

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast – Episode Two – 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. I'm your host, Gabriel Foley, bringing you a lifetime of both professional and lived experience in the child welfare system. Today's conversation is a deeply important one as we discuss how to support, expecting, and parenting young people who are still navigating their own journey through care. Expecting and parenting young adults are often an under-reported group who face the immeasurable task of adapting to life as an adult and life as a new parent, all at the same time. I sat down with Foster Club's Lanitta Berry to help gather a better understanding of the challenges that these young adults face. This is our second episode with Lanitta, who brings her own lifetime of experience with the child welfare system. As a pregnant and parenting teen in the North Carolina foster care system, Lanitta always had a passion for supporting her peers and changing the system. She was able to turn that passion into a rich advocacy career that spanned all three levels of government, local, state, and federal. These experiences allowed her to get involved with grassroots movements and make connections that directly shaped the system. In June of 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 and holistic reform. In our last episode, Lanitta and I discussed how professionals can center young adults' needs, and the importance of distinguishing the identity of a young adult in care from the identity of a young parent. Today, we'll discuss the tangible supports that professionals, peers, and parents can provide. It's a rich episode with takeaways for everyone looking to support young parents. So let's get back to our conversation with Lanitta Berry. We talked a lot about how professionals can support this population that we identify, but I wanna ask too, what would you suggest Lanitta, that young people do, uh, when they're looking to support their peers involved in these situations?

Lanitta [00:02:51]: So I believe everybody has a role to play, for sure, um, but to be very specific, I think advocates, allies, and peers they can always invest in co-creating spaces just to center expected and parenting young people. When I was navigating the child welfare system, and there were times where I was a part of, uh, systemic reforms, my lived experience often was forced to be put in a box. Like I'll, I'll give you example, let's talk, let's, let's say we're, uh, the topic is housing. And a young person can say, "Oh, yes, it was very difficult for me to get a FUP loan..." um, excuse me, excuse me, not a loan, A FUP voucher, a

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voucher, um, “because I, uh, there wasn't enough time for my voucher, and eventually expired.” I could come in and be like, “Oh, yes, I agree. It was very difficult for me to, to get that voucher because I have to make sure that the environment is not just safe for me, but it's safe for my child. I have to make sure that, um, because if I don't have transportation, I have to make sure that I'm in a spot where it's on the bus line...” all of these things, right? I'm so used, I was used to people hearing that, and they would condense my lived experience. They would condense my expertise to, uh, to format it in such a similar way that it didn't capture all the nuances, even though I just broke it down, right? So, um, this is why centering, centering spaces, centering, uh, projects, programming, centering policy practices, when it, when it comes to people who experience the child welfare system as a birth parent, as a, uh, person who, uh, um, is pregnant and parenting within the system is so important because we're capturing the nuance when we hear them say, yes, as a parent, this happened to me, as a person who gave birth while having a social worker, while having a case, this is what happened to me. So I just wanted to, to put that, throw that out there first. The other thing that I think is important that one of my mentors talked about, um, and I think it really, it stays on my mind, not just bringing young people to the table to speak, but making sure that others are trained to hear the feedback that young people have. It's, it's, it's very important in this work, um, because whenever a young person is speaking, we should be listening, they're providing valuable expertise that oftentimes people who create legislation, people who create resources and services, they don't really get to hear from. Um, so anytime we have a young pe, uh, a young person at the table to talk, we should be listening. Anytime, anytime we have someone with lived experience at the table that are talking, we should absolutely be listening, 'cause their expertise is so valuable. Um, so yeah, that those are a, uh, that is a, a huge example on how advocates, allies, and peers could really support young people in their journey.

Gabriel [00:06:36]: Yeah, absolutely so, and there's empowerment there, right? It, it's so, uh, I think daunting sometimes when you're first getting involved with maybe a youth advisory board in your locality or joining up with some friends to meet at your local family resource center, community center to lift up these ideas, whatever the context may be, it can be difficult to take the stride further. You can be offered the platform of a town hall without knowing that you have not only the, the right, but really the a, ability to take that further and define those spaces based on what you need. It is in the same way that young people have that ability that professionals have to, uh, owe it to young people to take in that feedback and respond accordingly. And if a young person feels that they have a, a desire to speak to certain concerns, but can't find the platform to do so, it's in conversations with,

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uh, the, uh, the professional, whether it be a caseworker, an ILP provider or the proctor of a youth advisory board, they have those connections to build those spaces. I really appreciate how you get to that Lanitta, and I think it really does a great job of personifying the spotlight that you mentioned earlier. As a young person, it's, that spotlight follows you. It's so easy to feel like your every step is guided or needs to be trained towards moving towards whatever success may look like for you, whether it's achieving permanency or forming relationships, or transitioning as an independent young person at the age of 18. But that spotlight can feel warm, it can feel negative. It's in the healthy relationships that you describe with professionals that we get the moment to step out of that spotlight and ask confusing or difficult questions that maybe we are nervous about asking when we're in that spotlight. It's in the same way in, in engaging young people's concerns and thoughts and their experience as a whole, that we reward that spotlight. They've had this hot, hot light bearing down on them; we need to make sure that we offer the chances to vindicate that through conversation, through dialogue, and through respecting lived experience for the unique perspective that it is. I think you walk us through all of that amazingly well and really capture, uh, takeaways and steps that both professionals and young people who have thoughts that they want to share can move forward with well. And moving on in our own conversation, want to ask, generally speaking, how can child welfare workers support young people in care? You speak about, uh, lifting up lived experience, what other needs should, uh, child welfare workers focus on lifting up?

Lanitta [00:10:28]: So I think it all starts about, it starts with building a relationship. You have to have a relationship with someone to really partner with them. That authentic engagement, building camaraderie, uh, this understanding of shared goals, we're in this together and your successes is our successes, but also your, the failures is our failures, and navigating care there's this, there's this interesting relationship when it comes to power. First, we have to acknowledge that. You have to acknowledge that, yes, social workers, agency workers, they've went to school, um, they've gotten degrees, and they can clock out at 5:00 p.m., but young people can't, like this is a continuation of their, their whole entire lifetime, a continuation of their child's whole, entire lifetime, right? Which is why it's so important that young people get their needs met while they're able to qualify for resources or while they are able to be in the system in the first place. Because we talked about generational involvement before, but that is so real, the fact that, and you, you said the statistics, you, you said it earlier, how it is so real of families continuously being involved in the system, just based off the fact that they had a previous family member in the system, right? And again, that kind of goes back to being able to build relationships with, with

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people. We have to co-collaborate with young people and also have this understanding of who's in the driver's seat. I would hope that the young person can be in the driver's seat while having that adult supporter, but in this case, the agency worker, the social worker, whoever be in the driver's seat. So a young, excuse me, being in the passenger seat, so a young person is driving, meanwhile, the social worker could be giving them directions, telling them, okay, watch out for that, uh, pothole, 'cause you don't wanna mess your tire up. Or instead of going left, let's go right, because that's a shorter, um, that's a shortcut, we'll get to our destination in a quicker timeframe, in a quicker manner. All of these things are so important, but it really starts about it; it starts when people can come together and really get to know one another. What are your dreams? What are your goals? What are you working towards? What is your destination? So we can do it together. And do it in, in a way that is authentic, that's transparent, that's transformative, and not, and not transactional.

Gabriel [00:13:36]: Absolutely. How can child welfare workers support young people in care? It starts with acknowledging the inherent power dynamic. It moves on to forming authentic relationships that acknowledge the person in front of you as a multifaceted person with many, many different identity traits, and in many ways, traits that they're still working out. And it's in that acknowledgement, in that relationship forming, that we work towards transformative conversations, authentic conversations, frankly, conversations flat out. I mean, it's those moments where you feel like you can just talk with your professional, that feel the most powerful. I love that that sentiment of forming relationships has been such a through line. Sure, it'll pass through our next question as well. We talked about providing professional support, we've talked about providing peer support, Lanitta, could I ask, what would you recommend to placement settings looking to make their home more supportive of parenting young people who need a placement?

Lanitta [00:14:57]: So I think all homes should be a safe space where young people can be nurtured and have a safe haven to adjust and safely have trial and error for their development. Within the foster care system, there's this idea of independent living baking, to baked into the foundation that is often geared towards transition-aged youth. In North Carolina, Independent Living is for young people, ages 13 to 21 up until they age out of, uh, extended foster care. So, typically, that age group is what independent living is geared towards. And I believe that framing often hinders young people because in our minds, being able to independently live means I'm able to do everything on my own, do everything by myself. And as it relates to a parent, um, it, it's the same thing. We, uh, being independently living in a space means I'm able to take care of all of my child's needs on my own, on my own timing, right? And realistically, no one on this planet inde, independently lives on their

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own. You still need people. And at the end of the day, isolation is not a sustainable answer. This is why this idea of being interdependent is so impactful, it's so realistic for young people to, to, to have, right? Um, it's, it's, it's a understanding that I know my strengths and I'm gonna delegate the rest. I know what I can do, and I'm gonna ask someone else, um, in areas that I'm unsure about. I'm going to seek out for help and make sure that I have everything that I need for myself and my child to thrive. Because it's so, it's so important, making sure that we are able to delegate the stuff that we might not have resources or you, we might not have the expertise in. And I think successful parenting is all about tapping into your village and allowing others to support you because you can't pour from an empty cup, which kind of ties back into this idea of being independent and, and just being a superwoman or, or, or a Renaissance man. Um, but when you're able to, um, allow your village to support you and your child, that's when you're gonna start seeing successful outcomes.

Gabriel [00:17:54]: Yeah, absolutely so, you know, it's, it's really in properly defining whatever space that we're defining, that expectations can be laid out, interactions can be laid out, relationships can begin to form. With improper expectations or an ill definition, we are starting off on the wrong foot, and I appreciate the sentiment of support and really meeting young people where they are. And that means not only meeting them where their need is, but acknowledging their strengths along the way, letting them lean into those strengths, even as they navigate uncertainty or new situations. And more than letting them lean into their strengths, letting them lean into where they want to grow, letting them lean into how they want to grow, and ultimately acknowledging that oftentimes with transition aged young people, with young people experiencing so much new, you know, as the population that we discuss, it's stepping in as a support in those placement settings, knowing that you are one of the villagers there to help move this young person forward. It's so easy as a transition-aged young person to feel like independence and total self-righteousness is, uh, the path forward. Um, and, and what feels right after so much involvement, and properly defining spaces, stepping up as a support rather than a guide is how you undercut those feelings. How you ensure that young people feel they can move forward with you as a boost rather than move forward checking a box or feeling defined by a list?

[00:20:01]: [Pause]

Gabriel [00:20:03]: I'm gonna take a quick pause here. I left a space there. I'll leave a space on the end here, Lanitta, that is all seven questions that we have. I'll toss out one more in

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my little formal place of, you know, if there's anything else that you would like our audience to take away from our conversation today. If you have an answer, we would love to hear it; if not, no worries at all. It's been such a impactful conversation. So toss that one out, and then we can take her home.

Lanitta [00:20:33]: Yes. So I wanna go back to empowerment, I believe when, as a young person, if you are taught that you don't have choices, then you're gonna operate in this understanding that my life is not my own and whatever happens, happens, and it, it is what it is, right? But I think what was really, another thing that was really impactful for me is this question: are you the main character of your own story? So that's the first part of the question, and the second part is, who are you gonna allow to write your story? And for me, growing up... somewhere along the line, I decided I'm my own main character and I'm gonna write my own story. I'm not going to let my trauma to define who I am as a person. And, and as a parent, that looked like as well, me deciding what are the traditions that I'm gonna pass on to my child? What, like, what are we, what is something that we're gonna do for Christmas every year? What is something that we're going to eat for Thanksgiving, for Thanksgiving every year? Like things like that, that, that familiar aspect, the, the, the normalcy of it all, it, it, it's a part of the journey. And when we are talking about parents who navigate the system, again, not just creating like a safe space, but empowerment is so crucial. It's, it's so crucial. And it, it speaks volumes to a young person when not only are you giving them the microphone to speak, you're also giving them the stage to just be them. You're supporting their, you're, you're supporting foundational skills, foundational, um, experiences for them that they will then pass on to their children. And that contributes to, um, combating generational involvement that, that contributes to a foundation that they are able to, to give to their child. Um, and I just wanted to, to leave everything on a high note, because young people, they deserve the world. They, they are our world, when we, when we are long gone, they will be here. And, um, how young people are, I do believe it's a reflection of our nation. So if our young people are struggling, then we didn't do a good job in supporting. Um, and we cannot expect them to, to, um, to carry everything on their shoulders if we're not giving them the skills, if we're not giving them the space to learn the skills, to practice the skills, and to apply the skills. So I hope that this, uh, has encouraged people to not only collaborate with a young person with this lived experience, but also give them the space to grow. Give them the space to, again, to get that microphone, share their lived experience, provide their expertise so young people overall can have better outcomes.

Gabriel [00:24:13]: That is so deeply impactful. Thank you for the closing thoughts. I couldn't imagine a better cap to our conversation today. I mean, we truly walked through so

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much from the idea of multiple identities, making up an individual, the uniqueness that is adding the identity of new parent to that list, even in moments where you feel you're already working through plenty as is, and you know, that's the individual side from the professional or the support side, it's steps of acknowledgement, steps of bonding. And once you've reached bonding and authenticity, you can move towards empowerment, towards truly ensuring that those, with the experience in what we've crafted for them are properly informing how we move forward, how we can better support the next, and how they can move forward towards success and independence and in this case, a family as they see it best. Such an incredible conversation with Lanitta Berry, a lived expert with Foster Club, but certainly so, so much more than just that. Lanitta, I couldn't be more grateful for your time, for this conversation. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Gabriel [00:25:51]: That brings an end to our two-part conversation with Foster Club's Lanitta Berry on how to center and support young adults currently expecting or parenting. It's a crucial topic that draws our attention towards supporting not only young parents, but young people as a whole. The importance of centering young adults' wants and needs and creating fluid dialogue is instrumental as we look to set them up for successful transitions to adulthood. You can find more resources on this topic on our website, childwelfare.gov. Lanitta shed light on the what, why, and how of supporting, expecting, and parenting young people with takeaways that can impact all levels of child welfare systems. We deeply thank Lanitta for joining us today, and now look forward to our conversation with Lanitta's Foster Club colleague, Jordan Otero, as we dive further into the roles of professionals and parents in supporting, expecting, and parenting young adults. I can't wait for that discussion. But until then, I'm your host, Gabriel Foley. Wishing everyone a good day.

[00:27:18]: [End]