



*Listen on Your Favorite App*



Spotify



Apple Podcast



iHeart Radio

---

## Season 2, Episode 1A: The Many Paths to Parenting

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

MB: Hello everyone, and welcome to the Healthier You podcast. I'm Megan Bergfeld. I'm one of the clinical counselors in Vanderbilt's Work/Life Connections EAP. This month on Healthier You, we're going to celebrate National Adoption Month with a four-episode weekly miniseries that is focused on various aspects of parenthood. So, to start us off, I am thrilled to speak with one of my health & wellness colleagues, Emily Cox, on the many paths to parenthood. Emily is a senior health educator in Health Plus. She is also a momma to an adopted son. She, thankfully, has agreed to share some of her story with us today. So, Emily, welcome, happy National Adoption Month, and thank you so much for chatting with me today. Emily, to start, when and how did you know you wanted to become a mom.

EC: Well, oddly enough, for me, it starts with thinking I did not want to be a mom. I just didn't have a lot of exposure to kids after I was one, and I just have been kind of an old soul, and I thought it just wasn't for me. But, after college, I had the opportunity to spend some time at an orphanage in Ethiopia, and it was just such a unique experience, I think my eyes were opened a little bit. I learned there from the kids that they just wanted to be held and

laugh and play games and hold hands, and that was really freeing for me. I think the language barrier actually helped in that case. I distinctly remember there was this little boy in the baby room who was really sick, and so I would go in there and hold him as much as I could. I was told at the time that he was the only baby in that room who hadn't yet been matched with a family, and that just broke my heart. So I think, just like my empathy took over, and the pieces kind of came together for me after that. That like, oh, there are kids in the world already here who need someone to love them, maybe I could do that.

MB: I love the view of, like, simplifying things. Like, we didn't need language. We just needed to be with them and show them love. They didn't need the perfect words. So, could you share some of your personal journey from that point? Being a mom, going through adoption. What did that look like?

EC: Yeah, so, fast forward to turning 30, my husband and I had agreed that 30 sounded like a good time to become a parent, I guess. It just sounded responsible and like a good time in our life for that, and so, and by the way, I have to give him a ton of credit for being totally open-minded and accepting of my desire not to have biological children. Like, obviously, I couldn't have done this path without his full buy-in, so I am really grateful for that trust and just willingness to go alongside me in that.

And so, we chose an agency and went through their process to become an active waiting family, which involved a home study, and we were ultimately approved to officially be a waiting family in April 2019. So, that first year really felt pretty hopeful. It was kind of like the early stages, and we were thinking like, "oh, this is easy." It's not going to be that long and just a lot of hope. Then, COVID hit within the year. So, March 2020, it really felt like everything slowed down everywhere, but you know, with the adoption world, it kind of was a time of "what's going to happen?" And so, for us, it became pretty, like, kind of hopeless, I would say. It started to feel like the wait was a lot longer and just kind of dragging on. But, in September 2021, we learned that there was a baby that was due to be born any day, and his mom had chosen us to parent him. And so, we got all of the things together in the ways that you can be prepared for something like that, and it was sort of like an on-call situation, where the baby was going to be born, and we needed to be ready. And some time went by, days passed, and eventually, we learned the baby had been born and that his mom had decided to keep him. And so, that was considered a failed match, and that was really, really difficult, because it had been two and a half years at that point, and it just sort of felt to us like it was never going to happen, but we were so happy for her that she had made that decision and that was the right thing for her to do. Yet, our emotions were still there and needed to be, you know, figured out. There was some grieving along with that, and just, again, that feeling of it's never going to happen. But, in February 2022, we got another call, and it turned out to be the one. So, we were told that a baby had been born in Nashville two

days prior and that we had been chosen as the parents. And so, from there, it was like, there were some legal elements that needed to be resolved before we could bring him home, so we ended up bringing him home a few weeks later on March 8, 2022, and he was 3 weeks old to the day.

MB: I'm wrapping my brain around timelines. Because you spend so much time in the waiting, and then suddenly, it's all hands on deck. It's go, go, go. And you have this 2-day-old baby and a few weeks to get it all together. So, how was all of that? You mentioned grief over the first "failed match," right? And you also mentioned a lot of stress, obviously, but what was it like for you for like two, two and a half, almost three years?

EC: It was a roller coaster, for sure. There were times that I think we were glad not to have a newborn, like during the pandemic. I think that would have been really hard, really isolating. I knew people with newborns during that time, and I think part of me was relieved in that way. But then, there's the other part of where you feel hopeless, and you're doubting everything, like did I misread the signs or something? Is this supposed to be what we're doing? And for us, I think it just felt like a big unknown. but, we have a really great support system, and so there were tons of people praying for us and checking in on us, and ultimately, we just felt really supported, and I think that really kept us afloat during that time.

MB: Yeah, for sure. In thinking of the topic of today, which, you know, is that there are many paths to parenthood, right? Adoption is one. Biologically getting pregnant. There are people who struggle with fertility. There's IVF, there's IUI. There's all these different ways that people can become parents. I'm thinking of the parallels in those timelines in the journey. Like, if you're pursuing biological pregnancy, there are still a lot of unknowns, and if you become pregnant, there's still nine months of waiting. With IVF or IUI, there's so much waiting there, as well. I confess, I don't think I had put those timelines and that uncertainty on the adoption spectrum in my brain. That's really interesting to hear. It's a different perspective I hadn't considered. Especially as you're waiting for a child to be born and then match, right? My sister has a now 10-year-old, who was adopted out of foster care, but it was kind of a, you know, we know this child in foster care, we will pursue this child situation. I don't, I don't even know what to say. I'm just wrapping my brain around that. So, on that note, what are some things you wish you knew about adoption before you started the process?

EC: Speaking to kind of what you just shared, I think I just thought it was this very linear process that you would sign up with an agency, you would follow these procedures, and then everything would just, you know, come together, and of course, that's not usually how most things work in life. But in my head, despite things I had read, I didn't go into it blind.

I'm a researcher. I want to know things and make decisions based on information, and I'm very practical in that way. I think I also thought there was no way it could take three years, because in my mind, you always hear, like, there are needy kids in the world. There are babies who need families. We had heard stories of these overnight situations where you get approved one day and then two days later, you have a placement. So in my head, I kind of just was thinking that could be us. Ultimately, it turns out there are lots of different ways to connect with expectant parents and kids who need families, and I guess I wish I had spent a little more time with families who had adopted so that I could see that, while our case felt unique, every case is, that it may have felt less unexpected.

MB: Yeah, maybe taking some of that hopeless feeling away, or at least lessen some of that, just the peer support component of it.

EC: Absolutely. And the agency does some connecting with other families. There are events and things where you can meet adoptive families, but we never connected on a really personal level with anyone, and I think that would have been really helpful, just to have someone in our corner cheering us on who had been through it.

MB: Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you for sharing all of this. Even though it ends with this hopeful thing, like you have this really amazing kiddo, and you've moved forward from that time, but it's still a vulnerable and personal story. So, I know there are a lot of people listening to this right now who have their own stories, or maybe have considered this path. So, what would you want them to know?

EC: There are probably a lot of things I could say, but the one that comes to mind the most is just to follow your heart for pursuing building a family the way that you envision, even if the people around you don't fully understand it, like us making the choice to adopt was kind of probably strange to some people who thought, well, can you have biological children? And we didn't know and that didn't matter to us, but this was just the path that we felt strongly about. And so, I would just encourage anyone who is pursuing one of these sort of more alternative paths to parenthood to just go with that instinct and just follow your heart. Also, adoption is certainly not necessarily the first choice for most people, and it's not something you should go into lightly. There are other perspectives to be considered in the whole what's called the Adoption Triad. There's my perspective as an adoptive parent, there's the birth parent's perspective, and then there's the child's perspective, and all of those have to be considered really carefully and treated with respect and compassion and empathy, and so, I think, in a lot of ways, you could probably say similar things. No matter how you pursue a family, there are lots of perspectives to consider and lots of ways to go about it. Ultimately, I wouldn't change anything about our experience, because it brought me to my son.

MB: And there he is, in all his amazing glory! Thank you so much Emily for sharing.

EC: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

MB: Listeners, thank you so much for being here. We'll be back next week with the next part in our series on returning to work after parental leave.

Thanks for tuning in to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness. If you are a Vanderbilt University Medical Center faculty or staff member, you can earn credit on your Go for the Gold Wellness Actions blog by listening by two podcasts during season one. Simply click the Go for the Gold link in the show notes below to record your participation and stay tuned for future episodes.