[00:00:00] This is Fostering Conversations with Utah Foster Care, where we have insightful conversations about parenting for bio, foster, adoptive, or blended families, to better understand the experiences we all face as families.

Welcome, Utah families out there. Thanks for joining us. Don't know if you're listening to this before Thanksgiving, after Thanksgiving, in between the holidays, or maybe even on Christmas Eve. But my family and I always approach this time of year with equal parts of anticipation, but also a little apprehension.

And this year, some people may be thinking, thinking about it, even with a little bit of dread. Um, and that's because for many of us, we have the prospect of a very different holiday season for foster [00:01:00] families. However, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, whatever you celebrate, have always been a time of mixed emotions for the Children in foster care who are in their homes.

Who are missing their families that they are separated from and that separation anxiety or whatever you want to call it has been heightened by the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic because it's it's keeping us all apart at a time of year when we crave being close to family. I'm Deborah Lindner and I'm joined now by my colleague Liz Rivera, Director of Education with Utah Foster Care.

Liz, we, we found out just now that our podcast has been downloaded more than 560 times. That is so wonderful. We're so excited. The goal, of course, of creating this podcast was creating something that would be a tool and a use, um, for foster and adoptive families and really families, um, in many situations.

So we're [00:02:00] excited that so many are listening. for listening. So if you are a licensed foster parent, um, a reminder that listening to this podcast goes towards your in service training hours, right, Liz? It does. All you need to do is listen and then send, uh, your resource family consultant in your region, the top three things that stood out for you, the top three things you learned, and then they'll let your regional trainer know and we can get this credited for you.

Wonderful. Well, let's dive in and I'll let Liz introduce our guests. We are so excited today to have Dan Camerlore, um, and Hope Nichols from Hope and Healing Counseling. Um, we, uh, we do quite a bit of, uh, partnering with Hope and Healing and, and they're a wonderful resource to families in, um, in the Salt Lake area, in the Tooele area, and I know they're looking at expanding.

So we're so grateful to have them with us. So Dan. Is an Associate Clinical Mental Health Counselor who's been with Hope and Healing since May of 2019. He's [00:03:00] worked in the mental health field since 2008 with experience in outpatient day treatment residential and wilderness treatment settings. He graduated from Westminster College with his master's degree and in mental health counseling in May of 2020.

Congratulations. That's made 2020 a little bit better year for you. Um, Dan utilizes trust based relational intervention or TBRI, um, interpersonal processing, psychodynamic psychotherapy, and interventions based upon theraplay principles to assist clients in working through challenging emotions and experiencing and experiences.

Building self awareness and insight and trying out new ways of engaging and connecting relationally in his free time. Dan enjoys spending time with his family and planning his next exciting, exciting adventure in the outdoors. So Utah is a good place for you. Welcome, Dan. And then hope I'd like to introduce take a minute to hope introduce hope as well.

Hope Nichols is an associate clinic clinical mental health counselor. Who's been with hope and healing since January of 2016. [00:04:00] She graduated with her master's in clinical mental health counseling from Westminster before becoming a mental health counselor. Hope was a teacher and taught preschool elementary school and middle school.

Um, which is always a big deal. I'd always have great admiration for middle school teachers. She has also worked in a variety of mental health settings, including a residential treatment facility for teens and a psychiatric hospital for adults. Hope works with children, teens, and parents. and utilizes attachment theory, play therapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, and TBRI to help clients process and regulate their emotions, build self awareness, and foster a strong attachment between parent and child.

Hope believes that the therapeutic relationship is an important factor in the success of therapy, as well as working with both the parents and the child to create a secure attachment and heal attachment wounds. In her spare time, Hope enjoyed playing with playing with her two boys, cooking, hiking, camping, and playing softball.

So as you can see from these introductions, Dan and Hope are well qualified, um, to join us [00:05:00] today as we talk about some of the issues that come up around the holidays. Thank you. And welcome. Starting off, um, people think of the holidays as being, um, very joyful, but, um, it can be stressful. Right? Hope. Yes. Um, I think the holidays are really fun, but they're also really demanding of our time.

Right? Yeah. Yeah. Um, often it's a huge financial strain for families around this time. Um, there's a lot of increased social interactions which can create a lot of busyness and out of being out of your routine, um, and that can be stressful and exhausting. And we want to remind families listening out there.

Utah foster care does offer some, um, some help throughout the state in providing gifts for Children foster care. So if you're listening and you haven't put in your name for for the giving tree or other other [00:06:00] programs in your region, please do. Um, what's it like knowing you have a child in foster care who is celebrating the holidays?

What do foster parents need to know? Um, I think good things to know about kids in foster care is they For some of these kids, it's not an exciting time of year. It's a very sad and triggering time of year, but also exciting. Um, and so the, that can be really hard for these kids and their foster parents to navigate, um, they can have really big behaviors, really big emotions, um, and that can, I think that can be hard for parents to.

figure out what's going on with the child and, and how to help them, especially if they're new to their home and they don't know them as well as maybe a child that's been in their home longer. And they may have some, some very different, um, past experiences with the holidays. What, what are some of the things that may have [00:07:00] happened in their, in their own families around the holidays?

I think a lot of them, um, may have experienced hard times during the holidays. Maybe they, um, didn't really experience the holidays. They knew it was a special time, but their family didn't do anything special. Um, I think another important detail is that there's a lot of markers in the, around the holidays.

Like, there's a lot of, um, like it's cold, there's snow, there's Christmas decorations. There's Um, things that, that stand out to the brain during those times. And so sometimes if they experience really hard times with their biological families, then there's a, there's a marker to go with it. Or even good times and, and it reminds them of, of missing them and losing them.

And, and, and you spoke to the idea of ambivalence, which I think is something that We as adults struggle with, and certainly kids do, where we can feel more than one [00:08:00] way and sometimes competing ways about one thing, and I think you, you've spoken really well to that idea that it's difficult to manage all the emotions and sometimes competing emotions around the holidays.

So what are some ideas to help kind of manage? Those expectations, expectations that maybe are, um, too high, you know, too, too much, you know, or expectation maybe that things are going to be worse than they really are going to be. How do, what are some ideas about managing those expectations? I think, um, deciding what's really important for your family, what traditions, what social events.

Um, which that's different during COVID, but I think deciding what's most important Um to you and letting go of those things that aren't important that might just make it more stressful or maybe lowering your bar, so maybe this year instead of making homemade cookies you go buy store bought ones because that would still keep with her to the tradition, but [00:09:00] make it more manageable if you Have a child that's experiencing really big emotions during this time, um, for being away from their biological family, but also being excited about Christmas.

I think also, um, setting good boundaries. Boundaries are, um, limits you put into place that protect you and your child. So if you know that your child can only handle 20 minutes of one holiday party, Then you go for 20 minutes and leave, um, and it's okay because that's what's best for your child. So it sounds like you're talking about, um, setting expectations in a way that allows the parent to be more available for the child and to help the child manage the struggles and, and maybe the excitement that they have around the holidays.

Yes. Is it a good idea also, Hope? To let your extended family in on that knowing that maybe, you know, I don't know if they'll be [00:10:00] able to go to grandma's house this year, but maybe when they go, that if you need, you may need to, um, leave early. I, I think that's, I think that's a great idea is to let your family know of any boundaries or limits you're setting to help your child cope with whatever it is that you're planning.

Um, and so that that family member doesn't feel like it's personal. There's a lot of stimulation around these events and so letting your family know that it's not to do with them It's to help the child manage great advice and one of those emotions that sometimes comes up as you mentioned is grief and Tell us how grief can can intrude on what we think of as a joyous celebration Yeah, well, I was thinking of grief and grief kind of catches us off guard.

You know, grief does not honor time. It doesn't honor routines. It doesn't honor [00:11:00] schedules. Um, it just shows up oftentimes without us anticipating. Um, and it can create anxiety, but it's also an important guest. Because it helps us to kind of work through some of those situations from some things I'm just thinking of with grief is it is it may show up at that point.

The child is feeling something and the difficult part is is they may not know exactly what they're experiencing and as a parent You don't know what they're experiencing either And that's challenging And thinking of like it's almost like being startled being caught off guard or surprised And if we can think of that time of being surprised or being startled, like someone comes around, comes around, just, Ooh, or just startled us.

There's a couple things that happen. Either we kind of take a deep breath in, and just hold it, [00:12:00] or we just kind of blast it out, um, which might be a scream, a yell, anger, uh, some people when they get surprised, they almost have aggression. And both responses, either breathing in, just holding that fear inside, or blasting it out, they end up isolating us.

Um, from other people oftentimes. Um, that may bring shame as well. And so just knowing that grief may come, I think there's a need, similar to what Hope was saying, to have time. To have scheduled in time for that connection. Um, time to be attuned. And, and to attune, first of all, as a parent, to be able to attune to ourself.

To be able to notice what's going on for ourselves. And then to be able to attune to our child. The foster child, the adoptive child, whoever that is that's struggling in that moment. You [00:13:00] know, the grief oftentimes speaks in a language that it's hard to understand. It's hard for the child to understand.

It's hard for the adult to understand who's trying to attune to that child. And so how do we engage a person who's speaking like a foreign language or a lesser known language? I think of getting down to their level. Um, I think of like paying attention to their body, paying attention to their words, really working hard to try to understand, um, Not, not arguing facts, whether that actually happened or the way that it happened, but to acknowledge and to create space and, and letting the child lead, you know, sometimes they might not have the words or be able to [00:14:00] identify the emotions and that's okay.

Um, but it's important just to kind of create the time and create the space and, and to listen. Are there different behaviors you might see depending on the age of the child, whether or not you're dealing with a young child or even a teenager? I, I think that there will be behaviors, but that's kind of, uh, it could be a whole spectrum of behaviors.

Um, when I think of grief or trauma, neglect, stress, um, those are all experiences that we hold them in our body. And so because of that, we have a cognitive understanding in our mind, but we also have a bodily experience or an affective experience of them. So for some kids, maybe they externalize those behaviors.

Some kids they internalize. So kind of going into that like an externalized behavior would be like that angry outburst or um, [00:15:00] maybe more conflict with siblings or just like like getting real critical or picking that little things that don't usually matter or maybe Um more attention like seeking out attention from an adult or from other people and maybe be more clingy Um, but then there's the internalizing behaviors and those can be harder to see You Those might be like in isolating or, or maybe avoiding, um, maybe, maybe being excessively tired, or it can come about in like body discomfort, like headaches, body aches, and we don't want to ignore that there may be a medical aspect, but that can also be, um, trauma or grief making its way through our body.

Sadness. Silence, um, maybe vigilance, like just noticing, [00:16:00] paying attention to all the stuff around us. Um, I guess that doesn't really give us, that gives a lot of different responses, kind of to sum it together, be what moving away from a child's baseline, or what their norm is. And when we notice that, that might be an indicator of, oh, there's something going on right now.

There's some sort of distress that's going on. Um, whenever there's, you know, a situation that seems kind of small, but the response is really big, the two don't match, that can be a clue as well. Kind of something that we come back to when talking with families is, is behaviors, when words don't work, Then we use behavior, um, and it's not that words don't work because it's the adult, it may just be we don't have the words, um, behavior is [00:17:00] communication, so we have an opportunity, um, as the caretakers, and, and it's difficult, but to try to understand what is being communicated by the behavior, and, and go, that just keeps going back to time.

And having the time to do that, um, to help our child to be able to, to get back into their, their space where they can think when they feel really dysregulated. So we talked, oh, sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off. Oh, you're good. Go ahead. Okay, thanks. Um, so we talked a little bit ago about expectations, and I'm wondering about, um, even with grief, and even articulating with kids that, whether it's the first, You know, holiday season in your family or maybe the fifth, maybe they've been adopted and they're, they're there.

But to talk about, you know, just articulating holidays can be sad and you might feel sad and that's okay. So that they may [00:18:00] be We start to maybe proactively give them some warning, some language, so they're not maybe as surprised by their own grief. I wonder if that might be something we could, could do as well.

And I think that makes a lot of sense. And, and being able to do that preemptively, I think is what you're, you're mentioning because it, you know, kind of going back to how grief catches us off guard. Oftentimes, in the moment when that topic is first brought up, the child may not be able to process it, but that doesn't mean that they're not listening.

And it doesn't mean that they're not taking it in. It just means their body needs time. Um, whatever occurred with their body took place. over time and may have gotten locked into their body because they weren't able to process it in that moment. Um, but kids will usually have the opportunity when, when we kind of initiate that, that tells them that it's safe.

This topic is safe. [00:19:00] Sadness is safe. Um, disappointment, whatever emotion that may be, and then having the opportunity to bring it back up later. But, but I think you're right. I think sometimes parents have to initiate that. Otherwise it might not come out. So earlier, Hope, you talked about um, your stimulation and you talked about people and activity and You know routines being disrupted and you know all that stuff that can come along with a holiday and maybe some ideas about and then going back to even what Dan was talking about that, you know trying to Trying to distangle.

Is this grief stuff? Is this overstimulation stuff? Is this out of routine stuff? And maybe it's a combination of that But maybe some ideas about managing that additional stimulation and disruption That kids may deal with and and we too as over the holidays Yeah I think um one way to help kind of set up the child and the parent for success is to prep the child Um, prep them with the schedule.[00:20:00]

What's going to be different about, I mean, kids are really, really sensitive to routine changes, schedule changes, excitement, just the excitement alone. Sometimes it's overstimulating for them. Um, they may get less excited. Sleep they may eat differently because they're eating dinner at a party and there's people everywhere and so they didn't get enough food Um, so I think prepping them before you do anything that's different telling them what's different how the schedule's going to be If they're a younger child, you may need to use pictures of the of the new schedule for that week um Just as much prep as you can give them or advance warning of what's going to happen helps them be able to predict What the expectation is and what's going to happen.

And I think that sets them up for a lot more success and helps them manage their own anxiety about this new situation or situation that's different. Um, I [00:21:00] think another another helpful thing is, um, and we kind of already talked about this, but setting up good boundaries, um, to help protect them. So no, if you know that one child can be at the party for 20 minutes and the other child can be there for two hours, maybe you take two cars and you, and you tell the child, like, we're going to go, we're going to eat some food.

We're going to open a present. And then me and you, we're going to leave and go home and do this. And your brother and your daughter are going to stay there and do this. and prepping them for that, um, is helpful. I think as much prep as you can do. What about also preparing your, your bio children? Yeah, I think, I think children, bio children, uh, children without trauma are just as susceptible to overstimulation.

In fact, I think it's just a good, expectation to have that all your kids at some point [00:22:00] leading up to the holidays and on the holiday itself are probably going to have a meltdown at some point and it's just inevitable because their little bodies hold all of this stimulation and excitement and sadness and anxiety and and at some point it's just gonna all going it's gonna come out.

And so I think knowing that that's going to happen at some point is helpful. So then you're not blindsided by it. Once again, that clear expectation, um, the better, better our expectations are, the better things go. And I really like the phrase you use to protect the kids that, um, you know, as wonderful as the holidays can be, our first Our first goal is the well being of the kids.

And, and you spoke to this much earlier when you talked about, you know, deciding on what matters the most and letting everything else go. And I think that that's a great, always great advice and making sure the kid is doing well. Another thing I forgot to add in talking about [00:23:00] that, um, is The kid, especially if they're in foster care, they may have traditions from their biological family, um, that are important to them.

And I think asking them what things are important to you around the holidays, what would you like to Bring into our family and and do with us and and not and bringing those in might help them also With any grief they're having around being separated from their bio family. Absolutely And it's a way to enrich your family too You know with with the traditions of another family and show that child that their family of origin is important Yeah, thank you.

So Debra mentioned this briefly in the in the introduction, but we are in unprecedented times with this pandemic. And right now, of course, the cases are not going well. And so we're being advised to really limit our social, our in person social interactions. What, what thoughts do you have around now all of this stuff around the holidays anyway, and now we had COVID on that and the grief [00:24:00] and the disappointment and the, you know, all of that, that may be heightened, um, any advice you have for families, um, in general, and certainly families, um, who foster and adopt during this time?

I mean, COVID has really changed so much. Um, so much of our lives, so much of what we do on a daily basis and, and so much in the holiday timeframe. Just anticipating that as well. And I think of anticipation, I also think of anxiety. So even before we get to the holidays, there may be anxieties. You know, if we as as parents are having them and our Children are going to be having them as well.

And so, you know, taking the time to go into and to unpack and try to understand some of those anxieties as well. Um, and knowing that Cove, it will change how we celebrate. Um, now something we've been thinking about, too, is There's going to be some negatives. We definitely tend to see that, but [00:25:00] there may be some positives with COVID as well.

Um, I'm thinking, you know, what Hope was talking about, about some of the boundaries and the expectations. Um, that may create a space where we're not going out and spending time with a bunch of extended family or, or having, you know, 10 different parties of different friends that we have to go to that feels very dysregulating for these little ones.

So noticing how COVID will change. having dialogue in our families about that. We need to be talking about COVID. It's happening, whether it's being talked about, it is being experienced by the kids. Um, but also trying to do some positive things with it, too. And so something I'm thinking of is that, you know, traditions are important, and there will be some traditions that are lost.

Uh, but that also creates an opportunity for new traditions within family, uh, something that we can look forward to. So, [00:26:00] you know, Hope mentioned traditions maybe from the foster kids, from their biological families, having those dialogues, um, and having them in a way that That we're being gentle, soft, kind, that we're leaving sufficient time for that conversation.

Um, having traditions that are a part of, of the family who is adopting, I mean, who is fostering. Um, and introducing those to the foster kids. One thing I was thinking of as well is, is even if a tradition is, is brought in, something that the foster kids bring from their family, It may still bring up grief for them.

There may still be some sadness or some unanticipated, even if they are loving doing that tradition. And that's so exciting. And then suddenly. There's tears, there's a heaviness that we don't fully [00:27:00] understand, so just making sure in those moments that, that we're able to take that in as well and be able to work to make sense of that.

Um, even, even fun changes or transitions can be dysregulated. Something that we talk about here is cortisol, the stress hormone. It is exerted both with excitement and with stress. So something that is like, Ooh, it's just so exciting versus, Oh my goodness, I'm so stressed out is still giving off that same stress hormone.

So just being aware of that as well. Also, as a, as a parent, I must say that, you know, I've had some stress always around the holidays. So it's important to recognize what you're experiencing to recognize when you're getting in that zone where maybe you have to, you know, kind of Go in your room and do some deep breathing.

That's so important for us to take care of ourselves. You know, we think of the, you know, say on the airplane, you know, you take care of your own [00:28:00] oxygen mask, and then you take care of the oxygen mask of the people next to you. And I think that applies in so many situations. We take care of ourselves. And while thinking of how we're going to be taking care of our child.

So I just would like to say that, I mean, I think that the, so if I were, if I were a foster parent, I'm going to send my top three things in that I learned, I would probably, uh, say lower the bar, um, and Communicate clearly about, you know, the prospect of grief, of grief, of, of scheduled changes and routine changes.

And then finally, what Dan talked about with, with COVID, even though there's, you know, loss and disappointment because we may not be able to continue all of the traditions we've developed over the years and see all the people we love. It's an opportunity to build new traditions and to find new opportunities in, in this difficult time.

So preparation is key. Yes, I think so. Well, it's time to wrap up our conversation. It was a good [00:29:00] one and we want to thank everyone who's tuned in, who's left to review, especially our foster families. And if you know of another foster family who, who may benefit from this conversation, please let us know about our, our podcast and, uh, and have them leave a review as well.

Thanks again to foster families for caring for children who have been traumatized. We want to wish you all a holiday season filled with fun, joy, and hopefully healing for all.

This has been Fostering Conversations with Utah Foster Care. Thank you for joining us. For more information, go to utahfostercare. org. We'll see you next time.