

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Episode One – Supporting Expecting And
Parenting Youth with Lanitta Berry
TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Gabriel Foley, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Lanitta Berry, 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 topics across child welfare. I'm your host, Gabriel Foley, bringing a lifetime of personal and professional experience in the child welfare system. After going through my own journey of system involvement and pursuit of permanency, I've now landed with the incredible Information Gateway team, where I offer subject matter expertise in stipend programs, supporting transition-aged youth, and plenty more. Today's conversation is an incredibly important one. As we dive into the specific challenges faced by expecting and parenting young people in the foster care system. This population is often forgotten in data and policy discussions, which can create heightened challenges and struggles as young people navigate confusion and uncertainty from all angles. To support our discussion today, I was joined by Foster Club's Lanitta Berry. As a pregnant and parenting teen growing up in the North Carolina foster care system, Lanitta always had a passion for supporting her peers and changing the system. During her advocacy career, she worked on all three levels of government while also being able to volunteer each year to give back to her community. These experiences allowed Lanitta to make connections that directly shaped the system by participating in grassroots organizing and transformative nonprofit spaces. In June 2019, Lanitta launched an organization called At-Risk 4 Greatness to provide collaborative technical assistance to advocates, community-based organizations, jurisdictions, and other key partners with the purpose of developing innovative reforms holistically. With her personal and professional experience, Lanitta was able to guide us through an incredible conversation about the challenges that this population faces and what supports can be provided from family members, professionals, and peers. It's a conversation I know we'll all take next steps away from, so let's dive right in. Thank you so much, Lanitta, for joining us today. We really appreciate your time and discussing what is such an important topic in supporting, expecting, and parenting young people in care. We have a list of questions we'll run through, but before we get into the weeds of our conversation, I'd love to ask you to introduce yourself to our audience.

Lanitta [00:03:07]: Yes, thank you so much for having me. My name is Lanitta Berry. I live in Charlotte, North Carolina. I am a mother to Violet; she is 11 years old, and I also have two fur babies. King and Celeste. King is five, and Celeste is four, um, and I love them so much. I, my lived experience, I have many different variations of lived experience. I have lived

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experience of being a sibling, trying to maintain a relationship with a sibling that's in care, I have lived experience being a birth parent, trying to work to get my child back. I have lived experience as a young person navigating care while also being a parent, so a lot of different types of expertise that I have.

Gabriel [00:03:58]: Yeah, certainly a lot of different angles, and I appreciate you breaking up that lived experience into those multiple angles, certainly, it all informs us and guides us differently. Now, focusing in on our topic today, the experience of being a young person expecting or parenting is a difficult one, really, no matter the context, and it can be a difficult one to put yourself into for those who haven't experienced it. With that, I wanted to ask, what effect does becoming an expecting or parenting young person have on both the new parent and the new child?

Lanitta [00:04:40]: Thank you for asking that question. Um, for me, I would have to break it down based on what are the impacts from the system? And what are the familiar impacts that you experienced just as a family unit? Um, one of the things that I will say, when I, before I went into care, I was 11 weeks pregnant with my daughter, and one of the reasons why I trans, transitioned to the child welfare system is because I was too young to receive prenatal care from one of my local doctors' offices. So that was a pipeline into the system in the, in the first place, right? And eventually, I transitioned to Florence Crittenton Services of North Carolina, and that was the placement that I had my child. And during my delivery, it was really difficult. I felt like my nurses wasn't listening to me as well as, um, a few days later, after giving birth, I, I thought that I would just leave and, and go home, but unfortunately, my child and I were separated, and come to find out years later, there was a reason, but it wasn't communicated. And for the medical system, they're not allowed to release the child unless they can confirm custody. So unfortunately, I was 12 years old, didn't know this information, and it, it was very challenging. During that time, I was breastfeeding, so, um, shout out to all the mothers who experienced this, but being that I was breastfeeding anytime away from my child, it, it, it impacted my body. So now thinking back on it, there is trauma from that experience. I don't, I don't wanna fully say that I have like anxiety, but I do get anxious, um, whenever I don't know exactly where my child is. And that started from when I gave birth and when I delivered my baby. And this is not just a gap in service with the child welfare system, this also sheds light in how the medical system, they're not communicating with their young people. So that was just my delivery. After my time, um, giving birth to my daughter and navigating the child welfare system, I noticed that the treatment that my child and I received we were considered to be a sibling pair. And that in itself is a huge challenge because there were times where I was told that I wasn't doing

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enough, doing enough as a parent, and then there were times where I was expected to “stay in a child's place.” So, the sibling dynamic only caused more confusion on how I should proceed as a parent, um, how I should, uh, take care of my child. And because during our time in care, my daughter and I, we were always together, I noticed that there were times where she didn't respect me as a parent. She didn't even see me as a parent at times. And that's just another cycle of, of the blame game, because oftentimes I would get blamed for that not being the case.

Gabriel [00:08:29]: Certainly, we are one step in, and I think have already reached such deep sentiment in our conversation today. The experience of being expecting or parenting at a young age is confusing and overwhelming. And that only heightens as you face uncertainty with healthcare or you face, uh, potential separation without a, a thorough explanation of why that happened. To have that compounded with, uh, involvement with child welfare, the association of a sibling relationship rather than a parental one and, uh, placements throughout the child welfare system is incredibly, incredibly difficult I think even to picture in, in this moment, much less live through, I appreciate how you connect that to long-term trauma, not only psychologically, but truly biologically as well, right? These are some of the most important moments that a body can go through. And confusion, stress, uncertainty around any of that only makes it all the more difficult. I really appreciate that answer, and I think it leads us nicely into our next question of how should someone approach supporting, expecting, or parenting young people in care?

Lanitta [00:10:05]: Yeah. So, the first thing I'll say is we have to acknowledge and be empathetic towards the understanding that young people have multiple identities. Um, so for example, yes, I am a young person in care. Yes, I was a mother in care, but I also loved anime, I was an anime fan. I still am now, I don't know why I'm using past tense. I love anime. Um, I also enjoy to, to travel. Like these are some of the identities and things that I connect with that, um, I feel like people just didn't see, like they, it at times, they couldn't see beyond the identity of being a, a foster youth or being someone with lived experience, and I, I feel like that kind of prevents people from really building connections. Which kind of leads me to my next point, not just acknowledging that there are mult, like young people have multiple identities, but how do you build connections with them, like transformative, transformative connections, not just transactional. Um, because, you know, if we continue to be transactional, I don't think we'll ever really get to meet the needs of young people and their children in care. So, when I was 16, I had a great links worker. Typically, if you are transitioning out of care, typically you'll be 17 years old, three months before you aged out. I was 16 years old when I started my planning, and that significantly helped me. There was a

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conversation about what I want just as a person, and then there was a conversation of, as a parent, what do I need and what do I want for my child? And I think that is so beneficial because, you know, being a parent, it's very difficult. And there are times where I sacrifice so much of myself to make sure that my daughter is, I'm in the red, I, I'm neglecting my own needs, but being able to break all this down, it is extremely helpful because I'm still taking the time out to focus on, "Okay, what does Lanitta need in this given time?" Yes, you have your duties to your child, yes, you have responsibilities, but when everything is said and done, um, did I drink enough water? Did I have enough bathroom breaks? Did I eat a proper meal? Like that stuff goes a long way. And when we're talking about young people in care, we're talking about asking the questions of their dreams, what do you wanna be when you grow up? Do you wanna go to college? Do you want to go to barber school? Do you wanna travel? Like any, any type of conversations, when we think introspectively like that, it's truly beneficial. That really creates the foundation that we want young people to have um, because life is, life is a journey, and it's, and it doesn't start just outta nowhere. Like every day you have a opportunity to, to make a difference. And, um, when I was 16, my links worker really helped impacted the trajectory of, um, from then up until now of just building and, and planning out what I wanted to move moving forward. So, building connections, planning, and acknowledging that, um, you, two things could be true at once. The identity of being a young person and the identity of being a parent, experiencing that really goes a long way.

Gabriel [00:13:59]: Yeah, that is incredible. And I love when you said young people have multiple identities. They have multiple identities worth acknowledging, and how does acknowledging those allow us to move from a transactional to a transformative relationship? How does acknowledging those multiple identities help us split the questions of how are you versus how is your family and ensure that, whether it be the short term, getting enough meals for both you and the young one, or the long term of finding a house or, uh, maintaining a job that can support you and your family? Uh, how do those questions and conversations rise from simply sitting in the moment and acknowledging that the person in front of you is a whole person, and in often cases with young people, a person who's still figuring out how to be a person, you know, there's so much that goes into being a teen, being a transition aged young person, and I love to hear that you found so much impact in your relationship with your links worker. I think back to my own time as a transition-aged young person, and I remember being amazed, like in the moment, kind of shocked at how important my independent living provider was to me. She took the time to ask me about football scores or how my weekend went, or what my holiday plans were,

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even though I knew that she lived on the other end of the state and didn't much care about any of those questions. You know, just taking those small moments really goes a long way in I think helping young people feel acknowledged, and I think we've already touched on how important that acknowledgement can be. And we've certainly touched on components of this question as well, but I think there's always intricacies and nuances to learn. So, Lanitta, what should more people know about the experience of being a young parent in care?

Lanitta [00:16:22]: So, I have been a part of a few trainings that talks about the outcomes that a young person often experiences when they transition out of care and, uh, one in particular that typically blows people's minds, whenever I say it, is about 2 to 3% of young people who have child welfare experience, who experienced the foster care system go on to have a post-secondary education degree. Even just saying that now, that kind of blows my mind. But that type of statistic, so many young people go through navigating difficult challenges of not having enough money, not having enough generational wealth, not having enough capital just to make ends meet, and that is just for the typical young person navigating care. But when we talk about parents, when we talk about, uh, people who've parented, who've given birth while they were in care, it's even more extreme of the challenge because you're not just navigating the care for yourself, you're also navigating the care of your child. You're also coming, uh, to terms with how do you wanna see yourself moving forward? You're, you're possibly battling, uh, generational trauma, generational, uh, involvement. You're also wanting to make sure that your child doesn't experience the same hurt and harm that you did as a kid. And one of the things that was very, very difficult for me when I was trying to get my daughter back after I turned 18 and I became, uh, seen as a birth parent lived experience, I had to ask the question, what am I doing to make sure that DSS doesn't see me as a threat, or they see me as someone capable of taking care of my daughter? And what that looks like on the ground level is, okay, if I have a, if I can afford a one-bedroom apartment, will that satisfy the agency? If I get on food stamps, will that satisfy the agency, and will they feel like I'm able to take care of my child? Um, and in my case, I had to do a, a lot more than that, of course, but there were that, it, it was, there was some challenges, especially because I worked with the same exact people, and I felt like I proved myself so many times that I started questioning myself of my value. And that was a real dark place. That's a, it's a dark place, um, when you are a parent and you feel like you're hopeless in, in taking care of your child. So as a young person experiencing that, uh, when it came to the system on the birth parent side, it was, I, I, yeah, it, it was very, it was very hard to navigate it, but I'm glad that eventually at the age of 19, I did get my child back and I will

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say this, I'm the only person that I know that really was able to get their child back. So, I'm, I'm blessed. I, I will say that, of course. But, um, it's still very, very difficult for a lot of people navigating the system. And I think that is, that does a disservice to the community. And if we're not making, making sure that we are representing people through that, uh, quantitative lens, then people are gonna continue to feel invisible, and it's gonna be very difficult to track any type of progress, right? So, um, those, those are the two things I would say that are, are really important that I, I want to flag for people.

Gabriel [00:21:37]: Yeah, certainly so. You know, that feeling of checking off the right boxes to shape yourself into the right person to achieve any of these systemic goals, whether it's transitioning out on your own accord and into independence or the complete separate, uh, boulder that can be trying to gain custody over your child, it, it really is that, it can feel like checking boxes. It can feel like conforming in a way to what is laid out in front of you, and that can be damaging to identity development in those crucial ages of 16, 17, 18, 19. Such a difficult time for so many already. It can be made even more difficult when you're trying to fit a list. And I really appreciate the data point that you bring up as well. The, uh, population that is expecting or parenting young people in care is often widely, uh, under-reported or misrepresented, both their situations, but also their outcomes, or if they had to go through interactions with custody or if they were able to maintain, uh, you know, relationships as they deemed best. I remember one data point from work I did years ago that shared that the population most likely to have their own children enter foster care were former foster care youth themselves. Now, that statistic jumps out, and it really speaks to, as you mentioned, generational trauma that can exist and snowball as a young person in care. But that statistic is also a bit misguided and, in many ways, misses the context of those outcomes that these young people experienced, whether they received the services or supports that they, uh, had thought were best in the times that they needed it, uh, even after their transition out of care. So, the data point, I think, carries so much weight, a, as we think about how to support this population, both directly and in the case-by-case scenarios, but also from a legislative perspective, from the point of statewide or even nationwide policy, that data is, uh, uh, sorely missing. Now, Lanitta, you speak to the, the truly dark place, the harrowing feelings that can come from fitting a list or checking boxes or trying to push through mud, that can seem to only get thicker and thicker as you're moving through it and in trying to regain custody. I think with that context, the question of how can safe spaces be built for expecting or parenting young adults in care is so important, what are your thoughts on how those safe spaces can be crafted?

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Lanitta [00:25:12]: So first I wanna ask a hypothetical question of, well, I'm gonna answer this question, but just asking the question, what is a safe space? For me, a safe space is where people can learn and grow without judgment. And I needed that space, and that could be a physical space, but it could also be psychological safety, too. Having that partner, having that adult supporter or a peer, uh, just being by my side, having a conversation, as well as having a mentor, right? Having a mentor relationship is so beneficial. As a parent, oftentimes you feel like the weight of the world is on your shoulder, 'cause at times it is, definitely like the expectation to do all be all is very apparent being a parent. Um, and when you are a young person navigating care, the spotlight is always on you. Like, talk about not having privacy, talk about at even feeling police, like this concept of policing. Yeah, you definitely feel it when all eyes are on you 100% of the time. Um, and just the ability to be present in a safe space again, is rooted in, do I feel comfortable enough to, to show others who I am? Do I feel comfortable enough and supported enough to know if I ask a question or if I ask for help, this will not blow back in my face? And not only will I learn from these situations, I will have something that I can utilize later down on the line, later down the line that I can apply, and it can truly make my life better. This, this is the type of, of safe space parents really need to thrive. And guess what, when a parent has that, it is so easy to pass that down to their children because we're not, when we, when we think of parents, we're not just talking about the parent here, we're of course talking about the child, and our children look up to us, they pay attention even though we don't realize that they, they pay attention. So, um, I'm very grateful that I had people in my corner, I'm very grateful that, um, other than others replicating for that to me, I'm able to also give that to my daughter. And I, I, of course, encourage her, um, to ask me questions and ask my, my God mom questions and ask just questions in general, because I want her to grow. I want her to be able to be nurtured.

Gabriel [00:28:19]: I love that and I love the broadening of the scope here, we may be talking about expecting or parenting young people in care, but each of them are coupled with a child that they love and are connected with and want to see grow healthily and without the same determinants or, or detriments that, uh, the, the parent themselves may have gone through. And I think the sentiment of a safe space is a psychologically safe space is one that, uh, many of us can take forward into our day to day work, I believe in some past conversations we've had, Lanitta, we've talked about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and that question of can a safe space even exist if we haven't checked off those basic needs before having a conversation, even if it's missing breakfast and lunch for the

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sake of a, a phone call or whatever it may be, those are two distractors that may pull us away from a really important or really necessary conversation.

Gabriel [00:29:35]: That concludes our conversation with Lanitta Berry on how to best support, expecting and parenting young people in the foster care system. It's a crucial topic that uplifts not only the needs of a specific population, but also the needs of teenagers in care as a whole. Navigating your teenage years is a confusing and often intimidating experience for all young people, and one that's heightened for young people who are additionally experiencing foster care and parenthood. Lanitta provided us an incredible look at how those challenges can manifest and what supporters can do to uplift both the young person and their new child. I am grateful to have had this conversation and hope it can inform your work to support teens in foster care. Thank you again to Lanitta Berry for serving as our guide, and thank you for listening. I'm your host, Gabriel Foley. Wishing everyone a good day.

[00:30:56]: [End]