

Episode 2 - Should i be a foster parent? Part 1

Jack:

Hey there, this is Jack and I'm here with Cat, and you know we were talking recently about how I often run into people and when they hear that I'm a foster parent, they say that they had always thought about doing that. And I just think that there are some things to talk about and think about when you're trying to make that decision to become a foster parent, so we thought we would talk about that today.

And I feel like there are families that would be amazing foster parents, and they just never get around to doing it. Maybe because they're scared of the unknown, or don't think that they can, but we also have to recognize that being a foster parent isn't for everybody. And there's other ways for people to help children in foster care other than being a foster parent. And as much as we really really really need more foster homes. It doesn't do any good to put someone in a position that isn't a fit for them.

And so Cat and I came up with a list of questions to ask yourself when you're considering whether or not to become a foster parent.

Cat:

So let's start here. What is your motivation to be a foster parent?

Jack:

So everyone that becomes a foster parent has one or many reasons or motivations for wanting to do this. And I think some of those reasons make for fantastic success stories and some of those reasons are bound to end in both failure and heartbreak.

Cat:

So for instance, I want to make some money... that would be a motivation, that would not be fulfilling to you in the long run.

Jack:

Right, so I know that every state is different, but in the state of Florida the stipend, which is

the amount that you're reimbursed every month for having a kid in your home, the stipend in Florida is significantly lower than other states in the country. And part of that has to do with a lower cost of living, but I feel like in order to properly take care of a foster child in the state of Florida with the stipend that we're given, you're going to be investing your own money for these children.

So, if you're becoming a foster parent thinking hey you know this is kind of like an extended babysitting, and you know that I love spending time with kids and maybe this is a good way to make some money. Well, I would recommend that that is not a good motivation.

Cat:

The other thing that I think of is if you only want to adopt.

Jack:

Okay, so, admittedly, one of the reasons that I wanted to become a foster parent was to add to my family through adoption. We had already adopted internationally, and we knew that as a foster parent, one of the possibilities would be adoption at times. Fortunately it wasn't the only reason that we were interested in foster care or it probably would have been a frustrating experience for us. But I think a lot of people go into foster care because they want to add to their family. And the thing is, while it does sometimes result in that, that's not the point of foster care, and I think sometimes when that's your motivation, it's really disheartening to go through the process and also maybe you're not always as much of an advocate for supporting the life change of their parents.

Cat:

Right, it can be absolutely detrimental for the experience for the child for the parents, and it can create adversarial relationships with case management, judges, and other people in the room, or other relationships and other systems. So even if the outcome could possibly be adoption, you can really create some enemies along the way. It's not a positive situation for the child and so that would not be a good reason.

Jack:

No. Okay, so let's talk about that because it is possible to adopt from foster care directly without becoming a foster parents.

Cat:

Right, you can sign up to do that.

Jack:

However, through my experiences. I have seen a lot of kids, potentially being adopted by people who weren't foster parents at first, and seeing those adoptions fail because those parents had not experienced, you know, life as a foster parent you start to understand what kids who have been through trauma are like, and you also learn like what you're capable of as a parent and what you're not capable of. So as much as if adopting is your sole purpose for going into foster care, maybe it isn't the best motivation.

I feel like being a foster parent is the best preparation for someone to adopt a child who's been through the trauma of foster care. What are your thoughts on that.

Cat:

No, I definitely agree with that.

Jack:

And I think that most of the foster parents that I talked to this week, a good portion of them said that part of the reason that they wanted to become a foster parent was to add to their family, but, but if that's your sole purpose, then it can be heartbreaking for you.

Cat:

Definitely.

Jack:

And also, could be limiting on some of these reunification processes.

Cat:

Yeah, I think, you know, sometimes you do have to go through watching kids go to relatives or go back home to parents.

If love isn't your primary motivator, then you're not going to be fulfilled in the long run, but if it is, then you are going to be highly fulfilled.

Jack:

Well, you do have the opportunity to make a difference, that almost nobody else has the opportunity to make, and I would say that, like, as hard as fostering is, and as many as the negatives that, that you can find in it. There's never been anything in my life that I've done that I've felt better about that's fulfilled me and made me happier than becoming a foster parent. I really take such really fulfillment out of the kids that I'm able to get back with their parents, like when a child is able to be reunified safely with their parent and live with their parents, and I see like these parents change their whole lives, because it's not easy.

Cat:

Right, like it's hard for anybody to change but especially a lot of these parents like drugs or a trauma of their own from their childhood, because it has to be so bad for their kids to be removed in the first place. Right. And so if you consider how bad it has to be for your kids to be removed. There's a lot of work that has to be done to get your kids back.

Jack:

Yes. So when you see that happen, it's like, oh my gosh, and that's one of the things that I always tell people, who are considering becoming foster parents and they're like, I just don't think I could ever handle losing the kids or the kids going back to their parents. And honestly, like, some of the hardest losses, and, and I don't want to say it's a loss because, like, they were never mine to begin with, but some of the biggest heartbreaks, of seeing the kids leave my home that became, you know, my children for a period of time. The joy and excitement and pride really that you feel for the family, changing their lives and reunifying together like outweighs the sadness that I feel for myself and not having them in my life.

And really, it's rare that you don't have them in your life at all after reunification, especially if you're able to coparent well, and that's not always possible, but when you are. You know I have parents who send me pictures years later of the children that were in my home.

Cat:

So, if I could just add this to the last note, you know, like watching, you know, you, you have three little girls that are going home right now. And knowing that you have made such an enormous difference in their life, and that they will become mothers who were raised by their biological mother, and that they will not grow up in the system, and that their entire lineage will be different because of. Partly because of the difference that you made and I would say probably largely by the difference that you made because you've made such a difference in the life of their mom. I think that that is such a strong influence to provide to the world, you know.

Jack:

Well, but, and I also have to give props to their mom because, like I have never had one of my kids parents be more acknowledging of their own mistakes and willing to learn, and open to the relationship. So, yeah, I think there's a lot there.

What were some of the other questions that we had though?

Cat:

Okay, so the next one is do you have the patience for the behaviors?

So there are some serious behaviors that we can see in foster kids and we often do not know what they're going to be when kids come into care.

Jack:

More often than not, you really have limited information, placement will call you and say this child has no behaviors, and then they come and they're smearing poop on your wall and throwing things.

Cat:

You know there are some pretty serious behaviors or kids who have shown up to have had autism and nobody told the foster parents that there are serious like emotional or physical health problems.

Jack:

Sometimes when placement gets a kid, they usually were just picked up by CPI, and they

only know what they see.

Cat:

Right, right, and so you really do need to have patience, and you know I have worked with foster parents who have really lost their minds because the child dropped a toothbrush down the drain and, you know, it's like, well, we need to probably need to work on some patience because it's really not that big of a deal. Yeah you know like, just some really typical, you know, behaviors and children and and you know these are kids who are dealing with some pretty serious trauma, and we have to remember that what we know of their trauma is almost with certainty the tip of the iceberg.

I mean, we really don't know the extent of it and often kids don't have the language to even tell us, or they're scared to tell you because they feel like they'll get in trouble.. And so, these kids are dealing with trauma they almost always I'd say 80% of the kids I work with are dealing with significant control issues where they, they, out of comfort need to have control over their environment to feel safe, and so they are going to be doing things, you know, lying, stealing smearing their poop on the wall, you know peeing in doing things to help them to feel safe. And, you know, so you do need to have patience for some of these behaviors, and so some of them are going to be excessively well behaved and you're like, where's this child come from.

Jack:

Yeah, you know I sometimes have kids and I'm like, how did they come from this household where, like, they're, they like they're more normal than you know anybody's biological children or kids who've not experienced trauma. And a lot of foster parents like really don't see a lot of behaviors like especially if they don't take a lot of kids. But most most foster parents will have experienced at some point in time, with a child who, like pushes your limits and, you know, every human on this planet has had things happen in their life that, you know, make them triggered by certain things.

And, you know, sometimes you're surprised at what triggers you and you know I just, I think knowing whether or not, not just having the patience for a kid because you can you can have your kids and have patience for them, but a large portion of the children who've had trauma are going to trigger you, so you just have to know that you're going to have the patience to.

And the calmness because you really have to be like the calm in their storm. You have to,

when they're going absolutely crazy in their head, like, understand that that's probably not how they want to be acting. And, you know, if they could stop it, they probably would.

And your job is to just be like calm and and kind of let them feel your calmness to help calm them down a little bit, but definitely not to be reactive, especially knowing that, like, a lot of them probably have experienced abuse, and, you know, the littlest type of noise or movement can sometimes scare them a lot more. And that's just going to result in more behavior. So, you have to be like a calm patient person who does not blow things out of control.

Cat:

And so as a foster parent, there's no physical discipline allowed and so if you're not that kind of person who can abide by that, then foster parenting is not going to be for you, you can support fostering other ways.

Jack:

Yes. You need to be able to be kind and compassionate, and like patient in, like when the world is getting thrown at you when you've got a two year old little girl, kicking you in the face and screaming and giving you fat lips and black eyes like you need to like just stay calm and be a safe place for her.

So that's definitely one of the things that I would say is that you really just need to be able to be a calm person, and you know if you're easily triggered or, like, get angry very easily then foster parenting might not be for you.

Cat:

And that is absolutely okay because you can support foster parents in lots of other ways.

Jack:

But we really do need more foster parents so if you are the type of person that can be calm when the storm is raging, then you know we need people like you.

Cat:

Alright, so another question you may want to ask yourself if you're considering being a

foster parent is do you have the time and the day for another child in time to be engaged with partners involved such as visits therapies, case managers and so on.

Jack:

Right, so, you know, taking on another child in your home isn't just going to be like taking on another child, like the children that might already be in your home, because, you know, they're, they're going to have all this extra stuff they're gonna have therapies, they're going to have to meet with their case managers pretty regularly. They're going to have visits with their parents usually they're gonna have guardian ad litem who visits with them.

So, you know, it's not that if you have a full time job you can't be a foster parent because a lot of foster parents do have full time jobs, and you know they just schedule the things as they need to, but to really be supportive foster parents, it's important to be able to have time for, you know, to help out with these things you want to be involved in the visits and, you know, try and get to know their parents if possible.

I feel like it's really valuable to me to be able to go to court hearings and stuffings and stuff like that. But, you know definitely consider whether you have time for this, because you might not.

Cat:

The next question is, do you mind losing privacy with people in your house all the time.

Jack:

Yeah, I think I think this is something that, you know, you quickly realize as a foster parent is, you just can't be the type of person that gets hung up on privacy.

Yeah, they're in my house all the time, like, you know, there's, there's no drawers they won't open, like you just, you know, you just have to be okay with someone going through your stuff all the time and you know, people come to our house all the time to see the kids to check on their, their living and that's good, like I want them to, to be checking our homes and making sure that the children that we're caring for are being well cared for and are in safe environments, otherwise we're no better than, you know, where they came from.

Cat:

Yeah, and you're right, I think about this all the time because I am in houses often, and often I'm driving and driving and then I get there and often I'm like, Oh my gosh, I have to use their bathroom, and people will often say, oh, and I'm like I don't care. I'm in different bathrooms I'm in different houses I'm in different bedrooms, all the time. I have no interest in going to people stuff, but I am in people's houses, constantly, and I see their stuff and I often think, I'm so glad that no one's in my house constantly, you know, because they must do so much to prepare. Yeah, you know, you really do lose a lot of privacy.

Jack:

Yeah, I remember when I first became a foster parent, every single time someone came over, I felt like my house had to be perfect. And I remember my first licensing specialist, she told me pretty early on, she's like pretty soon your house is going to be so full of kids and you're not going to worry about putting every toy away every time I come over, and it wasn't too long, that I was like, Listen, you come over whatever you want, but I might be in my jammies, my house might be a mess there might be toys on the floor. Like, I don't worry about my, all my dishes being clean every time someone comes over, because you know what! We live there and we've got a bunch of kids, and there are more important things than you know making sure the sink is always empty so but you do lose the whole privacy factor so if that's something that's important to you, it's something to consider if you're considering becoming a foster parent.

Cat:

The next question is if your partner on boards. This is a really important question because if your partner is not on board, then you kind of have an emergency on your hands.

Jack:

Well, I think I think there are some times that like people really feel like they want to be a foster parent and that they'd be a good foster parent, but their spouse is not interested, and either, you know, they don't get to be a foster parent and that's sad because they don't get to be, but you know what, like, maybe it's for the better, because sometimes you see foster parents come in where one of the partners is not on board, and it's hard - like you really need each other to get through this.

There are single foster parents let me start by saying that, and some of them are absolutely incredible, but it's, it's a lot and it's a lot to deal with not just without someone to tag team in when you are exhausted and you need a break, but also to not have a partner to like talk

things out and, you know, emotionally support each other.

Cat:

Yeah, yeah, I would totally agree with that because you know there are going to be times when kids are awake all night long, or someone is sick or someone's hospitalized and you have other kids. And you really need to have a lot of support and your partner's the most important person that can support you.

Jack:

And if they don't want to be a foster parent and you're doing it, they're going to resent you for what comes into your house. I think if my husband was not like excited and, like, a willing participant in being foster parents that he would absolutely hate me, because you know it's a lot.

Cat:

Um, the next question is do you have the finances.

Jack:

So, like we did mention earlier that you know when you're a foster parent they do give you reimbursement every month that's supposed to help take care of the kids, most kids have health insurance when they come into care. But, you know, depending on, you know where you live, what your stipend is in general like you're going to be spending your own money on these kids like you're going to need to be able to financially provide for them because sometimes this stipend gets messed up and you might go a month or two or three months without any assistance financially

Cat:

Or that if it's a sibling group of a couple of kids, you've just gone three months and that's a lot of money.

Jack:

And the truth of the matter is, like, you know what, at least where I live, the amount of money that you get does not cover what they need and they come in with like, usually,

none or very little clothes I did have that one kid that came in, we call them the Naked Cowboy because he had a cowboy hat, no pants.

Cat:

I remember that and it was so funny. He was so cute.

Jack:

Oh yeah, so, and we actually had him twice, because, but he did have pants for the second time he came.

So, you know you got to spend a good deal of money on, you know, getting these kids started off when they first come to your house. When they come with no clothes, and no shoes and, you know, if you don't have the finances to have an additional kid in your home. Despite the fact that you will be reimbursed at some point for a portion of that money you got, you've got to have, you know, the finances to be able to take on another kid.

Cat:

Yeah, because, you know, in Florida, I'm sure all states are different but when I was in Texas, it was about \$100 and in Florida, you get reimbursed for \$75 when you first get a child and that right if you're lucky.

Jack:

Well, if the child has not been in another home, because sometimes the kid has been in another home, and they already spent that \$75 But then they don't send you with the clothes for that \$75, so you have to go and buy them new clothes, and you don't have a reimbursement at all. Like when the girls came back to care this time, they had been in here before so they did not get an additional \$75, but I did need to spend a good bit of money to get them like school uniforms and all the clothes they needed.

Cat:

And you know, if you've never had kids before or if you don't really think about it, you know, underwear and socks are the worst, and pajamas. Why are pajamas so expensive? I don't know but you know maybe yesterday and I was like pajamas, were on sale for infants

for \$10. For infants though. My kids are huge. Yeah, that's for one day. Yeah, yeah,

And so let's say that you're a person, and you're thinking, oh I work nights I can't foster or whatever or I'm just not very patient or I don't know kids but I want to support that is how you can support foster parents, great purchase socks, purchase underwear purchase diapers put pajama donate them to someone that you know that's a foster parent because that is so helpful. But if just a few pair of pajamas, and socks and underwear and there's for \$75

Jack:

Oh yeah, a lot of these kids come with very little. Sometimes they come barefoot, but a lot of the times they come with shoes that don't fit them or shoes that are falling apart. Think about how much money you've got to spend to get a kid a new pair of shoes. Yeah \$75 There you go.

Cat:

Right, it's gone. I mean, that's no diapers, that's no shoes, that's no clothes. Needless to say, you need to have finances, available to provide for these children that are coming into your home, you do. There is a monetary commitment.

Jack:

Something to consider if you are considering becoming a foster parents.

Cat:

The next question is... Do you have the support?

So do you want to talk about what kind of support you really need.

Jack:

So support is like huge. I would say that when you look at foster parents, There's a lot of turnover, and a lot of foster parents don't actually last a year. Sometimes you hear about these foster parents have been foster parents for like 20/30 years, and I don't know how they do it like... That's amazing, Most foster parents like burn out after a year, sometimes after two years.

You know, I know a foster parent that had one placement, and was like "That's it". Actually I think I know a couple like that, but I've always said that if I didn't have the support that I have, especially from other foster parents but outside the foster system as well... There's no way I'd still be a foster parent. No way .100% Not.

Because there are times that are so freaking tough. And I just want to like, and it's not, it's not even really the kids, the kids are huge, you know you've got kids with behavior problems and that can be difficult, like, you know, I've had a kid or two that just, like, I can't even I can't even but you know the real stressful hard part of becoming a foster parent is usually the system... Dealing with the people... hearing judges make decisions and you're just like, How could any reasonable human being decide that for this child.

So I think that without having the support system that I have, there's no way at all that I would still be a foster parent because there's so many times I wanted to give up, but I had the right people to talk to and especially when you have other foster parents that you connect with, and I had a group like that for a few years now and you know when, when you're going through something and somebody says you know what I went through that too. And this is how I got through it, like it just, it's huge, it's huge.

Cat:

Can you talk about the kind of support that you have.

Jack:

I think I have had a huge amount of support from my friend Kat, who is very knowledgeable, not just on the dependency system, but you know all this stuff about development and trauma and emotional issues with kids that has really helped me get through a lot of it.

Also, you know my husband is amazing. I don't think that if I was married to anybody else that I would even want to do this because, you know, he like, he tags in when I need to tag out, he encourages me when I need to be encouraged. He laughs with me when we're, like, in these crazy situations, and, you know, there's nobody I would want to walk through the fire with other than Him.

Also, like, I think our parents have been incredibly supportive. His mother, my mother, my dad especially. :ike, it means so much when they're so encouraging and helpful and loving

and kind to my kids, you know like, whether they're there for a week or a year and, you know, our parents like are that child's grandparent while they're in my house. Like that is huge but yeah.

Having other foster parents that I can talk to and we can, you know, oh my gosh I can't believe this happened and, like, but it happens to all of us and all that stuff and, you know, having people who have gone through similar experiences makes all the difference in the world,.

Cat:

Was it you or was it someone else who started the weekly foster dinners?

Jack:

Yeah, that was me, and I started with someone that I was in class with and then a number of other foster parents started coming and I would say there's probably like 15 of us that over the past like three or four years we, we meet almost every week. But then, of course, in 2020 that kind of stopped.

Cat:

Yeah. And so that's, I think provided a lot of support for a lot of people who really needed support at different times in the break.

Jack:

It's nice. We always joke like no kids. Don't bring your kids we want to eat with both of our hands. And, you know, just like spending that time and, you know, we call it dinner but you know a lot of the times, wherever we go, we're there till they close. We're there for three or four hours.

Cat:

And then, then there's an organization here locally that you're a part of that provides support to foster families too and so there's a lot of support. Yeah, that you have, not just benefited from but generated.

Jack:

Well and I think that like that's like the biggest thing though, like that we need to like not just care for the kids but we need to care for each other while we're caring for the kids so that we can keep caring for the kids.

Cat:

Yeah, right, because there are a lot of kids. Yeah, a lot of kids who need us, because if they don't have foster parents, then they go to places like group homes. Yeah, and I can speak to that because when I've written reports, called CBHAs, you know what happens when kids comes into foster care. I've gone to these homes you know like St Pete in different areas and I've been there and I've seen these like 18 year olds, people trying to find, like, trying to handle like an infant, you know, not knowing how to swaddle them and not realizing that they probably need something like mylecon or whatever and, and it's been just like absolute torture, and I'm thinking why is this baby not in a foster home. And it's because there are not enough foster homes.

Jack:

Yeah, we need more.

So, like there's a lot of things to consider when you're thinking about becoming a foster home, but the truth is like we need so many more foster homes than we have. Because if we had enough foster homes there wouldn't be a need for group homes, and I have never had a kid that had been in a group home who didn't have horrible stories, and maybe we should talk about that another day some of the things that happen in group homes, but we definitely need more foster parents.