

COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 4

Healing Through Reparenting

Introduction

[00:00:00] **Daniel Treviño** Just a quick reminder: if you haven't listened to the previous episode, make sure you do. Since up next, that story will be part of this episode's conversation. All right, enjoy the show.

[00:00:14] **Daniel Treviño** Here on Counting On Us, I get the opportunity to share the stories of those who have found the hope to push forward and overcome the challenges of their lives—like gaining independence, building a family and healing from trauma. But how universal are their stories? And what are the threads that connect them with other ACH clients, and what does ACH's team of caregivers and professionals really want you to take away from their stories. I get help unpacking these questions from the members of the community ACH serves, and directly from those whose mission it is to help them.

[00:00:52] **Daniel Treviño** On today's episode, my conversation with Mike and Lane Hackemack, Anabella Muzzio, and Raquel Smith about a recent story shared on the podcast. I'm Daniel Treviño, and you're listening to Counting On Us, a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services.

Parenting Foster Children is Different

[00:01:18] **Daniel Treviño** Last episode, we shared the Sidwell family's adoption story. After choosing ACH as their agency, Brian and Yesenia enrolled in a series of classes at ACH that trained them in trauma-informed care. The lessons learned proved to be beneficial, because once their sons, Eli and Nico, came into their home, the extreme behaviors started. What was once thought of as part of a normal routine proved to be triggering for the boys— like daycare drop-off, eating dinner, and being alone in a room. For the Sidwells, it became clear that how they parented in the past was not going to work this time.

The Hackemack Family's Adoption Journey

[00:01:56] **Daniel Treviño** My first guests are Mike and Lane Hackemack. Both grew up in very close families where adoptive cousins and friends were the norm. They would eventually meet through mutual close friends and spent the next few years dating. Later, their lives would forever change for the better once they discovered they were pregnant with their daughter, Madeline. Their family would then continue to grow with the adoption of their son, Levi.

[00:02:21] **Daniel Treviño** Welcome Lane and Mike to the show.

[00:02:23] **Lane Hackemack** Thank you.

[00:02:24] **Mike Hackemack** Thanks for having us.

[00:02:24] **Lane Hackemack** Happy to be here.

[00:02:25] **Daniel Treviño** What did y'all envision your family looking like?

[00:02:28] **Lane Hackemack** Adoption had always been something that I was interested in doing. In fact, I really didn't have big aspirations to have biological children. Madeline surprised us, and obviously, we were thrilled about that. But I think adoption was always something that you and I talked about from very, very early on in our relationship.

[00:02:57] **Mike Hackemack** Yeah. I mean, personally, I always envisioned two kids so that we weren't outnumbered. But, yeah, we talked about adoption and fostering— just as an idea— so we were both comfortable with. Eventually, we started to take action, especially because there were some complications when we were trying to have our second child.

[00:03:27] **Lane Hackemack** Well, when we decided that we were ready to grow our family, I had already been researching foster agencies. I think we just sort of decided “Let's stop trying not to have a baby, and also start the fostering process— and whatever happens first is what we'll go with.” And as it turns out, we ended up having some fertility issues—shocking, I know.

[00:03:56] **Mike Hackemack** Trying to have a kid and you can't.

[00:03:57] **Lane Hackemack** Right. And so, fostering just was the seamless...

[00:04:02] **Mike Hackemack** Yeah.

[00:04:03] **Lane Hackemack** Process forward, and it didn't feel like a disappointment to either of us because it was something that we had both sort of already hoped for.

[00:04:14] **Daniel Treviño** And how old was Levi when he first came home?

[00:04:17] **Mike Hackemack** He was just— he was almost one.

[00:04:20] **Lane Hackemack** So he showed up the week before his first birthday.

[00:04:23] **Daniel Treviño** Okay, and then how old was he when he was adopted?

[00:04:27] **Lane Hackemack** We adopted him a month after his second birthday.

[00:04:29] **Daniel Treviño** Okay, cool.

[00:04:30] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah.

[00:04:30] **Daniel Treviño** So... so, like, just a baby...

[00:04:32] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah just a little guy, he's so cute.

Parenting Challenges and Trauma Informed Care

[00:04:34] **Daniel Treviño** And how would you describe Levi?

[00:04:37] **Mike Hackemack** He's awesome.

[00:04:38] **Lane Hackemack** He's awesome. If I had to, I feel like— and I think I said this in our pre-interview, but Levi is a man of extremes. Whatever he feels, he feels to the max. He is the most loving, the most hilarious kid I know. I mean, I do not get told, "I love you" more by anybody than by that kid, and it is with huge, giant hugs. And on the flip side, when he's upset, you sure do know—he's a man of extremes in those arenas too.

[00:05:17] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, well, we'll get to that. All right, so now let's transition to the episode that I had you guys listen to.

[00:05:23] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah!

[00:05:24] **Daniel Treviño** So it was the Sidwell story.

[00:05:27] **Daniel Treviño** After listening to that story, what could you relate to in terms of their challenges that they faced?

[00:05:34] **Lane Hackemack** Listening to Yesenia talk about Eli's challenges—like having tantrums and being afraid to be alone—is definitely something we can relate to. Whenever Levi has those episodes of really big feelings, we tried, at first, to say, “Okay, let's go calm down in your room.” But we quickly learned that leaving him alone wasn't an option. He would get very fearful and incredibly worked up. So, we had to adapt: if he's having a hard time, we take him to his room, but one of us always stays in there with him. We close the door and just give him the space to feel all his emotions and calm down in a safe environment. He really needs the presence of a calm, grown-up in the room with him.

[00:06:27] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, I know—during our pre-interview, when I was asking you some of these questions, I was curious, because, like we just mentioned, when Levi came into your home, he was just barely one. Right?

[00:06:38] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah

[00:06:39] **Daniel Treviño** And so if he didn't remember... doesn't have all that memory...

[00:06:42] **Lane Hackemack** Sure.

[00:06:42] **Daniel Treviño** Does he still experience some of the trauma, like the behavioral challenges? It sounds like that is the case, right?

[00:06:50] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah, I definitely think that we see them. I mean, he doesn't have the memory to point to, but he can feel it in his body—there was a huge loss there. And especially now that he's old enough and we're able to talk about it, we talk a ton about his first mom and dad. He'll mention feeling sad that he doesn't know what they look like. He's trying to sort of reframe memories for himself; sometimes he'll tell us stories about his time with them that we know he didn't experience, but he's just trying to sort of make sense of it all and kind of...

[00:07:28] **Daniel Treviño** He will tell you stories?

[00:07:30] **Lane Hackemack** He'll tell us stories, like saying, "My first mommy and daddy would put me in a crib as a baby and sing me songs." And we know that wasn't the case, based on just some information that we have. But it's interesting to see him try to reframe those memories and, in a way, heal that for himself.

[00:07:53] **Daniel Treviño** Is there anything else in that story that resonated with you guys?

[00:07:57] **Mike Hackemack** Yeah, I was going to say triggers— and training as well. I know that was brought up in the podcast, and just thinking back and remembering all the trainings we did with ACH, as my wife was alluding to previously, it's really about being able to de-escalate. You know, I forget exactly how that was covered in training, but...

[00:08:25] **Daniel Treviño** Well, wasn't it TBRI, right?

[00:08:26] **Mike Hackemack** Right! Yeah, TBRI.

[00:08:28] **Daniel Treviño** And isn't the whole purpose of that to help empower the child, right?

[00:08:34] **Lane Hackemack** Right, yeah, there's a quote that says—oh, I can't remember it exactly—but it's something like, "You don't have a bad kid; you have a kid who's having a hard time." It's really about you and your child against that hard time, not you against your child. I feel like they were really good at helping us see past the behavior and get to the feelings those kids might be experiencing. You have to relate to them differently than you would a child who's always had a safe upbringing.

Our Child's Healing Starts with Our Own

[00:09:11] **Daniel Treviño** So what did you both learn? Or what was surprising about this journey?

[00:09:18] **Lane Hackemack** That's a good question. We've been surprised to see how much the whole process has affected both us and Levi, especially considering how young he was when he came into our house. It's made us stretch and grow in ways we probably wouldn't have otherwise, helping us get to know ourselves better. We've had to do some emotional growing up so we could parent him properly.

[00:09:46] **Mike Hackemack** And that's still going on. Haha!

[00:09:47] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah, we'll just keep doing that forever.

[00:09:50] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, what did you have to change within yourselves? If you can, could you elaborate?

[00:09:53] **Lane Hackemack** Sure, so for me, I had to really learn that when he's having a hard time, the number one thing I can do is let him borrow my calm. I might be getting really worked up inside myself— it's hard to share a room with somebody who's throwing a giant tantrum—but the best thing that I could do is calm myself down. That way, as he's working on his own regulation, when he's ready, he can come and borrow calm from me, so we're not just escalating each other.

[00:10:28] **Daniel Treviño** How about you, Mike? How have you changed?

[00:10:30] **Mike Hackemack** I mean, it's still a work in progress. For me, growing up, it was more of that old-school disciplinarian style, and that just doesn't work. So, Lane's points about finding the root cause—what's actually causing an outburst—really resonate with me. It's just slowing down and creating the time to work through it with Levi, I think.

[00:11:10] **Daniel Treviño** You said creating the time?

[00:11:12] **Mike Hackemack** Yeah, creating the time—like, part of it is just slowing down. I mean, with everything we have going on, it's really about our lives just slowing down. And not just trying to, you know, gloss over a situation. That may seem small, but it's realistic

[00:11:31] **Daniel Treviño** I think one of the things I've learned from telling all these stories is the power of just giving these children or young adults the time and space to feel.

[00:11:41] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah.

[00:11:42] **Daniel Treviño** Like the full range of what they're experiencing.

[00:11:46] **Lane Hackemack** Yes.

[00:11:46] **Daniel Treviño** Let them process it. You know, for a lot of foster kids they just don't get a chance to do that.

[00:11:52] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah.

[00:11:52] **Daniel Treviño** Because they feel alone, or they don't trust the people that they're with.

[00:11:56] **Lane Hackemack** Yeah.

[00:11:56] **Daniel Treviño** And so, I love that you're saying that, because even just if we didn't have all this trauma, we'd all still need that, right?

[00:12:03] **Lane Hackemack** Sure.

[00:12:04] **Lane Hackemack** There's a re-parenting that happens. For us, as we sit with Levi and tell him, "All feelings are welcome here," we make sure that we're expressing those feelings in safe and kind ways. I also need to remind myself that my anger is welcome too—I just need to find safe and kind ways to express it. In many ways, it has truly felt like there's been a lot of healing within myself as I've learned how to help my son heal.

[00:12:35] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah you're validating each other. All right, well, thanks, guys, for coming to the show.

[00:12:41] **Lane Hackemack** Thank you.

[00:12:42] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah. And take care.

[00:12:44] **Mike Hackemack** Thank you.

[00:12:45] **Lane Hackemack** Thank you. Bye.

[00:12:47] **Daniel Treviño** We'll be right back.

A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:12:50] **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.

Understand that Foster Children are Different

[00:13:29] **Daniel Treviño** And we're back. I'm here with Raquel Smith and Anabella Muzzio from ACH's Foster Care and Adoption Department. Welcome to the show.

[00:13:38] **Raquel Smith** Thank you for having us.

[00:13:39] **Daniel Treviño** Can you both introduce yourselves and what exactly you both do here at ACH?

[00:13:46] **Anabelle Muzzio** Well, I'm Anabella Muzzio. I'm the Adoption Supervisor on the ACH side. In my role, I work with the waiting families—those who have completed the process and are ready to adopt children. I make sure they have not only the proper training but also the support they need.

[00:14:00] **Daniel Treviño** How about you Raquel?

[00:14:02] **Raquel Smith** So, I'm Raquel Smith, and I am the Supervisor on the Foster Care and Adoption side. My job is to train the FAS's—that's what we call our Case Managers; we're special, so we give them a special, fancy title. We're the support system, right? So, for all the families that come in on the foster care side, we provide support—support, support, support. We train, we're in their homes, we're available 365 24/7, we are. So once a family officially completes training, they come to my side. So yeah, that's what my job is.

[00:14:33] **Daniel Treviño** Can you both speak to the need or the urgency it is to find forever homes for these children?

[00:14:40] **Raquel Smith** Oh, it's of the utmost importance. I look at it like this: I don't want a kid in foster care for years—I don't. There's so much trauma that these kids have already experienced, whether it's a small amount or a big amount. And yes, in foster care, they're safe—they are. However, it's important for them to have stability. And stability, for me, is not fostering—it's not. Stability for me and for anybody else; it's finding your forever home.

[00:15:16] **Anabelle Muzzio** Yeah, I would tend to agree with that. It's just, permanency is the goal for all of our cases—whether it's with kinship, bio family, or anything like that, or, you know, with an adoptive family. These kids need permanency; they need a safe place to land, essentially, after everything they've gone through. And it doesn't matter what age they came into care. We may have littles that maybe might not manifest the behaviors, or you may not really see it in that moment. But still, that trauma is there, and they're going to remember. So we need these families that are willing to say, "You know what, I can do this. I'm sorry this happened to you in the past, but I'm here now." And with nurturance, guidance, and support, I think our kids can make it.

[00:15:53] **Daniel Treviño** How about once these children are placed in their homes? What is important to understand about them in terms of how to relate to them?

[00:16:04] **Raquel Smith** The biggest—actually, I think the first thing that families need to understand—is trauma. We don't just try; we train our families to be trauma-informed, right? As Anabelle said earlier, sure, you may get a four-month-old, and a lot of families are thinking, "Yeah, right, what trauma could this four-month-old have gone through?" Well, that four-month-old was with their mom, and since birth, that's all this baby has known—it's mom. There will be some trauma there. There is trauma: "I was removed from my home, whether I'm four years old or four months." And so, that's the first thing parents have to understand. And I think in fostering, again, you're providing a safe space and a safe haven. So you anticipate just all the beauty and rainbows. Sometimes, that's not what it looks like. The first three months of a placement are your toughest, because you're getting to know this child, and the child is trying to connect with you—or maybe the child is so disconnected that they don't want to. That's frustrating for families, because they're thinking, "What am I doing wrong? I'm providing a safe space. I'm doing all these things. And this kid has no interest in me." Well, you have to, again, go back to trauma-informed care and put that hat on.

[00:17:35] **Daniel Treviño** The main thing I hear from these families about the trainings is that there's a re-parenting going on.

[00:17:42] **Raquel Smith** Yes.

[00:17:42] **Daniel Treviño** That they have to learn how to relate to these children differently, and the way they were raised is not going to work for these children. So, can y'all talk about the process of communicating to families what needs to change?

[00:17:59] **Anabelle Muzzio** Well, I think for our families, a lot of it is understanding that you shouldn't compare these kids to your own kids. That's the number one thing. They're very different—your kids may have had trauma of their own kind, whatever that is, but these kids have a very different trauma. They come in with a background. So you have to meet them on their level and understand that whenever there's a behavior that comes out, you need to ask: What is behind that? What is causing it? Try to get to the root of it. That's where all the TBRI skills come in—understanding that, yes, they're feeling something, and they're not always able to communicate it.

How ACH Gives Families the Skills to Thrive

[00:18:30] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, in the Sidwell episode, they both had the experience of dropping off Eli at daycare, and that was so difficult for them because they mentioned how Eli had never been in that kind of daycare setting. He was just terrified of being dropped off in this place. Of course, as we know, if children have had experiences of being dropped off at home without being told why, they remember that. What I liked about that moment is that, as she was having these frustrations—not knowing how to help her child—she called ACH for support.

[00:19:13] **Raquel Smith** Yes.

[00:19:14] **Daniel Treviño** So, can you talk about those phone calls, and how common that is?

[00:19:20] **Raquel Smith** Those calls are very common. I've gotten on several phone calls—I've gotten on Zooms—at the craziest times of the day or night, just to talk a family off a ledge.

[00:19:31] **Daniel Treviño** What do they need to hear from you?

[00:19:33] **Raquel Smith** They just want you to listen to them, right? A lot of times, it's like, "This is the rundown, this is what happened," and then they tell you, "Yeah, I just needed to say that and I'm done." I'm like, okay, all right. Or they want to hear, "This is what I did; this is the rundown; tell me what I did wrong. What could I have done differently?" A lot of the time, you'll be surprised—I don't have a lot to say when it comes to telling them what they could have done differently. I say, "Well, you did everything that you were supposed to do. You did." So those phone calls are so common, and they want reassurance. They just want to feel supported in that moment. And so we try our hardest to make sure that we support our families, because they need it

[00:20:23] **Daniel Treviño** So, you both had a chance to listen to the previous episode with the Sidwells. What stood out to you, or what resonated?

[00:20:32] **Raquel Smith** For me, I felt a sense of pride for our agency overall, but especially for the Foster Adopt Department, when I heard Mrs. Sidwell say she closed the door right when he was having a meltdown. And then she heard a scream—it was a different scream. So she opened the door and saw the glazed look in his eyes. And she sat back for a moment and said, "I realized he still needed his time. But he also needed to know that I was there and he wasn't left alone." For me, I felt—yes, she got it! Trauma-Informed Care, TBRI—she gets it, she understood that.

[00:21:17] **Anabelle Muzzio** Yeah, I think the big part, too, was when she described where he had the meltdown after she closed the door. Hearing that scream and the yell, we know it's different—and that's coming from somewhere very deep. It's almost primal, like, "Oh my gosh, you've truly left me, you've abandoned me, this is it for them." And for them, it is—because you slammed, you closed that door. Who knows how many times that happened as a child before somebody closed the door, and that was it. They didn't come back.

[00:21:40] **Daniel Treviño** What do you think we can learn from the Sidwells' story, as well as the Hackemacks'?

[00:21:45] **Raquel Smith** Listen, what I got from them is that they put the work in. I feel like that's the big key takeaway, right? And when I say "put the work in," I don't just mean they opened their home, became licensed, and said, "We're here to foster, so this is what putting the work in means." No—they took the time to learn that child, to connect with their child, to restructure their mindset and their parenting, and that takes a lot of work. It really does. So that's one of the key takeaways I feel anybody can learn from this: you have to put the work in. In order for this to benefit both the kiddo and you, you have to put the work in.

[00:22:28] **Anabelle Muzzio** I think both of them may have come in with a certain mindset, but then here are the kids—these are the cards you're dealt—and it's about showing vulnerability, being able to be vulnerable yourself and saying, "You know what, I don't have all the answers." Even if I've parented before, this child is very different from my own child, so I need to understand that and use all the tools I've been given, and not be afraid to ask for help. Like, "You know what, I don't understand—teach me more about that." So I think that's one of the big takeaways: you may have expectations, but let's bring them to a realistic level and don't be afraid to ask for help, because that's what we're here for.

[00:23:04] **Daniel Treviño** That's great. And I know both of them would say it was all worth it. All right, well, thank you both for speaking with me today—I appreciate all the work that you both do.

[00:23:14] **Raquel Smith** Thank you for having us. We appreciate you.

[00:23:16] **Anabelle Muzzio** Thank you, Daniel. Appreciate it.



Closing Credits

[00:23:21] **Daniel Treviño** That's all for today. But make sure you like and subscribe so you don't miss the next two episodes—we release new ones every two weeks. And if you enjoyed the show, please share, rate, and write a review. It makes a huge difference. Also, if you feel inspired and would like to support ACH in its mission to protect children and preserve families, you can donate now at [ACHservices.org/Donate](https://www.achservices.org/Donate), or you can find the link in the show notes. Counting On Us is a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services, written, edited, and produced by Daniel Treviño. Special thanks to Mike and Elaine Hackemack, Anabelle Muzzio, and Raquel Smith. Mixing by Panoramic Sound. Thanks for listening.