

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Supporting Expecting And Parenting Youth
with Jordan Otero
TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Gabriel Foley, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Jordan Otero, Foster Club

[00:00:0]: [Music Introduction]

Gabriel [00:00:04]: Hello, and welcome back to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast, your space to learn more about the emerging and important topics across child welfare. I'm your host, Gabriel Foley, bringing to you a lifetime of personal and professional experience in the child welfare system, including my own journey through the foster care system and my time with the Child Welfare Information Gateway team, where I offer expertise in stipend programs, supporting transition-age youth, and plenty more. Today, we'll continue our conversation on how to support expecting and parenting young people in the child welfare system by sitting down with Jordan Otero, a lived expert with the Foster Club team. Jordan pursued his own journey through care and currently serves as an intensive foster care case manager for the villages of Indiana. But his work as a lived expert spans far beyond that role. He has advocated for youth at the state and national level, from a role leading the Indiana Youth Advisory Board to providing testimony in front of the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee. He brings specific expertise on supporting transition-aged youth and young fathers in the child welfare system. Alongside Jordan, we'll further explore the challenges facing young parents in the foster care system and what supports can be provided from their family members, professional supports, and peers. I'm beyond excited to talk through such an important topic with such a captivating young expert. So, without further ado, let's jump right in. Welcome to the Information Gateway podcast, Jordan. We're so grateful to have your time. So, how does the experience of expecting or parenting and care alter one's own pursuit of permanency or independence?

Jordan [00:02:19]: Yeah, Gabe, great question um, this is one that I don't have too much experience with uh, my own experience wasn't altered that much by it because I was already gonna be aging out the next year, and so I left care early, I had a lot of things that were already negative between me and my IL worker, and so I didn't really feel supported by them, so I was gonna be leaving anyways. But what I see right now in my own case manager experience, I've had a couple youth who are parents or were expecting in care, and the one thing that they easily and almost often always pursue is their independence right away, they're like, "I don't wanna be here anymore, I wanna get outta this house when I'm 18 or as soon as I can, and I don't want my own kid to be in care." And although that may be, it is sometimes a, a huge misconception, especially in our state of Indiana, just because a youth doesn't in care and they may be, may have a baby already. Or they may be expecting to have a child, um, those kids do not automatically become wards. And so sometimes we have something what is called a non-ward child that is in those foster home settings and,

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uh, our foster parents actually do get paid for those non-ward babies, um, that is a, uh, different things that goes into our foster care sector. However, um, yeah, so a lot of the things is they're so scared of that though, right? Because of their own experience and them being in care, and they don't wanna put their own child through what they're going through right now. So, they, as soon as they can age out, they're, they're, or they're, they're gonna sign out and be done um, and so that is something I've seen a lot. Um, and so what I, what I urge is to check your state and to have an understanding of what it means to be parenting and expecting in care. Um, you know, a lot of young people who are parenting and expecting, um, they, if they leave early, they're gonna be lacking the resources that they could use as an older youth. Um, so in Indiana, you know, part of our older youth services program, you have, um, services until you're 21. Those are IL services, and then you have voluntary services until you're 23. And so, if you leave early, though, and then you know, you sign out, you're gonna be losing out on a lot of potential, you know, money that can help you, uh, programs that help you find housing, uh, money for college. Uh, just so many things that because you're so, a lot of youth are so scared of what can happen to their child, own child, that they end up signing out early and seeking that independence. Um, and I, and I understand that Indiana has different state-specific services and each other state has their own services, but I would urge you as a, if you are parenting or expecting right now, to be searching your state services and see what's out there for you.

Gabriel [00:04:49]: Yeah, I think we jump right in with really tangible recommendations. That conversation of a, a desire for independence in your teenage years is one that's grown among all transition-aged young people, uh, over the last few years. And those feelings only ramp up as you face increased uncertainty and stress that comes with being an expecting or parenting young people or young person, uh, in that position. Um, so to that end, knowing what services are available is so important, truly digging into, uh, your own locality, your own state, uh, can go so far in fortifying those feelings of uncertainty or those nerves about interacting with different components of the system. I think that leads us perfectly into our next question, which is how should professionals approach supporting, expecting, or parenting young people in care?

Jordan [00:05:54]: Yeah, I mean, I already highlighted how, you know, you as a youth should be, should look into your own resources, but as a professional, as my, as a caseworker right now, I need to know there might not be services I understand and know about, so I need to be doing my own research and educating myself, and saying, okay, I need to know what services are offered for these youth. Learn what they have access to and learn what their support systems can be. Um, because, you know, the, the one thing is that we have a lot of the people who aren't in care who have experienced these problems and these challenges

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with parenting and expecting. And so, there's resources for everybody in this aspect. And then sometimes there are a little bit, there's other resources that are more catered to youth in care. But all in all, there's resources that we can find, like WIC, Women, Infant, and Child, a supplemental program that helps pay for formula. And so, as a caseworker, you can learn about that and say, "Oh, how do I help get my youth into this?" And because they're a young parent that's gonna be expecting to have a child, and they're gonna need that program for, um, the food, the, the formula, and the other things that that service provides. Um, you know, one of the biggest things about this, the educating yourself is that understanding where you come from, you know, the background as a professional in this field, uh, I see it most my coworkers who have some implicit bias and have different family norms that are going to shape how they view these young people that are parenting expecting in care. And so, their own, you know, perception of the world is gonna be vastly different from the people who are experiencing this right now. And so, these women who typically have not had these adverse experiences and who typically were not seen in this type of family structure, uh, are gonna have their, their own education and own bias against this, or, or that's not going to play into it. Uh, and so how, how do you navigate that, and how do you say, okay, I can educate myself and I can help learn these people better, learn these youth better, and be able to better support them. And I think that's our, our job as a professional to say, I mean, let me check my bias, let me navigate through it, and let me help these people and find a way to help them.

Gabriel [00:08:05]: Yeah, really a responsibility as a professional in the work to not get stuck in your rut, whether that rut is feeling that you can only provide, you know, a select amount of services, um, or, you know, that rut is implicit bias and, uh, you know, moving with the routine that gets established when you fill a role for so long, it's on the professionals to stay aware of what else is out there, what else could support the unique needs of the young people that they're serving. Jordan, as you walk through that, I think back to my own experience with my own ILP provider, uh, and, and she was the one who not only connected me to Chafee ETV and ILP, but also to food benefits and to work opportunities. Um, my conversations with her really became conversations about where my anxieties were and where they needed to be, or what I needed to get over them. And I think that sentiment really underscores exactly what you laid out. It, it's in providing holistic support that we can provide meaningful support. And, and again, that, that's only ramped up for young people facing the questions that come with being a new parent. We move into our third question, we've spoken about how professionals can provide support and how they can ensure that they are at their best to provide that support, but I wanted to ask too,

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how can professionals build safe spaces for these young people, often facing a lot of concerns or questions?

Jordan [00:10:00]: Yeah, great question, this question, really... so one of the things as a caseworker, right, and we talk about the educating yourself and learning, but you have to be someone that when you go to the state that they want to be able to get help from. And so how do you do that? Well, it's by watching what you say, it's by knowing your different language choices. You know, you never know that you, what, what you might say around this client that they may hear one time and then hold against you in the future, and be like, oh, I can't come to this person about that, because the comment they made six months ago, right? And so, you know, an example of that is if you're like, "Oh, teen pregnancy is just the worst. I can't believe this happened." But then you have a young girl that's on your caseload that heard you say that one time, and now she's pregnant, and now she doesn't feel like she can come to you because you are no longer a safe space for her because you made a comment about teen pregnancy. So, watching those, you know, those small interactions, watching what you say about them, you know, making sure that you don't cast judgment in your statements to make someone feel like, "Oh, I can't come to this person about that, because they're no longer a safe space." Um, and so that just goes with not talking down. Um, you know, and sometimes when that happens, right, maybe you have to readdress it and let someone know clearly where your stance is on that. Uh, again, that takes some responsibility, but, um, creating that safe space for your youth, for all your youth to say, "Hey, no matter what happens, I wanna be here for you. I wanna support you. If you're making decisions and choices that may not be the best for you in this moment, but you made them, like, we have to work through them." And so, letting them know that you're there to support them through it. Um, I think that, you know, you can help try to change your own mindset, um, to help always trying to fix the problem, keeping that problem at the fo... at the, at the focus point, so that way you're not bashing the person that way, they're not feeling like they're being degraded or less than, uh, because of what's going on. I'll just leave it at that.

Gabriel [00:11:55]: Yeah, I think succinctly put, I mean, to build a safe space, you have to be a safe space. And certainly, nobody's perfect, but it's in recognizing that these are young people facing problems rather than problems defining young people that we can extend the empathy required to welcome in those feelings of anxieties or frustrations, even if they're not the most articulate or, uh, you know, fully fleshed out in the moment. Um, to be a, a safe space is to lead with connection and care, and consideration. I think you get to that well, Jordan. Our next question here, what would you suggest to young people looking to support their peers who might be expecting or parenting?

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Jordan [00:12:56]: Yeah, I think that, that, you know, as a peer that while I now have my kid, but I've had a lot of my own friends who have had children or were expecting while they were in care or had already done that before me, and so a lot of them would reach out and so now I try to do my best to say, oh, let me reach out to any youth that I can. Let me give them the advice that I've received when I was going through care. Um, you know, I think that a lot of states, um, I know our state in Indiana has this, uh, but it's called the Peer Navigator Program. And this is something that, you know, as, as a champion of advocacy, this is something that you could go and advocate for in your state if you don't have this, but it's called a Peer Navigator Program, um, and it's young people with lived experience, um, who can use your experience to be a peer, a paid peer navigator and it's like a mentor to help provide motivation and advice to help support youth in their time and care and transitioning. Um, and so this is something that I would, I would definitely highly suggest for individuals to try to advocate for, there's a model of it that we use here in Indiana, um, and so it's just a like another case manager role, but instead it's someone with lived experience specifically being able to help people through that. Uh, I think case managers and state agencies and foster care agencies can create groups for youth to meet who are parents, uh, to work and coordinate young parents and peers together. And so another example is here in Indiana, we have, uh, Foster Success, they're one of the biggest organizations that work with the older foster youth in our state, and they have a parenting or expecting youth, um, like group that meets, I wanna say it's every Tuesday they have a group that meets, uh, pretty regularly to talk about the challenges and the, the resources out there and just to be able to, to be friends and to be mentors to each other and to be able to offer, you know, a shoulder to cry on and someone to talk to about these things. Uh, and so it feels really good to know that we have that in the state. But, and again, if your state doesn't have that, like be the champion that helps create it, you know, a lot of these things that happen in the, in our advocacy and policy world, um, they're not unique, they're not new. They're things that, you know, some states already are doing. And so, how do you motivate your state to be able to do that? How do you connect with the legislators to be able to say, "Hey, um, you know, this is something that we need here" and try to fi try to build those relationships so that way they're on your side now, you know, and I think that's one of the most beautiful things about the foster care system is it's not really ever a red or blue issue, it's purple. I always call it purple because both sides of the aisle, they love to come together on this, and so, you know, I, I can't stress it enough, if there's programs or resources aren't in your state, help be that change to make them in your state. And so, uh, and that's part of me being a friend and a peer to encourage you to show up for each other and to get these resources right. Uh, but yeah, if, if, if you're a young person who wants to help support your peers and in these kind

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of situations that are parenting and expecting, you know, this is, could be your first step into babysitting, your first step into understanding children. This could be, “Hey, you know, I, maybe I can make you a meal.” You know, there's not, it's a pretty common thing called meal trains in churches where, oh, someone's sick, or someone's, you know, in the hospital, or someone's having their baby, someone's on maternity leave. How do you help that family? How do you say, “Oh, lemme be there and support you.” You know, that you offer, you know, some type of resource, small or big, “Lemme help you clean your house.” You know, something small or big to just say, you know what, “Lemme be there for you.” “Lemme support them.” And that can mean the world to somebody navigating through this experience.

Gabriel [00:16:18]: Yeah, it's meaningful, Jordan, I, I really love your use of that word. It's meaningful and, uh, empowering, uh, I love that you mentioned it here and you've certainly mentioned it, I think in conversations we've had before this call, but, uh, the experiences of being a young person in care are scary and uncertain, and it can feel really overwhelming to not know what lies ahead of you. But those experiences often aren't glaringly unique. There are peers who are older than you who have marched many of the same roads that you have, or faced many of the same questions. And to that end, these peer navigator programs are so incredibly impactful, whether it's a general peer navigator program intended to partner transition aged young people with other young people who have already transitioned out of care for general support, or a tailored peer navigator program that offers young people support as they apply for colleges or apply for work opportunities or face some of these really daunting challenges, like being an expecting or parenting young person in care. It all goes so far because it provides the young people with someone that they can relate to, and, and there truly is no greater power than relationship in the work that we do. Peer navigators are a, a growing topic across the country. I know both of our organizations, as well as many others, support peer navigator programs in some aspect. And for listeners looking for more information, the Information Gateway website does have a great webpage on how to build, expand, and sustain peer navigator programs. If you look up “peer innovation and insight networking groups,” you'll navigate to our page at the Gateway and hopefully learn more about how to uplift or deeply root in those programs in your own state. And Jordan, I can't help but emphasize what you said as well, if you don't feel that these programs exist in your locality or in your state, be the voice of change. Find avenues, find paths to lift up what would be most supportive for you or for the young people under your watch. Champion these programs and their impacts, and use other states and localities as your backing, as your evidence for why they work so well. Now, Jordan, I've asked you this question a, a couple of ways already, but I really wanna ask it direct, how would you recommend that

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professionals support young parents who are currently in care? How can professionals advance the conversations of the unique needs of expecting or parenting young people?

Jordan [00:19:39]: Yeah, my favorite thing about this question is that we've highlighted it earlier in this talk, right? And earlier in this conversation, is that these needs aren't necessarily unique, but they're amplified by being someone in care who is expectant and parenting. And it's challenging for anybody, but just most likely specifically for this population. And so, right, the education is the biggest thing that I can talk about today. Educating, educating, and educating yourself on the resources and the needs of this population, the resources and needs of low-income families, the resources that are available for anyone that is going through these times. Here in the state of Indiana, we have the Medicaid program, food stamps, TANF, SNAP. We have, um, WIC that I mentioned earlier, right? What, what local churches do diaper drives, what local churches do, food, food banks, um, what the, what we have is called CCDF, the childcare vouchers to be able to say, "Oh, okay, you're, you need to be able to go to go to work to make a living. How do we help get you this childcare?" You know, the one thing that, um, professionals can help better do is to make sure that you're addressing each need of the youth. So, one thing as a professional that I like to educate myself on and always go back to is the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. This is what I've based all of my social work, my case work, and my policy on, as this, this hierarchy of needs to say, let me address each one of these problems to eventually get to what is, what is the root of what, what we're at, right? So, if someone, you, sometimes you need to address someone's physiological needs, their air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing, whatever it is to say, "Okay if, if I can address this, how can we now tackle the problem?" Sometimes it's their safety, their security, employment, the resources, their own health, you know, the love and belonging, friendships, intimacy, family, their own esteem, their respect, self-esteem status, and then the self-actualization, the desire to become the most that one can be. But each one of those segments, how do you, if you can tackle those roots, right? If you can find what that person is struggling with and really address it there, then they're going to be able to want to help themselves and push forward and move better. And so, as a professional, always making sure that you're addressing the needs of what's going on at that moment, so that way you can then tackle the problem.

Gabriel [00:22:04]: You certainly sound well-rehearsed in Maslow's Hierarchy, and I'm grateful to have had that mentioned; it's such a good visual for why roadblocks may be coming up. Why it, it may be difficult to bring your full self into a conversation when things like those physical, physiological needs or those safety needs aren't met. I always enjoy the framing of, it's difficult for a young person, it was difficult for me as a young person to talk

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about college or food funding when I wasn't sure where I was sleeping that night. And that really gets to that Maslow's Hierarchy, we cannot talk about self-actualization and long-term goals if safety needs aren't confidently met, if physiological needs aren't confidently met. And your point about education is incredibly interesting as well. So many programs, so much funding exists, but how often are young people on their own thinking about things like TANF or, uh, ETVs um, or independent living programs? It can be so difficult to bring yourself to think about those things. And then it's even more difficult to find eligibility and really confidently assess that you fit into the service or the program that you are in need of. To that end, educating for both the young people as well as their professionals, and really any supports in, in their ecosystem is so impactful, so meaningful, and it really is that stride that you can take to support these young people. I really appreciate how much you emphasize that. Our next question here wanted to ask, what would you, Jordan, recommend to foster parents and other permanency placements who are looking to provide support to parenting young people directly?

Jordan [00:24:24]: Yeah, I have a, a little bit of a unique, um, way to spin this, right? So, you know, um, I mentioned earlier how in Indiana we don't, you know, sometimes the state doesn't automatically take a kid away just because a, a young person's expecting a parenting in foster care. And so, you know, they have, they have their own kid, and they are their own parent of their child, but they live in a foster home. And so sometimes foster parents think that they need to help parent that foster youth's child. But one of the roles that you can take on now as a foster parent, you know, it's not one that you may have signed up for, but when you took this youth into your home, now it's something you get to work on, is that learning how to be like a grandparent to, to now you're, you're going to be a parent to this foster youth that's in your home, but now you're gonna be like a grandparent to this foster youth child that's in your home. And the reason I say this is so interesting is, uh, I'm a 26-year-old adult who just moved back into my former foster homes, or my former foster family's home. And so, my foster parents had me when I was 17, and I aged out, and I went to college, but here I am now, 26, I'm, I moved back to the area, and they said, "Hey, you can live with us for a while while you get back on your feet." And so, I have my own child now, and the, the best thing I get to watch is that we had a conversation about it too, is, I don't wanna parent your child while, while you're living here. I want to help be that grandparent and support that you need for this child. And so, you know, it's, uh, I get to see it every day. It's like when my child makes a mistake or does something, I get to handle that and address it. And the best thing is, is that I get to now lean on my foster parents and say, "Hey, did I do this right?" And that they're not, I don't have to worry about them overstepping and trying to immediately address it. And my foster mom, if, if something

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happens and, uh, I'm not around, then she'll tell me about it, and she's like, "Hey, I want you to be able to parent this. I want you to be able to tackle this. Um, here's what happened." And so, I love that interactions that I get to learn as a parent from my foster parents now, but then they also don't overstep. And so, one of the biggest things that you can do as a foster parent is check yourself and say, "Okay, how do I avoid overstepping? How do I learn to take on this grandparent role? How do I help educate my foster child on how to be a parent?" Because right, a lot of foster parents have been parents before or have been foster parents of other kids. And so that you are a parent. That's like the, the critical and most key part of being the foster parent is you are a parent. You're going to help these youth develop into hopefully parents one day of their own. And so, again, here's the biggest thing: education. How do you educate that foster youth to now be a parent? And how do you, as a foster parent, say, "Lemme take on this grandparent role and show 'em what these healthy relationships can look like and provide some sense of normalcy to the situation?"

Gabriel [00:27:06]: That's incredible. We started out our conversation today by speaking about the growing desire among teenagers in care, uh, seeking independence, seeking a way to do things on their own. And as you mentioned, oftentimes challenges that young people face aren't necessarily unique, but amplified by additional challenges that roll in by things like becoming a young parent and seeking out that independence while becoming a new parent can be difficult. Lanitta, in our other episode on this topic, spoke deeply about, uh, letting young parents come to you, letting young parents define how they want to grow, where they want to grow, and knowing that even if where they want to grow isn't a strength or isn't an area where they're clear, uh, sometimes making small mistakes is important. I think, Jordan, you get to that beautifully here in supporting parenting young people in the foster care system, we're really supporting a pursuit of independence, uh, a pursuit of growing life skills. And it is the role of foster parents to not interrupt that, but rather really get behind it and help push the boulder forward. I love the connection that you made in there as well to how meaningful, well-built long-term connections can be. Even though you are well beyond your own days of worrying about transition plans and so on and so forth, you've found a way to maintain such an important connection with, with your foster family and found growth and, and strides towards your own, uh, platform as a parent and as an adult through those connections. It emphasizes education, it emphasizes relationships in this space and how meaningful, truly being, you know, empathetic and leading with consideration and recognizing your space in a young person's evolving life, uh, uh, can be for that young person both in the moment and 5, 10, so on years down the line. That's incredible, Jordan. And I really think that you've provided all of us with substance to mull

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over and chew on different ways where we can grow our own capacity to support an often under-discussed population, uh, that is expecting or parenting young people. I think we've certainly asked plenty of you in today's conversation, but I do want to ask you additionally if there's anything that we didn't touch on today that you'd like to make sure our audience walks away with.

Jordan [00:30:34]: So, Gabe, yeah, the, the last thing I have to say, the last thing I want to add here is that it truly does take a village to raise a child, um, you know, I work for the Villages of Indiana and that's just what we live on, you know, it takes a foster parent, them taking the role of the grandparent, it takes a caseworker taking on a role of a mentor, it takes a peer navigator taking on a role of a support, and it takes you as the parent to be able to say, "Let's raise this child together." So, thank you for your time, Gabe. I really appreciate it, and I look forward to our future conversations.

Gabriel [00:31:05]: Jordan, you've provided more than, uh, for us to move forward and really fold these components of belonging, education, connection into the work that we do. So grateful for your time, so grateful to Foster Club for partnering with us on two meaningful conversations about expecting or parenting young people. Thank you, Jordan. We appreciate your time.

Jordan [00:31:35]: I really appreciate this opportunity. Thank you.

Gabriel [00:31:39]: Preparing for adulthood is a daunting task for all teens. It's even more challenging for those navigating the child welfare system, especially when they're presented with something as new and unknown as becoming a young parent. I'm deeply grateful for how Jordan was able to guide us through the specific challenges experienced by young parents in care and how they can be supported from all angles. Whether you are a professional, a peer, or a parent, this conversation shed important light on how to uplift young people and prepare them for success in every stage of life. Jordan has provided us with tangible thoughts and next steps that I hope can guide your own work supporting this group. Thank you again to Jordan and the Foster Club team for joining us today. And thank you for listening. I'm your host, Gabriel Foley, wishing everyone a good day.

[00:32:54] [End].