Well, then I get a bonus, it encourages this creative collaborative play so kids can create their own worlds and run their own challenges. But with any role playing game, the goal of it like there, because you ask this question like way, way back towards the beginning, in in typical role playing game, like the truest form of a role playing game, it is collaborative storytelling. There are no winners or losers. It's you might beat a scenario or you might like overcome a challenge, but the story continues. So the next challenge just comes. And you kind of said it yourself. I say to folks in trainings that we offer for four therapists and educators, there's no better way to get a group working together than to lock a door behind them and say, you hear the grinding of stone and metal and a sound echoes above you. You look up and you see a ceiling with multiple spikes pointing down towards your direction and it is approaching fast. Man, you're going to see some wonderful partnering develop when you put someone in that kind of scenario where, OK, what do you do? Because that's all it is in role playing. It's not anything sinister. It's literally you're here. I say a thing that happens. You respond, it's catch and release. It's back and forth, constant, back and forth. Sometimes we roll for things, sometimes we talk things out. But that collaborative play brings people together through creative problem solving. It brings people together through creative, dramatic play. It's so, so many beneficial things. And I like systems like No Thank You, Evil because they're very rules easy. So parent, because I think a lot of people, if they've never played a role playing game, they get very intimidated because there's a lot of numbers and even some board games have rules, have rule books that are like one hundred and twenty pages long.

[00:39:44.595] - Melissa Corkum  
Yeah.

[00:39:45.045] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.  
So you look at that and we joke about fiddly bits in role, like board games where look at this box and you're like, why are there fifty seven different pieces. And I never am going to understand what these do. Well I didn't when I started playing board games, but you learn the language, you learn the culture. And again, that's, you know, why go into things like, you know, game stores and conventions and, you know, libraries now are starting to have board game collections. You know, there's a ton of great ways that you can add on to to what it is that you're doing. So, yeah, there's there's a lot out there that's beneficial. And again, the collaborative nature of play is just wonderful. There's there's a game called Meddling Kids where you remake your own Scooby Doo mystery crew. I could sit and name systems, role playing all day.

[00:40:33.075] - Melissa Corkum  
Yeah. Something else you mentioned in the, in the more open system of collaborative play too, hits on another parenting tool that we use or encourage parents to use a lot here, which is called shared control, right? Where it's great when you get to let your child make the rules for the game that you're playing or create the characters as much control as we can get that's appropriate creates a lot of safety for kids.

[00:40:58.065] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.  
Well, and even when a lot of times when we talk, because we do a lot of different in addition to like doing trainings and presentations and events for adoption and foster agencies, we also have worked with a lot of like gifted students, groups, Boy and Girl Scouts. You know, we we do a ton of different presentations and we go out to groups all the time. And one of the things that we really taught at this gifted students program that we did was called Super Saturday was we taught parents that even with like really, really young kids don't be so focused right away on the rules heavy part. You know, there's a game that we had is called Monster Factory where you get these little silly pieces that have like monster bits on them and it could be like an arm or a wing or a nose with a horn or whatever. And we just kind of gave the components to these kids. And we were like, what do you think? And they turned it into a storytelling game where every time you put a tile onto the monster and you made it grow, you had to grow the story. These kids came up with this on their own and we're sitting there going, this is

brilliant, because they were engaged, they made up the rules, they took over the control of play. Now, over time, you can start to say, OK, well, you know, there's like really cool rules for this game, too. So why don't we try to play it that way? You know, don't be so no, these are the rules and you must play it this way and relax. There's time for that. And part of I think what you touched on games do allow that level of comfort like No Thank You, Evil. When you're talking about kids who are five, remember I said that's an adjective noun that verbs. If you're talking about a really little kid, their character sheet is just blank is a blank. So you are a pirate. You don't need to worry about numbers, bonuses, any of this stuff. Just play a pirate and that's all you need to worry about. Now as the child grows, they actually have three different versions of the character sheet, which is the full one, adjective, noun, who verbs. There's a middle grade one, which is adjective, noun, and then there's just the noun version. So the game is even staged developmentally for children to grow with the design of the system. And then when they get to be like an adult, it actually uses a modified version of the rules of some of the other monocoque products. So now a child can step into a game like New Minera or The Strange, which uses the same mechanic. So, yeah, games have gotten very sleek in terms of how they develop. But but we also like that as a child grows with that imaginative play, you know, we talk about, one of our big things that we do in our groups is once the kids have been role playing as characters for a while, they kind of graduate in a sense to running their own adventures. So, and a lot of people are like, well, wait a minute, I'm paying you to run groups, so, you know, why are you getting your kid to do your job? And I was like, OK, first of all, I'm getting your kid to do my job. But the real point is now I'm teaching your child reflective listening skills and I'm teaching them how to resolve conflict because they're in charge of the game now. So if two characters want to do the same thing, they're going to need to prioritize how to organize and handle that conflict or if there's a problem between players or just listening to their questions and adapting their story, you know, because a lot of folks that we support or, have an autism diagnosis. So we actually had a kid who started running a system and a game and it was like open mic night. You just slapped the spotlight on and this this dude was telling a story and that was the adventure and fun, like humorously, one of the players turned to me, and was like, can I do something? And I kinda leaped back and I went, I'm not the game master, don't ask me. That's your game master, tell him. And so at first when he did it, it was all he did was tell his story. He didn't involve the players at all, but he also took feedback from the player who was like, yeah, I'm not trying to be mean, but I don't really feel like I got to do anything that wasn't very fun. And the player was like, what do you mean it wasn't fun? I told this great story. And then the player was like, no, you told your story. I didn't get to tell my story. So we took some feedback. We kind of coached him and we said, let us know if you feel you want to try again. About six months later he said, I think I'm ready now. I say, OK, tell us about what your adventure is, because then we would step in the role of players while he ran and we would kind of challenge him as players. So we are now like therapeutic plants in the adventure. The second time he ran his adventure, he was reflective, he was responsive, he was attentive to the facial expressions on everybody. That's kind of huge for some people with an autism diagnosis to be able to recognize someone's not having fun. Let me ask them as opposed to I'm just doing my thing. So we even used a higher level of play to teach a completely different set of systems, you know, and skills that the person used like self advocacy and confidence and, you know, just emoting creativity creatively. So it's fascinating and it never amazed, it never surprises me the level of what you can use gaming for if you know how to safeguard and watch over the process, but also if you know how to find the right game that that really speaks to what it is that you want to teach, you know, or what you want to develop. So there's a lot of you know, people are like, oh great, I'm paying you to play games with my kid. No, you're, what you're doing is you're paying me to utilize a game with specified therapeutic and clinical intentionality that is designed to rehearse, practice, and evoke certain skills or emotional content that are relevant to challenges your child is trying to develop. For intake, we actually play short one shot one hour adventures with a parent. We go, we're going to play. I'm going to I don't just want to tell you about this, I want to show you. So let's play for an hour, then we'll talk about what that looked like. And immediately parents are sold that, yes, this is worthwhile. And we have parents now who are like, what gaming stuff do I buy my kid? We're having conversations where kids are actually like designing their own systems and designing like their own overlays, like, well, I'm going to do DnD, but I'm going to do Naruto because I really love Naruto the anime. Go for it dude. I'll help you play test it. That's beautiful because then that same kid, the mom's like what's my kid doing in his room all the time. I go, have you asked him? And it's like, well he's working on this role playing game and he as a result was spending less time with the problem kids in class, getting into less trouble. He was using online Zoom to meet up with other kids and he has a

whole new friend group now that is based around playing role playing games which was a lot better than trying to appeal to the, you know, quote unquote, the bad kids in class. Mom was like, this is amazing. Like, we gave him a new world and that world is gaming. And if you introduce someone to that it, everybody loves board games. You just got to find the right game for them.

[00:48:12.945] - Melissa Corkum

As we wrap up, what are you guys, I know you talked about in person gaming, which, of course, would be ideal. We are in the world of covid at the time of this recording. So is your group working, I guess, one, virtually, and two, does that allow you to work with families who are outside of Pennsylvania?

[00:48:30.705] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Yes, it does allow us. We have gone pretty much right when covid hit mid to late March, we almost immediately made the transfer over to virtual running. So we run multiple different platforms that we can use. We prefer Zoom because we can set the waiting room and permissions and passwords. Now, one of the things about Pardinis, if we would operate out of state, a lot of what we do is private pay and sliding scale. You know, we don't want to, you know, bleed someone on this and insurances and all that kind of stuff differs between states. Our typical rate is forty dollars for a two hour session for someone. Again, our goal is we want to just pay our facilitators to to make sure that their time is rewarded. We can work with families as long as they have all the tech necessary. There are platforms not only, I mean, role plays a little bit easier because there are things like Roll Twenty and fantasy grounds. They're what we call VTTs or virtual tabletops. So you could do maps and minis and all that kind of cool tech stuff where you can just do basic theater of the mind, which is like what you and I are doing. And I could like share an image of the monster and I can play background music and, you know, all that kind of cool stuff. But there's also a lot of online board game resources. Discord is also very popular for playing role playing games right now because you have video and voice chat. There's a website called Board Game Arena which has video and voice chat. And you actually have scripted mods for board games that people can play, especially in the midst. And the cool thing is that I think it's for an advanced membership to that website, it's only four dollars a month and they have well over I think it's like 700 games that you could play. There's also a tabletop simulator which you can get through Steam. There's Table Topia, which is another website. So there are a ton of ways to do online facilitation of these of these types of games. The only problem is that sometimes you're limited in what games you can play because they have to be scripted by people and so, yeah, we we definitely offer services. We currently do have some spots available on our Saturday private pay group, which, you know, runs from about two thirty to to two o'clock to four o'clock Saturday EST. But we also can offer groups based on new populations. We've run for children, we've run for teens, we've run for adults. We've run for things from depression to anxiety. We can run for trauma. We've run for folks on the autism spectrum. We're also doing a research project with local university, Harrisburg University of Science Technology to explore the efficacy of this model with adults with social anxiety, especially in covid. So, yeah, a lot of a lot of good stuff that we can offer. And all folks have to do is, you know, just visit our website. We also have a new webinar series that we've just launched, which we are offering for donation only. So if you if you don't have money, that's not the point. And we talk specifically in a family development series. We talk about board games and we talk about how to teach and learn board games for differing ages, what different skill areas for games can develop. And again, that's all on our on our website under webinars. But it's something that we, it's our nonprofit promise to continue to bring the knowledge and the experience that we have using games with intention to benefit families and to kind of help folks. That's, that's that's our biggest mission is to get that all out to folks. And annually, we run Save Against Fear still which is based in York. Hopefully next year if we can meet in person. But that's our annual fundraising convention that has a ton of games. We bring our two thousand board game library out and unpack it onto fifteen different tables. But but it's great fun, so.

[00:52:25.845] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, well thank you for everything that you're doing to give back to the community. And it just sounds, I can tell you're a wealth of knowledge of so many things. So I know that our audience appreciates you spending the time with us. We'll, of course, have all the information in the show notes and I will go through and pick out all those games you recommended and we'll have links and all the things. So, Jack, thank you so, so much for your time. I, my mind is blown, I have some research to go

now.

[00:52:51.425] - Jack Berkenstock Jr.

Oh, no, absolutely, thank you. Thank you for having me on, and I mean, if I know you're going to put, you know, posts and such to to links and websites, please don't be afraid to reach out to us by email if you have questions or want more information. We are, we love talking about this. I could do this for the next seven hours.

[00:53:13.065] - Lisa Qualls

That was such a fascinating conversation. I mean, I thought I knew a fair bit about games, but clearly I knew nearly nothing compared to Jack, who is such an expert on all of this. The gaming world is so much broader than I realized. So I really enjoyed learning about that. I also was really encouraged by the way he talked about using games to actually help our kids heal and to experience different emotions than they might be able to experience otherwise. I thought that was really, really useful.

[00:53:46.815] - Melissa Corkum

Literally, we could have talked for hours. As you can tell, he was a talker and he spewed out so many different games. And I know if you are driving or doing or busy with your kids, you might have been thinking, what was that? He said that too fast, I don't know. So I have collected all of them in the show notes. They'll be there for you, but I like, my mind again, it's spinning with the possibilities of all the things. And again, I'm like, I wish I would have known this earlier. If you would like to connect with Jack and pick his brain about all the games or the ways that games can help your family or even join one of his online groups coming up, you can go to [thebodhanagroup.org](http://thebodhanagroup.org), and that's spelled B O D H A N A, and of course, that will be in the show notes as well.

[00:54:36.415] - Lisa Qualls

If you like this episode, you might also want to go back and listen to Episode 123 with Michelle Batten who talked about the value of play and parents playing with their children. You might also like the episode with Chef Kibby, which was Episode 118, where he talked about connecting with your kids in the kitchen through cooking. And lastly, Melissa, you interviewed your husband, Patrick, way back in Episode 37 about connecting with your kids through video gaming. So all of those episodes, as well as all the links to the games that were mentioned in this episode, will be in the show notes that you can find at [theadoptionconnection.com/125](http://theadoptionconnection.com/125). Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. You can find us on Facebook or Instagram as [@theadoptionconnection](https://www.instagram.com/theadoptionconnection).

[00:55:25.345] - Melissa Corkum

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a quick review over on iTunes. It will help us reach more moms who may be feeling alone.

[00:55:35.515] - Lisa Qualls

And remember, until next week, you're a good mom, doing good work and we're here for you.

[00:55:42.715] - Melissa Corkum

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