

COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 3

Building a Family

The Sign We've Been Waiting For

[00:00:01] **Daniel Treviño** In a picture-perfect neighborhood, Brian and Yesenia Sidwell had recently purchased the largest house at the end of a cul-de-sac. It was their dream home. One night, over dinner, the family of four wondered what they would do with all of the spare bedrooms, now that the eldest child, Tory, was about to go off to college.

[00:00:20] **Yesenia Sidwell** Yeah, we were just talking about what we were going to do with these rooms. Then everyone started suggesting ideas, like, "Let's have a gift wrapping room," or something else—we were just throwing out silly ideas. I remember Tory said, "You guys need more kids," and of course, because of my fertility issues, I couldn't. But Tory quickly suggested we should adopt, and although the idea had crossed our minds at some point, it hadn't really stuck. So, after that dinner, I went online and googled things about adoption.

[00:00:51] **Daniel Treviño** In her research of adoption agencies, one stood out: ACH Child and Family Services. After months of discussion, Yesenia and Brian filled out an application, but they were too hesitant to send it in.

[00:01:04] **Yesenia Sidwell** I think it was a little bit of anxiety, a little bit of the unknown. And, of course, every question comes to mind: Can you love another child like you do yours? Can you open your home to children? Then there's foster care or adoption—or both. So, we're learning about this journey.

[00:01:21] **Daniel Treviño** Everything remained up in the air until Mother's Day, when the Sidwells attended church and listened to the pastor give a sermon.

[00:01:29] **Yesenia Sidwell** He went into a whole-hour session about fostering and adoption. Needless to say, I could not look at Brian the whole time because I was crying at this point. At the very end, he said, "If you want any information about fostering or adoption, if this is pulling at your heartstrings, we have an agency here today in the lobby that you can talk to, and they will give you all the information you need." He said that agency is ACH. I thought, "Oh man, if this isn't a sign, I don't know what is." So, needless to say, the very next Monday is when we turned in our application.

[00:02:10] **Daniel Treviño** Welcome to Counting On Us, a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services. The show where we share the stories of people navigating life's challenges with ACH alongside them every step of the way. I'm Daniel Treviño.

A Family's Adoption Journey Begins

[00:02:36] **Daniel Treviño** Once the Sidwells' application was processed, they were enrolled in Pre-Service Training, a series of classes taught on the ACH campus that educates families about what their forthcoming child has been through and how to best integrate them into the family. For Yesenia and Brian, taking the classes was an eye-opener to the realities of fostering and adoption.

[00:03:00] **Yesenia Sidwell** My first impression was that there was no holding back. It was raw, it was honest, it was transparent—which is exactly what we needed to hear.

[00:03:14] **Brian Sidwell** I would agree—the content was really strong. It wasn't all worst-case scenarios, but they didn't leave the worst cases out. What you come to find is that you need all of it, because you may see none of it, you may see a little bit, you may see a lot, and you've got to be prepared.

[00:03:34] **Lizbeth Bryant** Well, in training, we give all kinds of examples of things that may arise, from simple situations to worst-case scenarios. The reason we do that is because we like to set realistic expectations. We want our families to thrive, and we don't want to set anyone up for failure.

[00:03:53] **Daniel Treviño** That's Lizbeth Bryant, the Adoption Supervisor for ACH Child and Family Services. Every day, Lizabeth and her team work to match licensed families with children available for adoption.

[00:04:05] **Lizbeth Bryant** We really want them to know that for children who have been through trauma, much of their behavior is about survival. It's not malicious; it's not manipulation. So we do a lot of training on that. That's a big difference with our children—they just need to be treated differently sometimes, and their behaviors have to be addressed in a different way.

[00:04:29] **Daniel Treviño** After the adoption of their son Eli, the Sidwells would soon become familiar with how the pain of past trauma would resurface in Eli's behaviors.

Navigating Challenges and Finding Support

[00:04:39] **Yesenia Sidwell** Soon after he moved in, just a few weeks after our honeymoon phase, he had his first meltdown—his first tantrum with me. I was home alone with him. I tried all the techniques we had learned, but nothing seemed to be working. At that point, I caught myself; I was getting frustrated. So I said we both needed some time to cool off, and I put him in his room. I said, "We're going sit here. I'm going to leave you alone," and as I walked out of the room, I closed the door behind me. That's when it started. Holy moly, he had a meltdown like I'd never heard before. It was beyond the tantrum he was already having—it was a cry, a scream, almost curdling sound; I can't even describe it. It just went to a different level. The second I opened the door again, he was fine. And I was there. I remember his eyes—he even had this glazed look in his eyes.

[00:05:40] **Daniel Treviño** How did what you learned at ACH prepare you for that moment?

[00:05:45] **Yesenia Sidwell** One of the skills they did a really good job teaching us was how to find triggers. I thought to myself, “Holy cow, this is one of those triggers.” In our training, we learned that some kids do not like the door being closed—and, lo and behold, that was his. I learned that he still needed time by himself, but he also needed to know I was close. So, I stood in the doorway with the door open. I think that made him feel a little better, knowing that, one, I wasn’t gone and I wasn’t shutting him away. Honestly, if I hadn’t had that training, I probably would have gone back and closed the door again.

[00:06:26] **Daniel Treviño** Yesenia, what other behavioral challenges did you and Brian experience with Eli?

[00:06:32] **Yesenia Sidwell** When we dropped him off at daycare, we realized he had never been in a daycare setting. For me, dropping him off meant leaving him with somebody he didn't know. Trying to get him familiar with that person wasn't as easy as we thought. Every morning was a battle.

[00:06:51] **Brian Sidwell** She’d tell me it’s a physical struggle. I physically have to, you know, carry him in. There’s this physical interaction between the teacher and her. You can see the pain and anguish—it was difficult.

[00:07:08] **Yesenia Sidwell** But there were several times when I would get in the car and either call Brian first and say, “Oh, man, this is what happened today. I’m so tired,” or I would actually call my ACH worker and say, “Talk me off the ledge. This just happened—did I do the right thing? Or what could I have done?” Just to get some guidance.

[00:07:27] **Lizbeth Bryant** We support the parent during the call, saying, “Hey, why don’t you try this?” Sometimes, it just takes someone who’s not in the moment to

have a cool head and help them through it. We also provide support after the situation, once things are under control. We'll reach out the next day and say, "Hey, let's talk about this. How are you feeling?"—because sometimes parents are like, "That was really hard," and we support them through that as well. Being a Case Manager, a lot of people think it's just paperwork and meeting deadlines, but at ACH, the key for us is being a support. We are there to support you through the good times, the bad times, and, in the end, the joy. We really do want to be there all the way.

[00:08:09] **Daniel Treviño** For the Sidwell family, a big part of the work was understanding why Eli behaved the way he did during daycare drop-off. Over time, they applied the tools they learned during the ACH training to begin to manage his behaviors.

[00:08:24] **Lizbeth Bryant** A lot of times, our children are scared to be away from their parents. One of the most important things we teach parents is to prepare their children for transitions. Transitions are a huge focus for us. Many of our children have been moved from home to home, or they were removed from their homes, so they have a really big issue with going anywhere that they're not familiar with. Another key point is being consistent. If your child is scared to go to school or daycare, simply saying, "I'm going to pick you up," can help. Once they see you pick them up every day, they start to understand that this is something that's okay. They know you're going to be there every day when they're done.

[00:09:03] **Brian Sidwell** I think we understand how to get out in front of it, and we're much more attentive to that now. We share it much more—we share it with his teachers, with his new teachers—and over time, it subsided. As we continued to reassure him, I realized that what he really needed was to know that we weren't leaving

[00:09:32] **Daniel Treviño** How much time passed before you both decided to adopt another child?

[00:09:36] **Brian Sidwell** We went from one to two, really after discussing it with our ACH case manager, once we learned how many sibling groups needed parents willing to take in multiples. So, we moved that up, and after Eli, we waited for the required period that Texas mandates. I remember Yesenia coming in and saying, "Okay, I've got us scheduled for training." I asked, "Training for what?" and she said, "Well, we signed up for two. We're going to do two," and I said, "Okay, that's what we're doing."

[00:10:14] **Daniel Treviño** We'll be right back.

A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:10:19] **Wayne Carson** Hi, it's Dr. Wayne Carson from ACH Child and Family Services. I hope you're enjoying the podcast. Here at ACH, we know that the community is Counting On Us to get it right. So, for over 100 years, ACH has remained true to our mission of protecting children and preserving families. Follow us on social media or visit our website, ACHservices.org to learn more about what we do, how to get involved, or if you'd like to support us. Now back to the show.

From One to Two: Expanding the Family

[00:10:56] **Daniel Treviño** Every adoption is unique with the many variables involved. Families learn early on how inescapable uncertainty is during the process. The Sidwell family would experience this firsthand once it came time to adopt their son, Nico.

[00:11:13] **Brian Sidwell** Eli's status was different from Nico's. Eli was a straight adoption, while Nico was foster-to-adopt. So, we actually had to change our status with Nico. That was a decision we had to sit back and really spend some time talking about.

[00:11:34] **Yesenia Sidwell** It was a little unsettling, simply because of the unknown. The unknown was unsettling. I think all the worries we had when we were first learning about foster care and adoption came into play. He will continue to see his biological family. What happens if a judgment comes and he gets to go back home? It's all the what-ifs.

[00:12:01] **Brian Sidwell** The unknown was tough, but ACH did a good job preparing us for it. They let us know, "This is what it's going to look like, this is what's going to happen—just be prepared."

[00:12:14] **Lizbeth Bryant** We emphasize it a lot in training. We let them know that reunification is our goal—that is the plan. We remain very positive about biological families until they're no longer an option. We emphasize that at all times.

[00:12:33] **Daniel Treviño** Why is family reunification important?

[00:12:38] **Lizbeth Bryant** Because it's in the best interest of the child. Children truly thrive in their families, and we always want to give each child the opportunity to be raised by their biological family or family members. Children do well with their families, and that's what we want. We want to protect families.

Breaking Bad Habits and Creating Normalcy

[00:13:02] **Daniel Treviño** Once Nico was placed with the Sidwell family, it became apparent that his past upbringing had created some bad habits that were now up to Brian and Yesenia to correct.

[00:13:12] **Brian Sidwell** So, Nico is much different from any of our other kids. He could live off of soda and, you know, doughnuts—or really anything with sugar. He's a sugar kid.

[00:13:27] **Yesenia Sidwell** We kind of nicknamed it “gas station food,” since that’s what he was raised on. So, I would make him eat and try different foods. Therefore, I’m the mean one.

[00:13:39] **Brian Sidwell** What helped a lot was the training at ACH. For example, with food early on, we would say, “Okay, tonight, we’re going to have this. For dinner, we’re going to have this.” That way, we could get all the angst and the “oh man” reactions out early.

[00:13:59] **Yesenia Sidwell** One thing we’ve done, even for our biological children, is that when we make dinner, they now know they might push and shove, and it may take a little while, and they may sit at the table a lot longer. But, by golly, they will finally finish that last bite, and then they get the reward: dessert or praise—of course, lots of praise. Now, they just know. So it’s not so much of a battle because they just know that’s what’s expected.

[00:14:28] **Daniel Treviño** With both Eli and Nico now legally adopted, the Sidwell family share their experience integrating the boys into the family.

[00:14:36] **Yesenia Sidwell** Previously, the pictures on my nightstand were of Noah and Tory as infants. I remember Eli coming to my nightstand and asking, “Where’s my picture?” That moment was eye-opening for me—I realized I didn’t have any infant pictures of either boy. I wasn’t lucky enough to receive those. However, I was able to find some toddler-aged photos. So, I decided to switch the pictures to more toddler-age photos for all my children, including my biological ones, to make things a little more equal and fair.

[00:15:14] **Brian Sidwell** The other thing was sports. Noah was already playing sports—he’s playing lacrosse. As soon as Eli became old enough, we signed him up as well, and we were very intentional about getting both of them involved in the same activities that any other kid would be doing at home.

[00:15:31] **Yesenia Sidwell** And for each other... If one has a game and the other doesn't, we still all go together

[00:15:36] **Brian Sidwell** That's right.

[00:15:37] **Yesenia Sidwell** To watch each sibling. And Nico being young, he's not yet old enough to participate. He asked already, "When is it my turn?" Well, now it's his turn.

[00:15:46] **Brian Sidwell** Yeah.

[00:15:46] **Yesenia Sidwell** So it's really important that now we have our older children to support him. Just as he sat there and supported and came, we make sure to have the boys acknowledge, hey, thank your brothers for coming. That was really special that they came to watch you today.

Celebrating Gotcha Day and Embracing Change

[00:16:02] **Daniel Treviño** Several years ago, it was over dinner when the seed of adoption was planted in the hearts of the Sidwell family. Today, I got to see that dream come to fruition when I joined them in their home for dinner and cake in celebration of Eli's Gotcha Day.

[00:16:19] **Brian Sidwell** Chicken's ready, and so are the rice and the beans. Eli, Nico! Come on, you guys, it's time to eat!

[00:16:29] **Daniel Treviño** Yesenia, can you explain what Gotcha Day is?

[00:16:32] **Yesenia Sidwell** Gotcha Day is a celebration of the day the boys were adopted. Through training, we learned that it's important to celebrate the day we became a family unit with them—that we incorporated them and blended them in.

That advice was really helpful for me. It encouraged us to truly make a celebration out of it and not treat it as a taboo subject that you just don't talk about.

[00:16:55] **Nico Sidwell** I don't want beans.

[00:16:57] **Brian Sidwell** Remember, we have to eat some beans if you want dessert. I didn't give you very many, you're good. Eli thought he didn't want the beans either and then he tasted them. What do you think of the beans Eli?

[00:17:08] **Eli Sidwell** They're good.

[00:17:08] **Brian Sidwell** They're good, see!

[00:17:09] **Brian Sidwell** What really stood out to me, after a few years with Eli, was when I recently asked him, "Hey, what does Gotcha Day mean for you now?" He looked up at me and said, "Dad, that's the day I became a Sidwell." That response truly resonated with me. Even if you feel uncomfortable or have any apprehension about celebrating Gotcha Day, hearing him say that reassured me—we're doing the right thing. It's right for him. It feels right.

[00:17:44] **Yesenia Sidwell** For dessert, we got a chocolate-on-chocolate mousse cake. It's huge, thick, and delicious. Every time we have an event, I try to get one because the kids devour it.

[00:17:57] **Brian Sidwell** We always wanted a big family, and we left it in God's hands. It didn't turn out the way we expected—God had a different plan for us. But after going through the process and the training, I'm so glad we did it. I'm grateful we had that opportunity and were able to provide a home and love, and to have them in our lives. We've talked a lot about what we did, but the truth is, they may not realize it, yet the love we're able to give them is so good for us.

[00:18:32] **Yesenia Sidwell** No, I definitely agree. I think we're changing them, yes, but I also think they're changing us as well. I believe they will learn—or at least I hope they grow to learn—how much impact they've had on our lives. I also think it's important for Brian and me to share our story with others. As he mentioned, it's not always a pretty path, but the outcome is so great and so grand that those hurdles are absolutely worth it.

[00:19:11] **Daniel Treviño** Thank you Brian and Yesenia for sharing your story.

Closing Credits

[00:19:14] **Daniel Treviño** If you feel inspired and would like to support ACH in its mission to protect children and preserve families, then you can donate now at [ACHservices.org/Donate](https://www.ACHservices.org/Donate), or you can find the link in the show notes. Also, if you liked this episode, please share it with a friend. Follow us or write a review. It makes a huge difference. Counting On Us is a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services, written, edited, and produced by Daniel Treviño. Special thanks to Adoption Supervisor Lizabeth Bryant and the entire Sidwell family. Mixing by Panoramic Sound. Thanks for listening.