

## Episode 4 how to help foster kids Transcript

CAT

Foster parenting is not for everyone. There are a lot of ways to support foster kids in the community, other than foster parenting. Let's talk about these valuable partnerships today.

So one of the ways you can support foster kids, is by becoming a guardian ad litem. So what is a guardian ad litem.

JACK

Well, they describe themselves as a volunteer, appointed by the court to protect the rights and advocate the best interests of a child involved in a court proceeding the volunteer guardian ad litem makes independent recommendations to the court, by focusing on the needs of each child. They advocate for the best interest of the child they represent a guardian ad litem is an individual who is appointed by the court to advocate for children who come into the court system, primarily as a result of alleged abuse or neglect.

CAT

So in short, what do they do?

JACK

They're an unbiased, third party, advocating for the best interest of a child.

CAT

Okay, so what they do on a regular basis is they come out and they carry out the following activities, once, once a child is on their caseload, they visit the child.

They keep the child informed about court proceedings. They gather independent information on a consistent basis, about the child, and about the parents in order to recommend a resolution that would be in the best interest of the child. They review records. They interview all appropriate parties involved in the case, including the child or children, and they determine whether a permanent plan has been created for the child, in accordance with federal and state laws, and whether appropriate services are being provided to the child in the family.

So I have met some really wonderful guardianship items in my time with the foster care system, I know you probably have too, who've gone above and beyond in this process.

JACK

Yeah, 100%. You know I've seen such a wide range of guardian ad litem that come and visit the kids that are in my home, then you know you kind of see which guardian ad litem are just checking off a box and which ones are really there to support the kids.

CAT

I mean I have, I've talked to some on the phone and I've thought wow I've known this child for over a year and I didn't even know they have a GAL.

JACK

I've had kids that had gals that lived in my home, and because they never came to see them or call me to ask about them. I also didn't know that they actually had a guardian ad litem.

CAT

I also have worked with some gals that if I even mentioned, oh I should, you know, there were doing this in therapy I should probably get them a fire truck because they talked about the fire truck that used to come to the home. And then, within a few days I've got a fire truck toy on my Amazon doorstep so that I have all the tools I need to work with this child in therapy. I also the same guardian ad litem also provided me with the ambulance, a garbage truck toy. An ambulance toy, a skateboard toy.

JACK

I mean, that's pretty awesome.

You know one of the things about the volunteer guardian ad litem is that they're part of a team usually there's a guardian ad litem attorney, a cam, who oversees the guardian ad litem, and then the guardian ad litem that actually comes to the house.

So really the purpose of this, you know man on the bottom of the totem pole if you will, is to be the one that has a relationship with the child, and actually gets to know them and reports that to everybody on the court, and to their cam and to the attorney, because they're the only one that really knows the kid. So when I have a guardian ad litem that has never met the kid. I'm you know I'm always like, well, how are you going to advocate, how are you going to tell the cam and the attorney what they need, but you know if their purpose is to create a relationship and if you're considering becoming a guardian ad litem, you know, going and just checking off a box like, what a waste of time for a job,

you're not getting paid for.

CAT

That's so true and, you know, I've had ones that have gone above and beyond, at this certain staffing by saying, you know, it's been more than 30 days for this why haven't we scheduled, you know, a termination it's been, you know, so much time for this, why haven't we proceeded with, you know, such and such. These kids have been in care for too long, they need to be adopted and it's really been the guardian ad litem that has made sure that termination of parental rights, and adoption has happened in a timely manner. Otherwise I really do think some kids would sit in foster care for just, years and years and years and years, if not for the guardian ad litem program.

JACK

I 100% agree. So I would say one of the biggest ways a guardian ad litem can go above and beyond in supporting kids in foster care is to advocate, advocate, advocate, advocate, just like what you're talking about one of my children that I have since adopted his case just kind of sat, and even though, you know, we went months and months and months and over a year at times without even having any contact from the biological parents. The court was not moving anything forward and the very month that the guardian ad litem got assigned, they finally started moving forward on trying to find my little guy permanency.

CAT

So you know it's sometimes it's hard and scary to be the one to speak up and to say hey, we're not doing something this kid needs, but I think one of the biggest things that a guardian litem can do is to use their voice, be brave in court and with their cam, and to just advocate.

What are some other ways that you can go above and beyond, as a guardian ad litem?

JACK

Well I think one of the big things for me is like, The Guardian ad Litem that create actual relationships with my kids. It's a result of those relationships that make them really go above and beyond for these kids, and they can't have a relationship if they don't visit them so the guardian ad litem that like you never hear from or that come, just when they're supposed to, on the last day that they're allowed to, and they're in and out. those are not people that are going to create relationships with the kids, the kids know that they're not a priority to them. And, you know, that the lack of relationship is going to, you know, not give you as much trust from that child and the child is not going to tell you as much.

So I would say one of the things is visit as much as required and if not more, and take time with the child and make your visits, visit, instead of just a check mark so you know I've got this one guardian ad litem and she, I was actually talking to her today even though I don't have any of her kids anymore.

She's incredible. And, you know, beyond being a guardian ad litem, I just felt like she was a mentor and a friend to the foster child that lived in my home that was assigned to her. And, you know, to the point where, when this child would have meltdowns, we would call this guardian ad litem and she would help me talk this child down. You know and that only happened because of the relationship that you have with this and this was a, an 11 year old girl who had been in foster care for years, and didn't trust anybody and like anybody and told me all the time that her mom was, you know, the only one who would ever love her, or that she could ever trust, but this guardian ad litem created such a relationship with her that, you know, to the point where we would call her and she would help us get through the hard times so yeah I mean, that's a big thing, visit and, and with his guardian ad litem would visit her like she wasn't stepping in and stepping out a lot of the times she would take her out for lunch, or you know they would go buy something. She made this child feels so loved and special and and still does because she's still assigned to the case.

And, you know, I think that, you know when you go above and beyond like that you really are making a difference in that child's life, because they have tons of people that come and ask them questions and pop in and out, and you know that they feel like a checklist to them but if you're creating a relationship with his child, and mentoring them, you know, it makes all the difference in the world.

CAT

That's so true and just to piggyback off of that I've, I've worked with some guardians who did not spend much time visiting the child, especially this year with COVID and, but I've been with them on, you know various meetings like adoption stuffings and was really in awe of how much knowledge they had about the case in general and how much they had to offer, so you know in case turnover was high and even supervisors had turned over, repeatedly, three, four or five times case management has turned over three, four or five times.

Sometimes all that's left, who's knowledgeable about the case is the guardian ad litem, so you know in this particular case that I'm thinking of, I had never met the guardian ad litem. I didn't know who he was. I've known this child for almost a year I've never met him. I think he maybe visited the child once or twice this year, probably because of COVID. However,

he was the only knowledgeable person about the case, which is really a valuable resource to be the only warm body, who is able to provide any information about the case. So that can be really helpful.

So, there are definitely both pros and cons to being a guardian ad litem. So let's talk about some of the pros to being a guardian ad litem.

JACK

So I think it's a huge way to advocate for a child and care to mentor a child and inspire them. But really, as I said before, you can make a child in care feel they have someone who loves them and cares about them and that they feel special and, you know these kids in character, they don't feel that from their parents because they do, no matter what experiences they've had with their parents.

CAT

But, you know, going through what they're going through, having more adults, care about them and make them feel special is huge. It's true and I think that is the guardian ad litem you. You're not going anywhere. Most of the time you know you're not going to put a new 30 day notice anytime soon.

You're not going to quit, like, you know, most caseworkers the turnover is so high. You see them, you know, every so often, every few weeks or once a month or so, and you're available by phone, the commitment is generally higher so you get to be like the fun Auntie uncle to these kids and you get to fill them up with candy and then drop them and drop them back off at their foster parents house. Indeed.

JACK

Yeah, I think, you know, I, I really didn't realize that one of the more interesting parts of becoming a foster parent would be, going to court and learning how the court system work and really learning more about the community and people that I wouldn't normally interact with, or, you know, whether that be the attorneys or the judges or, you know, my kids parents. So, as a guardian ad litem. That's one of, I feel like that's one of the cool things about it is you get to learn about your court system, you become more informed about your local community.

CAT

That's so true and you know you get to say I made a difference in the life of somebody you know and you get to be involved, even after the kids go home sometimes which is really nice.

JACK

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think that's definitely the case and even my, my three children that are adopted from foster care. I still have relationships with all of their guardian ad litem, and you know I touch base with them they touch base with me and you know for a long period of time.

My second oldest son, his, the one constant in his life was his guardian ad litem like she had been with him forever. And you know he had been in care since he was born and spent two years before he moved in with me in other foster homes and she was. She was somebody who was with him and knew him. And so, you know, even at this point, she's so knowledgeable about the family and the history that you know she's a great resource and, you know, we just adore her and love that she fought for our kiddo.

CAT

So we are going to be honest here and fostering the future and we're going to also talk about the cons to having a guardian ad litem so what are some of the cons of being a guardian ad litem, so it can definitely be heartbreaking because you become invested in the kids. And then when things may not go in the direction that you think is the best for them. It can be frustrating it can be heartbreaking.

JACK

You know, dealing with kids who've had trauma. You know sometimes isn't the most, you know, you're not going to get a lot of thank yous and accolades from them in general. So, you know, you down and then sometimes kids have more trauma in care, you know, sometimes you. You come to find out that more things happen to them that are traumatic to find you know traumatic to hear and you have secondary trauma and that's tough and it's you know it's tough call to take, so it can be a very heartbreaking position to be in. Sure. I think one of the other cons of becoming a guardian ad litem is that, honestly, even though these kids don't live with you, and you don't have them 24 Seven. Being a guardian ad litem is a pretty big commitment, there's a lot of paperwork involved. There's travel involved, you've got to do 30 hours of training in the state of Florida before you can become a guardian ad litem, and then every year, you have to do another 12 hours. Honestly, to me, I really like taking classes and learning especially about trauma, and you know how I compare it better so for me, maybe that wouldn't be a con but it you know it is a pretty big commitment.

CAT

It is a big commitment so you know if you think 30 hours of training that's almost a week

off of work if you have a job so that is a big commitment. But someone like you might like it.

So there are some, there are definitely some good guardian items and there are some bad Guardian items and I think that when foster parents are thinking about asking for a guardian ad litem for their foster kids, this is often their hesitation, they're thinking, oh no, who am I going to get. And so we've had some experiences with some of these guys do you have anything you want to share.

JACK

Sure, I will say that I really have only had one negative experience with a guardian ad litem program. I have had guardian ad litem after guardian ad litem that just made our world brighter that loved on my kids that advocated that for them that, you know, we're just emotionally and personally invested in these kids lives, and I felt like, you know, we were all on a team together to try and, you know, help these kids get what they needed and get permanency.

So, you know I've some of my guardian ad litem are just some of my favorite people in the world. And out of. I've had like 5060 kids in my home. I can only tell you one bad experience and to be honest I've had a lot of guardian ad litem that were just, you know, checking a checkbox. But, you know, the haggis the one negative experience I had was, in this case had an older gentleman who was a guardian ad litem on it, and I felt like this gentleman didn't have healthy boundaries. And I felt like, sometimes he was a little inappropriate with the girls and, you know would have them sit on his lap, and you know just was a little too handsy with them, and also very aggressive with me which honestly set off red flags for me.

CAT

Sidebar. You don't have to work with the guardian ad litem program, if you're a foster parent.

JACK

Right. And, honestly, in this situation I went to his superiors and unfortunately because of his relationship with them. My Reports went nowhere. And I had to keep going up the chain until I went about as far up as you can get and express my concerns, which, you know, was all fine and good, because I was able to protect the girls from having any interactions with him. However, I definitely received some retaliation from that, because, you know, a few months later, one of his superiors that he has a relationship with me, made some comments about maybe I needed gift cards for clothes because the girls were

dressed ratty when she visited

CAT

and on this particular day Jack's ring camera caught the girls coming home from school and they're brand new school uniforms.

JACK

Yeah, and because of COVID We're doing visits outside and I actually have the recording on my ring camera that records to the cloud of her standing there talking to the girls and they were in their uniforms, their school uniforms, it was PE day, and you know they just started going to school in person so I had literally bought them like less than a month previous so you know it was clear that it was retaliation and, you know, I expected that a little bit but, you know, and in the end, you know, that was one bad experience, when I've had over, you know 50/60 foster kids and never had a bad experience with a gal.

CAT

Other than that, and the girls were safe. I haven't had very many negative experiences I've only had a few, just kind of carry experiences and you have to remember that, you know, people come from all walks of life and so I've had a few, just really bossy guardian ad litem so I had one once that explained to me that she wasn't sure if I was aware, but part of my job as a mental health therapist was to supervise visits between kids and their parents.

JACK

And so, isn't that only when it's court ordered.

CAT

Yeah, and that's just rarely court ordered Yeah, I generally do that like for one kid at a time, I'm doing it for one kid right now but I have been in this field for like, I don't know, 16/17 years and so I think about 10 years ago I would have like laughed and argued with her but I just said. Thanks for letting me know. You know, I would be glad to do it, you know until you find someone else. But just noted that she was, you know, dishonest and passive aggressive and was far less, I was far more reluctant to work with her in the future because she was so manipulative, and you know later found out she was a pretty new guardian ad litem. And so I've had a little bit of that I've had some people that were bossy manipulative but my positive experiences have far outweighed any negative experience.

JACK

Well I tell you, I was talking to two of my favorite people on the planet today and they're both guardian ad litem and I was asking them you know from your experience as a



guardian ad litem. What do you feel are the pros and the cons of doing that.

And you know one of them said the pros are that you meet some of the sweetest children, you develop a relationship with them, you can offer guidance and friendship as they navigate the foster care system.

And then the cons is that a good guardian ad litem does a lot of the legwork gathering documents School Dr therapy's IPs. And I can tell you that this guardian ad litem is a good guardian ad litem because she, you know, honestly I think someone needed to pay her because she was doing, everybody's job, nothing would stop her from making sure these kids needs were met, above and beyond.

She also said a con would be that many obstacles sometimes hinder the progression of children returning home or finding their forever family, and her last con was that she said she feels like she's never able to do enough.

So, you know that that is one viewpoint of a guardian ad litem and another one that I talked to said that the positives is that you can actually advocate for the best interests of the child. If you've spent time and effort and there's back to that creating that relationship again. If you have spent time and effort, seeing the child with their bios or their caregivers, you can make sure that siblings have a relationship, even if they're not in the same household. And you can make sure they don't get forgotten in school, and sometimes you can help them just by making them feel loved, in a very unloving world, you can really make the world a better place if you fight hard.

And, you know, the cons is she said that sometimes fighting the system. And, you know, trying to get the best interest of the child is sometimes a bit difficult. If you know there are other situations at play. So she said you have to talk loud and push back, and when you're finally heard it is possible to get results that will give that child, a good shot at a good life.

Oh, yeah. So, you know, I think being a guardian ad litem is an incredibly admirable thing to do. And it's probably one of the most time consuming and biggest commitments in ways that you can help, but if you have time for it, you know, it's definitely a huge,

I know that that guardian ad items have made a huge difference in the life of my kids so that could be you. Yeah, it is a great position that's for sure. What are some other ways that foster kids can be supported by someone other than a foster parent or guardian ad litem. Well one of the things that we actually talk about a lot because of an organization that we're involved in is, and you could probably speak better to this than I can, but all children

in care have experienced trauma. Right. So, you know, even if it's a newborn, that was removed at birth, you would think, Oh, you know what is the trauma that they've experienced, they haven't, You know, been homeless or abused or neglected. But the removal itself is, is a trauma,

CAT

Right, even a baby that's five hours old has been found to be experiencing the significant stress of being apart from their mother, by you know symptoms of excessive sleeping and disruptive bowel patterns you know they all experience stress just by the removal and so there is from there.

JACK

So, if, if we can understand that one of the big differences of children and care is the level of trauma that they've experienced, then obviously, if we want to help kids in care. What is a good way to help them heal from that trauma. Well one way is to other than, you know, by providing stability, you know, by providing, you know, support and academics, is to provide positive childhood experiences, and a lot of times foster parents need support and providing that for their foster kids, and so it can be really helpful if the community can step up and help provide these things for foster kids and we can do this in various ways.

So what are some of the ways that someone who's not a foster parent or a guardian ad litem can provide some of these childhood experiences that are positive.

CAT

Well, someone can help pay for something like ballet lessons, gymnastics, sports, for a foster child who they might not otherwise be able to take those lessons because foster parents often have, you know more than one kid and it's difficult to pay for those things for a lot of different kids.

JACK

Okay, so let's say I'm someone who wants to pay for a kiddo to you know be on a sports team, What do I do stand out on the street with some cash and say hey, any foster kids come here. Take some cash.

CAT

I definitely would not recommend that, there, there are definitely ways you can do that, you know various foster care organizations have child welfare boards where you can donate money, you can ask a local school, if there are any foster kids that you can anonymously pay for, to do an activity or take some classes, you can donate to an

organization like caterpillars to butterflies, who specifically raise money in their nonprofit to do things just like this.

And, you know, on the same topic, you can call local high schools and see if there are ways that you can provide money for things like prom dresses, and you know those are. That's an age group that needs a lot of support for things like, you know class rings you uniforms for sports, things like that and so there really is a lot of need there.

JACK

So speaking of some of these older kids, something that, you know, I've thought a lot about and, you know, really concerns me is a lot of foster children get stuck in the system. And because sometimes these court processes take so long to finalize that by the time these kids reach permanency, the trauma they've experienced in their age is limiting on finding them a forever family. So a lot of the times, kids in foster care end up aging out.

So, you know, that's when you look at the stats for kids who've aged out of foster care, how likely they are to, you know, have traumatic adult lives, and, you know, the the low rate of them going to college and having careers, what are some of the ways that we can support foster youth that are aging out.

CAT

Oh, and you're totally right like those stats are really high and those years can be really tough for those kids so we can provide support to these kids by providing employment for them, and in turn that employment can sometimes become kind of like a family for these kids, and it can be almost, you know, an example for them of what a family looks like and what work ethic looks like those examples can really be like a cookie cutter for them for life.

We can mentor them, especially in the area of education or career training because you don't always have to go to college, you know, if you, if your first job is that auto shop auto body shop, then you know that can be your forever job.

You can locate local organizations that helped them start with independent living and there are definitely some of those out there that that have a passion for that and that's all they do and they do a great job with that.

JACK

Yeah, absolutely. So one of the things that I've been thinking a lot about lately is education. so, you know my sister's a teacher, my friends are teachers, as an educator, I feel like you

have such a first row seat to a lot of foster kids in our community. And I feel like that when you talk to a lot of kids one of their biggest like one of the most important people in their lives is sometimes their teacher like the right teacher can really make a difference.

CAT

That's so true.

Having an understanding teacher is really everything to a child because when a child comes into foster care, they really just immediately want to know that their basic needs are going to be met because they're in survival mode and if you look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, either the first need and the greatest need that a person has is the need for food, water, warmth and rest. And so, a child is really just scrambling immediately to know that they will have those things and sometimes when they come into care. They don't know that they will have those things, and sometimes, because of, you know just instability in their home environment, long term, they continue to not know even though they have a house full of food. And, you know, the, the second greatest need that a child has is for security and safety. And so, when a child comes into care and they are going to their second or third school, and they're not sure that they will have food, water, warmth, security, safety, or just recently they didn't have those things.

And, you know, they're not quite sure that they still have those relationships with friends and family. The belongingness and the love that Maslow also says that we need, then their last priority is learning.

And so to have an understanding teacher who is really concerned with the whole child, and not just the child who finishes 30 math equations in 60 minutes really is very helpful for that child, and can really get them to a point where they're where they are more likely to graduate from high school to complete the school year to be more willing to complete the test they need to complete or complete the assignments they need to complete or really the priority would actually just be to learn.

And so that really brings us to our next point which is, this is really one of the greatest tragedies of foster care, not the greatest, but it's just really a symptom of how awful foster care is, and that is that foster kids do really poorly when it comes to completing their education in 2018 the percentage of foster youth who graduated from high school was 30 to 50%.

And this is really really dismal. The percentage of foster kids who completed college was 3%. And one of the reasons that this is so discouraging is because your college education

is paid for when you're, when you're in foster care, or when you were in foster care and so the opportunity is there for any child who was in foster care, and only 3%, you know, were able to do this and so that doesn't mean that 97% were failures, of course lots of kids, you know, choose another route but I think it's really just a symptom of how, you know, go into two and three schools, a year.

And, you know changing curriculums repeatedly kids are getting behind. I think that, Jack, you can probably speak to this more than I can.

JACK

Well, yeah, sure, a lot of the times when kids come to my house. They've already been in, Like, let's say two schools that year. I remember as a kid having to switch schools. One time between middle school and high school and how traumatic that was of making that change and going to a completely different curriculum. And if you think about these kids that are doing it multiple times per year a lot of the time because of location.

Kids come to my house sometimes from, you know, an hour, an hour and a half away, and I can't drive that far to bring them to school every morning. No one else can. So, I'm gonna have to move them for the third time that year.

And I just think you know, as an educator, you can really make a difference in the life of a foster kid by helping them follow their passions pursue education. And while that may not mean college. College is paid for. So it's not even a factor and whether they can't go or not is whether they can pay for it so it's really just a matter of, you know, wanting it, and pursuing it and working for it. So if you're an educator and can inspire them to do that and help them meet their goals, and really build their confidence so that they can feel like it's something they can do. I think that makes such a huge difference

CAT

I think so too.

Another way that you can be a help to foster kids is to volunteer with foster organizations and there are a lot out there.

JACK

Sure. Most areas will have one or many foster closet so a foster closet is a place that foster parents can go, let's say you get a kid and you can't get to the store for whatever reason. And, you know, they need clothes, or they need socks or you know whatever.

CAT

There are foster closets where you can go and people will have donated clothes there for children and you can find some for the foster kids in your house.

JACK

There are so many in my area, and you know when I've when I've helped out with some of them, I learned that there really are a lot everywhere, so probably wherever you live, you can find a foster clothing closet and volunteer there. I know it takes a lot of time to go through all the clothes and organize them and make sure they're all, you know, appropriate, and you know what if there isn't a foster closet in your area that you can volunteer at, maybe that's something that you can start and that would make a huge difference in the life of foster kids.

CAT

It's true and you know I have to say one of our local closets, I have run into her at Target, buying clothes with her own money for this closet. And so, you know, if you, if it's even something that speaks to you at all, Donate to these closets because these clothes go directly to these kids.

JACK

Sure, you know, most of us when our kids outgrow stuff we find somewhere to donate it we find a bin somewhere but if you can find a foster closet to donate it. You know that is going to directly go to kids who really are in need.

So you know you can volunteer your time at foster closet so you can donate your items to foster closets, you can ask foster parents that you know what organizations support them and where you can volunteer, you can call a local foster agency or just Google, see who's in your area and what they're doing and volunteer your time because, you know, that's something that they all need is true.

CAT

You can do a Google search for organizations in your area that support foster kids. There are tons, there are so many,

JACK

So if you don't have time, you know some people have very busy lives, but they want to do something to support foster kids. Well, maybe you can donate some funds there. As we were just saying there are so many organizations that exist purely to provide something for foster kids and if you find some, make sure you know that they're legit and, you know send

some funds their way so that they can directly support these kids.

CAT

Sure. And so the last way that you can support foster kids is something that we're going to talk about in our next episode so that's right so stay tuned on ways that you can support foster families.