

Amy J. Brown:

Welcome to Take Heart, where our goal is to offer encouragement, give hope, and insight; so you can flourish in your journey as a special needs mom. As we explore monthly themes, share inspiring stories and practical tips, our desire is for you to feel connected and encouraged. All of our resources, including an entire written transcript of this episode, is available on our website at www.takeheartsspecialmoms@gmail.com.

I am excited to welcome my friend Jennie Owens to the podcast today. Jennie and her husband have parented over 100 children and worked with 1000s of families. In addition to an MA in education, Jenny has received extensive training in trauma-informed care and therapeutic parenting. She is currently training to become a somatic experiencing practitioner. She provides training at conferences, schools, retreats, and workshops regarding effective trauma-informed practices, and caregiver self-care. Jenny's book *Dancing With a Porcupine* documents her struggles on how she learned how to better help her children heal without losing herself in the process. After an intense 15 years of helping children and families, Jenny and her husband needed a rest. In an effort to add more beauty and margin, and adventure into their lives. They sold their home and are traveling full-time in an RV with their youngest son. When she's not hanging out with her now eight-year-old boy, Jenny has been known to collect art and craft supplies that she has every intention of using but only brings out on rare occasions. She also loves playing guitar, scrapbooking, nature hikes traveling, riding, and swimming. Welcome, Jenny,

Jennie Owens:

Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Amy J. Brown:

Jennie is the author of the book *Dancing With a Porcupine: Parenting Wounded Children Without Losing Yourself*. I read this a couple of years ago, and I have underlined, yesed, amended, and initialed (meaning my husband needs to read this.) She's the author of the book. I'm so excited to talk to you about your experiences. As a mom of kids with attachment and trauma, I felt seen reading your book; you were very honest. Thank you. As we talked before, we got on sometimes that welcome judgment. Before we start with that, let's go ahead and let you go and tell us a little bit about yourself, your family, and your story.

Jennie Owens

Yeah. My husband and I got married in our 30s. About a year and a half after getting married, we decided that we want to do something different. We were in youth ministry. We ended up at a place called Place of Hope in Palm

Beach Gardens, Florida. Before that, I really didn't know much about foster care. I had never met a foster child knowingly or even known a foster parent. While we were there, we learned everything we could about foster kids, what they go through when, and how the system works, what the outcomes are for a lot of them; it really broke our hearts. We decided that we wanted to do something a little different. We would like to bring children. We were foster parents as a part of this group home, but we wanted to adopt. We knew that a lot of the kids in the foster care system, especially the kids that were at the group home, would go into an adoptive placement, and their bed would barely be cold before they would be back at the group home because people didn't know how to handle behaviors. We had received a lot of great training there. I don't know about you, but despite all the great training, when we actually did this, there was nothing that could prepare you for some of it. Two of the kids that were there, we knew that it was not going well; the case wasn't going well. We contacted the social worker and said, "If it moves toward them needing an adoptive placement, we would be happy to be that placement." Our first two came along with us when my daughter was 10, and my son was almost eight. We had no intention of bringing any more children into our home. For us, God had other plans. Our social worker kept saying, "I don't know what to do about this kid. He's 10. It's a really dangerous situation, so we can't really announce it out there." I said, "I'll pray for you," and left it at that. The other kids had lived with us for maybe six or seven months when she asked if we could do respite for him, overnight respite. So we did. Within two hours, I thought, 'Oh man, I recognize that feeling. I know that this child is supposed to be part of our family.' What we didn't know at the time was in addition to the trauma he endured, he also had autism. We dealt with a lot of extreme behaviors: hours and hours of wailing, smearing feces, that kind of thing. He would follow you around - arguing over everything, everything was World War Three. He also had Oppositional Defiance Disorder. Then what happened was we moved.

We realized that the kids each needed their own room, and we were renting. We moved and that kind of set everybody off. It was a really tough thing for them to do, even though they were moving with us, they, it triggered them. We dealt with a lot of behaviors.

Two years into our fostering journey, I had a doctor basically sit me down and say, "Jenny, if you do not get rid of your stressors, you're gonna die. Your body is literally shutting down." I could barely walk across the room without having to sit down. I couldn't remember anything. I was talking to my mom one day, and I said, "What is that thing you sit on?" She was like, "Do you mean that chair?" Yeah, that's what it is. I had a lot of medical things that were going on: fatigue, I wasn't sleeping at night, all this stuff. That really sent me on a journey to discover...I was putting off a lot of self-care things because I kept thinking, 'Okay, well, I'm just gonna pour everything I have into these kids.

They have so many needs. Once I do that, everything will turn around, and then I can focus on myself and take care of myself.' It was really this journey of how do I really help my kids heal as much as I can? Obviously, there are other things in there. That's one thing I'm learning, you can't really force someone to heal, they really have to want it. How do I help my kids as much as I can, and then also maintain my sanity? It was a tough time, it was a very dark time for me personally, and even for my husband. That's where the book came out of. Then in the middle of it, the judgment that you sometimes have as a special needs mom, especially when kids have invisible needs like fetal alcohol and ADHD, attachment disorders, and all of those things. We got a lot of judgment. It was really learning how do I stay healthy, so I can help them. What does that look like? My parenting changed. I read a lot of books. I didn't have Karen Purvis at that time, so there was some stuff that was missing. To the best of my knowledge, at that time, I was trying to do therapeutic parenting. There's a lot of stuff I would do differently now, knowing what I know, now about the nervous system and everything. There were things that I had to do above and beyond the typical self-care things that we consider self-care because of the extreme needs. I call it Olympic parenting.

Amy J. Brown

Yes. I find it interesting when I when I hear your story, and when I read your book, I remember thinking, this is not like a kid that's having a tantrum once a week; this is extreme. I have that kind of parenting too. If I were on the outside, looking at your day, by day, I'd be thinking, How in the world is she going to get self-care? How is she going to rest? Is she crazy? There's no time for it. No offense. Where did you start? To that mom out there that's going? Are you kidding me? I've got locks and alarms, and I'm up all night, and there's not a moment of peace? Where do I start? Where did you start?

Jennie Owens

Well, you, you start where you can. We can talk about some nervous system stuff later. It is hard for your nervous system to relax when you're still in an unsafe situation; your nervous system doesn't really distinguish between a tiger chasing you and a three-year-old, throwing a major tantrum. It really doesn't. I took it when I could. One of the things that I wish I would have done differently, and that I started to learn was when I did have time off, I needed to take that time for myself. At first, I thought well that's so selfish because they have so many needs. In the beginning, if I had time off, I was reading about how to help my kids more, and I was taking workshops on how to parent. I was doing all this stuff to try to help my kids, or I was thinking about them. I was going shopping for them or whatever. I really had to start with when I did have time off, to really take the time off, and not let guilt stop me from practicing good self-care because I do feel so guilty. they have so many

needs. That was really where I started. Even a bathroom break can be restful if you allow yourself. There'd be World War III going on outside the bathroom if I went to the bathroom. My daughter was afraid I was going to be doing drugs in there. She was flipping out. At one point, we had chimes on the doors to keep our kids safe, so I would have them go to their rooms, and I would just breathe, take a moment to breathe. When we couldn't find someone to do a date night or whatever, my husband, and I would send the kids into their rooms with electronics, which we didn't do very often at all, and we would watch a movie out in the living room, and we would have a date. I think I would have taken more advantage of the respite that I did have, and the people who are willing to help out. One of the things that we did when we did send them to respite was, their behaviors really increased, because of their way of not feeling safe. I would tell them, "Look, I know you're gonna get away with thing; you're going to be able to do things that this house that you can't do at home, right? You know what, that's okay. I know they're gonna keep you safe, and so it's okay if you get away with some things; you're gonna do things differently, and that's just okay." A lot of the behaviors really mellowed at that point. For my one son, we explained to him, "Look, we know, it's really hard for you to be part of a family so hard, and it's so much work for you, so we're giving you a break from having to be part of a family for a while." The way we worded that and the way we presented, it can make a huge difference. We didn't get quite as many of the behaviors when they came back. Sometimes when they came back, the behaviors were so much that thought, 'why are we even doing this, it didn't even feel like a break.

Amy J. Brown

Yeah, why are we doing this? I think one thing that sticks out to me is talking about our expectations. You gave the expectation that okay, they're gonna get away with stuff here. I think sometimes we don't want to take our respite because we're afraid they're going to act out there like they act at home. I think one of the things I hear a lot from moms, and maybe you do too, because I know you mentor and talk to other moms, is the expectation (as you said, "I was constantly reading) if I just get the right key in the right lock, it's all going to be okay. I have to keep searching for that right therapy or that right book. Don't you think that is a large part of our fatigue, not allowing to take ourselves off that role?

Jennie Owens

Absolutely. As you said, our expectation is I can fix this. Aside from divine intervention, there are certain behaviors and certain struggles that our kids will always struggle with. There's only so much that we can do. That's one of the things that I work with parents is asking,; What is realistic? Because if you look at your life. I don't know if you've heard of Ira Chesnoff. He does a lot of

stuff on fetal alcohol. I think one of his books is called the Mystery of Risk. We did some workshops with him. It's amazing For some of these kids, especially with fetal alcohol or different ones, there are certain parts of their brain that are completely gone. Self-regulation or different things like that are not going to happen; they're not capable of it. I think one of the things that we can provide rest for ourselves is letting go of that expectation that we can fix it and make it better. Some of those things might happen. That's one thing that I talked to parents about, say, my goal is for you to be okay, no matter what happens. Even if they are not able to heal, even if this behavior never changes, you're okay because that's when you can best help them. I think it actually helps our parenting journey when we kind of let go of expectations. We're gonna get judgment from other people, they're gonna misunderstand. We've heard everything from why don't you just spank that kid? It's just not going to be helpful.

Amy J. Brown

Yeah, most things people say are not helpful.

Jennie Owens

Exactly. That's honestly part of why I wrote the book because I knew how alone I felt and how much judgment I got. I wanted people to understand what it's really like sometimes as a parent. People either love it or hate it. Granted, there are certain things that even now I look back and think, oh, man, I had no idea what I was doing, I really would do things differently. I would use more therapeutic parenting, I would do these things for myself to learn how to regulate my nervous system to help them regulate theirs. But I did the best with the tools I had at the time.

Amy J. Brown

Let's talk a little bit about, I know, you said, you're doing somatic training now. One of the things we really focus on in Take Heart is the mom, and how to help come alongside the mother of these kids or parents.

Can we talk a little bit about the nervous system, specifically for moms who might have PTSD, whether that's you have a kid with RAD or you have a kid that's had 50 surgeries and you're at the hospital again? It doesn't have to be a kid with behavioral issues. Let's talk about what you've learned about the nervous system and what has helped you regulate your nervous system.

Jennie Owens

Yeah, it's a great question because honestly, probably the biggest change in my understanding has been from the classes that I've been taking about somatic experiencing. Basically, it's a really great understanding of the nervous system. We think of trauma as an event, but trauma is very personal.

You can have two people that are in a little fender bender, and one person walks away from it going, "Well, that was kind of an unfortunate delay in my day." Then you have another person that it might impact their sleeping, it might completely impact their lives on a deeper level. One of the things that they discovered was that Peter Levine, the guy that came up with somatic experiencing, developed it. He was observing animal behavior and saying, "Well, why don't animals get PTSD because they're being chased by predators on a regular basis there." What he found was that the nervous system has this process, when you see something coming at you, your nervous system decides very quickly before it even comes to your frontal lobe before anything else, if it's a threat or not. If it determines that it's a threat, then it already has a plan: we're gonna run, or we're gonna fight. For children, freeze is the most common response, especially in abuse situations, if it's an adult that's hurting them. They recognize that I can't fight this person, they're bigger than me, and I can't run away because I need food and shelter and all those things. Under the freeze, there are these fight-and-flight responses. We sometimes shut those down, so we don't get to finish the cycle. I'll give an example. I started using it with my son, and it's been amazing. I was throwing the ball and he was batting. I'm a terrible pitcher, so I accidentally hit him on his shoulder. It hurt him, and he was very upset. My youngest, came to live with us at two and a half when our other kids were adults. He's eight now, so he was very upset with me. He was mad. Normally this would have lasted a long time. I thought, well, you know what, I'm going to try this. I took a baseball, and I moved it toward him very, very, very slowly. At first, he kind of giggled. I said, "Oh, it's coming at you, what are you going to do?" He giggled and grabbed it and threw it down, and then he said, "I'm still mad." I did it again, and again, and again. One minute he would duck, and the next minute he would grab it and throw it. After about a minute of that he said, "Mom, I'm not mad anymore. Do you want to go play?" I thought this normally would have been days and days worth of "I'm mad at you". Somatic experiencing basically allows your nervous system to finish the protective responses that did not get to get finished in a certain situation.

I was in a situation where someone was coming at me with a lot of anger and in rage. I was kind of cornered. As I processed it on a body level, I realized that my arm kept going to the side, like I wanted to push them out of the way. Then my other arm wanted to punch. You actually allow your body to do the movements, sometimes it's shaking, sometimes it's punching or kicking or running. It allows your nervous system to go, oh, that's what I wanted to do in the first place. Okay, I'm done. I don't know if you're familiar with the *Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk. He talks about somatic experiencing, that's how I got introduced to it. He talks about how our body holds on to trauma in different areas; it's really not that our body's holding on to it, it's that our nervous system is, "Man, I really wanted to punch, and I didn't get to."

It's like it holds all that energy still, that it sent, when it wanted to, like the preparatory energy of, "Okay, we're gonna fight." A lot of our kids have attachment issues that had been through trauma, some of what we're dealing with is a nervous system response. Even as parents, you find yourself going, why didn't I respond that way? It's a nervous system response because when kids have ongoing behaviors. When we have a kid that's throwing a temper tantrum, or throwing things at us, our nervous system very quickly decides this is not safe. Then it codes that person sometimes as unsafe. One of my older sons when he would walk in the house or walk in the room, would literally stop breathing and hold myself stiff because I didn't know what was coming. We have this trauma response to kids who have extra needs sometimes because our nervous system is saying this doesn't feel safe.

Amy J. Brown

In a situation, for example, like what you just said, you have this response to the child. I know for me, mine is phone calls and knocks on the door because CPS has shown up at my door. Police have shown up at my door. The schools call, and it's never they're doing great. I know that about myself. I can feel my body starting when I don't know what will be on the other end. Either that situation or in the situation you said when your son came into the room, what can a mom do at that minute? First of all, I think you must recognize, okay, this is what I'm feeling. What would you suggest next for something like that: just breathing or moving, or what would you suggest when she feels that trauma response?

Jennie Owens 23:22

When you feel the trauma response, one of the things that have been most powerful for me is the somatic experience, and there are different things you can do. I do coaching, and so I work with people processing past stuff so it doesn't come up as a trauma response and a trigger anymore. For me, the biggest thing was tracking body sensations because that's how the nervous system stores trauma. It's not necessarily an explicit memory where you remember this, this, and this.

It stores it as a sensation in your body. You might get that knot in the pit of your stomach, or you might get a headache coming on. One of the things that we have to do is really work on a felt sense of safety first. because if you kind of go into that...Sometimes you can, where you're just like, okay, I feel the knot in the pit of my stomach, and I'm not going to run away from that; I'm just going to notice it and see where it goes because it'll move sometimes. Well, now I feel it in my chest, or now I'll feel it in my arm. But tracking that sensation, noticing your breathing, but tracking has been the most powerful for me. Even if you're in that situation or you know you're going to be in a situation, having something there that signifies safety to you. When I'm going

to have a really difficult conversation with someone or I have a difficult phone call to make, I have this really soft pink blanket that I have with me, so I can touch it and feel the softness. Even orienting to your environment, looking around your environment: what are some things I see where my eyes are drawn to? Noticing the present moment because what happens is when we get a trigger, we're kind of back in that trauma moment for a while. Bringing yourself into the present moment is very important. Then again, noticing what sounds do I hear? What can I touch? Anything to keep you in the present moment. For people who find themselves disassociating or freezing, you can actually get a tray of sand and stick your feet in there, and there's something about sand or cold water, running cold water over your hands, that can keep you in the present moment. The goal is basically that you can process trauma to the point that you're not in the past, that you're really able to stay in the moment and deal with what's happening there.

Amy J. Brown

Right. I would also think that you're also not in the future, off to the races assuming the worst. I think that's the other thing you remember the past trauma, and then you're off to the races, not even giving yourself a moment to breathe. When you're saying, have a soft blanket, that makes so much sense. We would say that to our kids. But for some reason, it seems too simple. Why haven't I thought about that for me? I don't know. I don't know if we think well, we should be able to handle this better. I do think too; we don't always recognize that it's traumatic. The kind of parenting we're doing, as you say, it's Olympic-level parenting is traumatic. Our kids come from trauma, but it's also can be traumatic to us as parents. I think you say in the book that you're they're constantly coming at ya. I think it's your therapist that said, "No matter what you do, they're still gonna come at ya. Yeah, I mean, I'm paraphrasing you there. If I would have known that, I think that would have made life so much better.

Jennie Owens

Just that understanding of trauma is anything too much, happens too soon, or happens too fast, like a car accident. You don't have time to process what's happening. The thing that I find when I'm working with parents who are dealing with kids in trauma, it's too much at the same level or things are happening too fast. You got one that's throwing; there's wailing and screaming and throwing things, and then you get a call from the school. I used to say it was almost like popcorn because they kind of trigger each other, and then they kind of be set off. Recognizing that it doesn't matter what you think trauma should be; it is anything your nervous system perceives at that moment as trauma. We totally expect ourselves to handle more and do more. Why can't I deal with this? One of the interesting things I

discovered after writing the book I wish I had put it in there. I thought about doing a rewrite and adding in some of the things that I know now. Rejection is actually perceived in the brain. It activates the same part of the brain as physical pain. There was a time when I thought, what is wrong with me? It's just a kid rejecting me, so why can't I handle it better? Understanding that it doesn't matter who it comes from, rejection is always activating the same part of the brain as physical pain. I don't know if you're familiar with blocked care. That was a new concept for me that made so much sense,

Amy J. Brown

Would you explain that to the listener?

Jennie Owens

I'm not an expert at it. I'm really excited Lisa Qualls, and Melissa Corkum are coming out with a book on blocked care. I'm really excited to read it. The basic principle is that we have five different areas of the brain, like different care areas we give kids. When we have a kid with blocked trust, meaning because of their past, they struggled to trust future caregivers (attachment disorders, that sort of thing) Our brain starts to code that person as a danger. It starts to shut down the different parts of care. I remember at one point feeling like oh my gosh, what a terrible mom that I don't enjoy my kids. Recognizing that the brain shuts down all but one area when it's extreme is to keep you alive. The other areas of care really get shut down in our brains. Understanding that a lot of the stuff we're talking about really comes down to brain science for our kids and us.

Amy J. Brown

I love what you said earlier about they're just a kid, but that continual rejection; we can line up all the trauma they've had, all the abuse they've had, and their rejection of us is still taken as physical pain. Yeah, we're adults, and maybe we didn't have the trauma they had, but it's still hurtful. I think that's very helpful.

I want to ask another question here before we wrap up. What do you say to the mom, because you did mention this in your book, that pulls into her garage and thinks I can't go inside? I don't like this kid. I'm a terrible mom because I don't want to walk in that house. I can't do it. What do you say to that mom?

Jennie Owens

I've been there.

Amy J. Brown

Me too. Why is mom always in the garage?

Jennie Owens

20 minutes in the bathroom, mom? The judgment doesn't stop with parenting. When I wrote the book, I got a lot of judgment, too, so people either hate it or love it. When you're living with a kid with extreme behaviors and extreme needs, I want to normalize the fact that it's normal; that is brain science. Your nervous system starts to say; this is not a safe person. In a normal situation, if you were walking along the street, and somebody started hurling insults at you, or throwing things at you, or breaking your stuff, or hitting you, or whatever, you would run, and you would get out of there, and you would not go back to that person. It wouldn't be, I really want to walk down that road again,

Amy J. Brown

You certainly wouldn't house them and feed them.

Jennie Owens

Exactly. You wouldn't say, come live with me so you can do this more. I remember thinking that at one point. If this child were an adult, people would tell me you're crazy for having them in your home. Why do you keep putting up with this? Because they are a child, people go, well, it's just a kid. I don't understand what your problem is. I just want to normalize that; your brain codes that person as dangerous and unsafe. Of course, you wouldn't want to move toward the right person. Understanding that you're doing something that is going against what your brain is telling you on a daily moment-by-moment basis. That is difficult. So just to help them understand that you are walking a difficult road. I've been there. I understand. I know that there are going to be people who don't understand and who judge harshly. Before we even started, people were judging us harshly; I looked at them, and I thought you would not have walked a day in my shoe. You wouldn't have been able to do this for a day. These kids would have been back in foster care. They would have been institutionalized. I'm not saying if people do that it's wrong; I'm saying that for us.

It was honestly, the most painful thing for me was being so harshly judged by people who did not understand, who had not walked where I've walked. Was I perfect? Absolutely not; none of us is perfect. Sometimes I think foster parents and adoptive parents are expected to be perfect. Well, you're not doing therapeutic parenting every moment, and neither is the parent who's parenting the neurotypical kid, but you can get away with it more. You don't have to deal with that. That's one of the benefits. I think what has come for me from doing what we've done is I've been able to recognize, wow, now that I understand how the nervous system works, I went through trauma as a child. Nobody meant to do it or anything like that, but my dad was a very

angry man; we walked on eggshells a lot, and so that does something to your nervous system. Being able to deal with my nervous system and the trauma I've endured has been really helpful in my parenting.

Amy J. Brown 35:08

Then you walk into a parenting situation where people are always angry at you. That just builds on it. Of course, you have to have healing with that. I think, too, the judgment (and we could talk for six hours about this, but we won't) is very isolating, not just for kids like ours but all special needs moms. I think there's this idea that we will love him a lot, which will heal everything. I think sometimes we go into adoption and foster care thinking that. I'm just gonna love them, and it's all gonna be okay. I think there's a need to understand trauma and our nervous systems better. I've had people dismiss trauma because now they're in your house, and you have beds and food. That isolates parents trying to have somebody listen and understand what they're going through. I really think what you've shared today is going to be helpful. If you haven't read her book, you must because it's very helpful. I felt so seen by your book. You were saying out loud what I couldn't even say to some of my friends out loud yet because I couldn't take any more rejection. I'm already getting rejected by my child, and then friends are like, 'Oh, come on, it's just normal teenage behavior.' I won't get us sidetracked with that. I appreciate what you shared today, and I'll be thinking a lot about what you said about the rejection, which registers as physical pain. That makes so much sense.

Jennie Owens
Isn't it, though?

Amy J. Brown
I wish I had known that.

Jennie Owens
I can't just get over it.

Amy J. Brown
Right. That was so good. Tell our listeners where they can find you.

Jennie Owens
We are at www.thrivefamily.org. My husband is a counselor working with kids with trauma. I do coaching with parents and somatic experiencing to the level that I've trained. I'm working towards becoming a somatic experiencing practitioner. I found it to be very powerful. Many of the parents I work with have said, "Oh, my goodness. A lot of the stuff is somatic experiencing is so basic, and really good understanding of the nervous system." When you

understand it, you can work your way into a point where trauma's happening, you can process it at the moment, and you don't have to have it add to your stack right of trauma.

Amy J. Brown

I will share that in our show notes. Where they can find you because being able to be coached by you would be very helpful for many people. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Jennie Owens

Yes, thank you very much for inviting me.

Amy J. Brown

All of our resources, including an entire written transcript of this episode, is available on our website at www.takeheartsspecialmoms.com. Thank you for joining us today.