CELESTE HEADLEE, HOST:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Celeste Headlee in Washington. When we talk about the foster care system, we're often responding to stories about the kids, their struggles, sometimes their triumphs. But in a recent blog post entitled "What Foster Parents Wish Other People Knew," one foster parent speaks from the other side of the table.

Her point was to rebut some of the common misconceptions about fostering, that people do it for the money or that foster parents must be saints to take in other people's children. So today we'd like to dig a little more into the experience of being a foster parent, what we don't know and what we should know.
So if you are or you have been a foster parent, tell us about your experience. What do we not know? Our number is 1-800-989-8255. Our email address is talk@npr.org. Or just go to the website, npr.org, and then click on TALK OF THE NATION to join the conversation. Later on in the program, we'll talk about the power and the problems of the dead, but first the realities of being a foster parent.

Michelle Burnette has been a foster parent for more than 15 years. She's fostered more than 40 kids, and she joins us now by phone from her office in Leonardtown, Maryland. Michelle, welcome.

MICHELLE BURNETTE: Hi (unintelligible) thanks. It's good to be on.

HEADLEE: So 15 years and more than 40 kids is a lot, but can you remember your very first experience, the first kid or kids that you ever fostered?

BURNETTE: Oh, I definitely can, even though it's been 15 years, it almost seems like yesterday. I like to think that I was pretty organized, and I'd gone through all the classes with my husband, and we had everything ready in that February that we got the call. And I opened my door to this set of coal-black eyes that were bloodshot and behind that one was another little one peering around.

And the only thing I could think to do was to welcome them into my gingerbread home that smelled like cookies, where I thought everything was perfect. And instead of that happening, I was met with don't touch me, you're not my mommy, I don't want you to touch me and these screams. And I started to panic, thinking to myself I want my own mommy at that time.

HEADLEE: So I mean that must play into one of the misconceptions about foster parenting, which is that the kids should be grateful that you're taking them in, which is something you must have encountered before, that people sometimes get angry at kids who don't seem grateful enough.

BURNETTE: Yeah, and they don't understand that these kids have lost everything. They've lost their favorite blanket, they went - that, you know, was comfortable to them when they fell asleep at night. They've lost their parents, their siblings, their dogs, their neighbors,
and in some cases even their own school, which could have been the only continuous thing in their life, where they knew they were going to get to be fed twice a day.

So we shouldn't expect them to be grateful that they've been torn away from everything, and we should just be able to love them.

HEADLEE: Well, there's two separate questions here. Let me ask the first one, which is: What do you wish more people knew about foster parenting? What's an essential piece of information that people don't seem to get?

BURNETTE: Well, I think one of the biggest things that I, you know, I do hear all the time, and I kind of laughed when I read the blog and was shaking my head because we don't consider ourselves saints. We really - I feel that everybody has a gift, and this is a gift that my husband and my family has and has been able to share.

And we just chose, like she says in the blog, we chose, we signed up to be that doorstep for those kids. And I think, and the other thing that people don't understand is we're not getting rich off this. You know, I don't have a Ferrari parked in my garage. I have a 15-passenger van that has kind of balding tires and, you know, completely embarrasses my three seniors in high school when I pull up to get them.

HEADLEE: Yeah, the vans are not cool, just so you know, Michelle.

(LAUGHTER)

HEADLEE: So that - maybe that's different, and maybe it's not. Is there anything that you wish you had known before you became a foster parent?

BURNETTE: Well, I like to think - you know, I came from a nursing background, so I kind of was ready for the medical portion of what I thought I was getting into. But I really didn't understand the emotional level, and it really was after that first placement, when I went to bed crying that night to my husband, thinking what have I done, what have I exposed my children to, how are we going to fix these children, you know, it was at that moment that I thought who can I call.
They want their mommy. I want my mommy. But my mommy doesn't know what to tell me. So I really wish I would've had another mentor maybe at that time that could have said, hey, you're doing fine, you're going to get through this.

HEADLEE: But what kept you in it? I mean even after that first night, which ended in tears, you kept going for 15 years.

BURNETTE: I did, and you know, when we got those boys, they were both sick and on antibiotics, and you know, we had them, you know, for three weeks, four weeks - it was four weeks. And we began to develop this fragile kind of trust, and they began to sing in the car with the other kids. And so when they went back, I was kind of angry, and I thought how can I - you know, I'm continuing this vicious cycle. How can I do this to a child?

And about three or four months later, it was - my social worker called me and said I want you to know that this certain child just came back into care, and he asked to come to your home. Now he was four. And I said how - I can't take him. I've taken other children. That's terrible. What - and she said you'll understand.

And it was literally that night when I was thinking back to her words that I realized what I had done for him was not necessarily save him, but what I really did for him was I allowed him four weeks of being a child. I allowed him not to have to worry about where he was going to bed that night, not - he didn't have to worry about if he was going to eat. He could just play and grow and thrive for that amount of time, and as small as it was, he remembered.

And so that's really what has kept us going.

HEADLEE: Do you have the kind of parents - and again, we're speaking with Michelle Burnette, who was a foster parent for more than 15 years, has fostered more than 40 children, which is just astounding. Do you have friends who express astonishment, who wonder how and why you would do this? What do you say to them?

BURNETTE: They do. I do have, you know, some friends, and some of them say I could never do that, or, you know, and I have other friends that say, you know, you're damaging your own children. But I have to say that we have learned - I feel very fortunate. I do feel very lucky because my own children and myself have learned so
much more from these children than I even think they've learned from us.

You know, we've learned that they can love unconditionally. We've learned that despite things that happen to them, that they are resilient, that they can move on from situations that are horrific sometimes and go on to be well-adjusted, successful adults. So those are the kinds of things that I like to point out to people when they do say why do you continue to put yourself through this.

And truthfully, it is hard, don't get me wrong. And it's very, very hard sometimes, and there have been many nights I've gone to bed crying. But the benefits far outweigh anything else.

HEADLEE: So tell me about the process itself. Do you get to choose - what kind of choice do you have over children? I mean you obviously should get control over how many kids are staying with you. But do you actually get to choose which kids come to you and which don't?

BURNETTE: You do. You can get a phone call, and we like to say, you know, the kind of joke is that you can say that you want a blonde-hair, blue-eyed boy between the ages of nine and 10, but really and truly at 11:00 at night when we have a three-year-old girl with brown hair that's been found walking in the streets, you're going to get a call if needed.

But at any time if you feel that that does not fit in your family, you can always say no. You're given that right. And the states do mandate how many children you can have in your home and the ages of the children that you can have in your home.

HEADLEE: How much control do the kids have? If a kid gets into a foster situation where they don't feel comfortable, do they have control? Can they leave?

BURNETTE: They do. They have - each child has a social worker, and the children have their own attorneys or guardians ad litem. And they would express those feelings to their social worker or to their, you know, their attorney. And I've had a situation where I had a child that was not happy to be in our home and didn't want to follow the rules that were imposed.
And it happened to be on a weekend, and so I sat down and I made a promise. I said if you promise to stay here this weekend, then first thing Monday we will go up and we will talk to the social worker and see what other options we can come up with.

HEADLEE: What - would you describe our foster care system in the U.S. as flawed, Michelle?

BURNETTE: I think that there - I think in a way it is flawed and only because we're not involving some of these kids in the decisions that are being made about their lives. You know, we need more input from some of these children about what they want to happen. You know, when they say - you know, one of these things even said on here are you going to adopt the child. Well, not every child wants to be adopted.

You know, some of these children maintain relationships with their parents because that parent may not have been abusing or neglecting them 100 percent of the time. You know, when they weren't doing the abuse, they were loving them and parenting them and building a bond with that child. So I do think that there is a lot to be learned, but I think that we need to get back to the basics and get the kids at the table to sit and speak and what do you want and what do you need, how can we better serve you.

HEADLEE: And I wonder your response, Michelle, we're speaking with Michelle Burnette, who is a foster parents, has been for more than 15 years. And if you have a comment to make, a story to add, you can call us at 800-989-8255, or email us at talk@npr.org.

And Michelle, I wonder how you feel, you know, most of the time that we report on foster parenting or the foster care system, it's negative. I mean, it's usually when something's happened to a child. I wonder what your response is to that. Do we as an American public get the wrong view of foster care than is real?

BURNETTE: Absolutely, 100 percent, because sensationalism sells. You know, some of my very favorite shows themselves, you know, the police shows that, you know, the foster children were in cages, or they were doing this or doing that, I mean every single one of those damages the credibility of the foster parents. And I really believe that we are professional parents.
And the incidences of those things happening are so, so small. We rarely, rarely hear about the wonderful things that happen, and that's why, you know, I really want to thank Sharon Astyk for bringing this out because...

HEADLEE: Sharon Astyk wrote the original blog that we're talking about here.

BURNETTE: Yeah, as I sat here and read through this, you know, I was shaking my head, yup, yup, oh yeah, you know, and highlighting things, and that's a good point, and because I think all too often the focus is on the negative and not on the good things that happen, the kids that were reunited with their family or the adoption.

I celebrated two adoptions - our family celebrated two adoptions in December.

HEADLEE: Meaning that you adopted them, or two kids got adopted?

BURNETTE: I did. Our family expanded by two in December legally.

HEADLEE: Well, congratulations.

BURNETTE: Yeah, thank you.

HEADLEE: Yeah, that's something to celebrate for sure. We're speaking with Michelle Burnette. We'll continue speaking with her. She's been a foster parent for more than 15 years and has fostered more than 40 kids in Maryland. But we're talking about some of the things that foster parents wish the rest of us understood. So if you are or you've been a foster parent, tell us about your experience. What do the rest of us not know? 800-989-8255. The email is talk@npr.org. I'm Celeste Headlee. This is TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

HEADLEE: This is TALK OF THE NATION, from NPR News. I'm Celeste Headlee. Nearly half-a-million kids are in foster care, some with grandparents, aunts or uncles. Others are taken in by foster parents. One of those foster parents recently wrote a list of things she wishes other people understood about her experience.
So we wonder: If you are or have been a foster parent, what do the rest of us not know? Our number is 1-800-989-8255. Our email address is talk@npr.org. Or you can join the conversation just from our website. Go to npr.org, and then click on TALK OF THE NATION. Let's take a phone call, actually, right now - Rob in Myrtle Beach. Welcome.

ROB: Thank you, and I appreciate you having me on.

HEADLEE: Well, you've been a foster parent for more than 10 years. What do we not know about your experience?

ROB: How much you can change a child's life for the long term, even if you only have the child for a few days. Generally speaking, these kids come from homes that lack structure, they lack rules, and people don't pitch in to help one another out. And that's part of the symptom of why they get removed from the home to begin with. And even spending just a weekend in a home where people are loving and helpful and they take care of the house and they have structure and some rules in place can change the way they view their whole future.

And we've had situations where the kids have gone back to their biological parents and explained these rules and helped their nuclear family improve over the long term. And we're still in touch with some of those families, and it's really beautiful to see how much of a difference you can make in a very short period of time.

HEADLEE: That's a really good point. That's Rob calling from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. And with us also is Michelle Burnette, who's been a foster parent for more than 15 years. She's fostered more than 40 children. And joining us now is Dale Margolin Cecka, a professor of law at the University of Richmond. And she directs the law school's Family Law Clinic, joins us from a studio in Richmond, Virginia. Dale, welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

DALE MARGOLIN CECKA: Hi, thank you.

HEADLEE: So I'm sure you've been hearing some of these stories. You're an attorney. You deal with lots of issues dealing with family law. And I understand you're actually trying to become a foster parent. Having heard - knowing in detail all of these issues and how hard this is, why do you want to be a foster parent?
CECKA: Yes, that's a good question, and I have to say I did - and I still have ambivalence, and I know it's going to be hard and difficult. But I - you know, I have represented many, many children in foster care, as well as parents who have lost their children and are trying to get them back. And I strongly first believe that children should be with their family of origin, and I advocate for them to go back to their family of origin.

But I also know that there can be times where children and families are in crisis, and they may need - you know, there may need to be some other care for their children. And so I just feel that knowing what's out there, I feel that my husband and I would like to, you know, make our home available to families and to help, you know, hopefully get them back to their family of origin. I just feel that knowing that all these kids are out there, I would like to welcome them into my home if I can help.

HEADLEE: Does a foster parent need a lawyer? Are there legal issues that arise?

CECKA: There are, although foster parents generally - I mean, they're not court-appointed an attorney in any state. They have a right to be made aware of the hearings regarding the children in foster care, and they can appear there, and they may be called to testify. But they don't really have standing to file any sorts of petitions or to really do anything.

I mean, the foster parent is just an agent of the state, and if they have any sort of legal issue, they would have to go to the state's attorney who's representing, you know, the whole foster care system, agency, in court.

HEADLEE: I imagine that could be frustrating sometimes.

CECKA: Yes.

HEADLEE: We have another call here. This is Maryann(ph) in Oakland, California. Maryann, what's your story of foster care?

MARYANN: We - I felt like it was a very humbling experience. I felt like - we set out to help. I don't think that - I don't think the child felt like he fitted in with our family. He was black, and I'm Asian, and my husband's white. And I think that discrepancy could have been harmful than helpful.
HEADLEE: That's an interesting point. That's Maryann - thank you for the call - from Oakland, California. Let me take this one to you, Michelle Burnette. You've been a foster parent for more than 15 years. May I ask what race you are?

BURNETTE: I'm Caucasian, and I like to refer to my house as we are kind of like the United Nations. We - my husband's American Indian, and I have a biracial child, a black child, and an Asian child that are adopted.

HEADLEE: Does race become a problem?

BURNETTE: My children - I've taught my children not to see color as best I can. However, it is hard on - we were recently at a movie, and my son who is black was over talking to a friend from school. And I came over and said come with me. It's time to go in. And his friends said: Who's that? And he said oh, that's my mom. And he said: Are you adopted? And I said why would you ask him that? And he said because he's black, and you're white.

And I said I'm white, really? And Matt kind of laughed, and we went on. So - but we do explore the other cultures of the children in our house. So we celebrate Black History Month. We try to incorporate everything about every culture, because we think that that's important for all of our children to know.

HEADLEE: That's Michelle Burnette. Let me take this to you, Dale Margolin Cecka, because you not only direct the law school's Family Law Clinic, but this is the kind of situation that may come up for you. How often does this issue of culture come up in foster care?

CECKA: Oh, it comes up every day. I've had young people I represented who don't even speak the same language as the foster family that they were placed with. I've also had experiences where I had to translate between the children who had been removed from their parents and were no longer speaking their parents' original language and translating between parents and children.

So it's difficult. The agencies do try their very best to place children with culturally similar backgrounds, but, I mean, every family's different. Every - and what is really - you know, how do you define anyone's ethnicity or race, or it could just be a matter of moving - when I used to work in New York, a child going from the Bronx to Brooklyn is not the same - you know, it's not the same thing, right.
HEADLEE: It's true.

(LAUGHTER)

HEADLEE: And everyone defines race differently, as well.

CECKA: Exactly. Exactly.

HEADLEE: Casey is calling from Pleasant Hill, California. And Casey, it sounds like you have a story about another thing that I imagine often comes up. You're the guardian for your grandkids.

CASEY: Yeah, that's right. We deal with a lot of the same issues that foster parents do with regard to advocating for a child. I think we have a little more legal standing than foster parents do, but I'm aware - I've known foster parents, and I know that they have to watch sometimes as kids get sort of jerked around, yanked in and out of the system when their parents choose to engage, and when their parents go away and disengage.

And that's a pretty frustrating process to watch, and it seems some parents know just how much they need to stay in contact to maintain their legal standing as parents, and that can be really rough on the kids.

HEADLEE: I bet that is. That's Casey calling from Pleasant Hill, California. And let me put this to you, Michelle Burnette. These kids who have to deal with parents who are keeping just enough contact, have you come - have you had to deal with this?

BURNETTE: I have, and I've had - I think some of the most heartbreaking times have been when we've had a scheduled visit, let's say at a Chick-fil-A or a McDonald's or somewhere, or a park, and we show up, and the child is so excited, and then the parent doesn't show. And that - and taking that child home and trying to comfort that child can be very, very hard.

HEADLEE: What - how do you do it?

BURNETTE: It's funny, because in the very beginning, I wouldn't tell the kids we were going for a visit. I would let it be like this super-surprise or the toy, you know, from the Happy Meal, or whatever. You know, oh, look, and guess who's here, type of a thing. But I realized what I was doing is protecting myself more, because I knew
that I didn't want to go home to those disappointed feelings and stuff.

So depending on the age of the child, I do try to involve them. You know, we're going to go to the park and see your parent. And if the parent doesn't show, I just try to be as supportive and listen to that child and let them vent and let them cry or let them go to their room and be alone and just let them know that I'm going to be there for them when they need to talk.

HEADLEE: That's Michelle Burnette, who's been a foster parent for more than 15 years, and Dale Margolin Cecka is with us, professor of law at the University of Richmond. Dale, the question we've been asking our listeners and Michelle is: What do you wish people knew about foster parenting? What's your answer for that?

CECKA: Well, I think that some of what's already been discussed and said very clearly, that first of all, most foster parents - I mean, no foster parent is in it for the money. It's - the amount of money that foster parents receive is just to support the child, and it's a bare minimum. It's not what people would think of as making money.

There's also a law that foster parents go way above and beyond what would be - what we would imagine that they would do, or that should be expected of them when they don't have any legal standing, as has been discussed. I mean, they're not - even the state, when the state removes a child from their biological home or the family of origin, the state becomes - shares legal custody with the original parent, and the state has the other half of legal custody, you could say.

The foster parent doesn't have legal custody. The foster parent has physical custody just because the child's in her home, but they don't have any, I mean, they can't make any decisions in school. They can't make medical decisions or anything like that. But yet we are expecting them to, you know, provide 24-hour care to these children, and we expect and hope that they will love and support them. But yet they have no - they really have no legal rights. And then it's just very - can be very difficult to sort of balance those - everybody's different needs and feelings for the children and the rights that they have.

HEADLEE: Well, then let me ask you the same question I asked Michelle, which is, is our foster care system flawed?
CECKA: Well, yes, I certainly believe that it is. I mean, I believe from the beginning we have too many children. As you mentioned earlier, about half a million children are in foster care in the United States. And most people don't know that - the general public doesn't realize that about 80 percent of those children are in due to what's called neglect, which is really a lot of - it stems from poverty and what - and not what we would think of as children in foster care as being severely abused, you know, physically or sexually. Their symptoms of economic difficulties in our society and people not having enough, not being able to support their family. So a lot of children don't belong in foster care and shouldn't be removed. And there's - so that's one major problem.

And then it - within the system itself, you hear horror stories, but they - it's - everybody has lots of competing needs and there's just not enough support for foster parents. There's not enough support for foster children. Foster children are moved around a lot, and there's also - it's a very difficult job to have. I have no, you know, I have full empathy - or as much as I can - for our case workers and social services team. This is very difficult, and they're not necessarily all well prepared and well trained and staffed to handle all the many crises that happen.

So it's just a really overburdened system, which, on the one hand, should have reduced numbers. If we address some of the inequality in the society, we could take a lot of kids and families from being involved with foster care. And at the same time, there are families that need this kind of help, but we're not necessarily directing the resources to the right places.

HEADLEE: Well, our question for those of you out there listening, is what do you think people should know about foster parenting as a foster parent? You can call us at 800-989-8255. Our email address is talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation. Just go to our website. It's npr.org, and then click on TALK OF THE NATION. You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

Let me go back to Michelle Burnette because - Michelle, we have people on the line who've been foster parents like you for a very, very long period of time. What have you learned now that you could've used on that first day?
BURNETTE: I think one of the biggest things that I learned was that whole misconception about the parents. I have to say, over the years, I've seen my family and my acceptance of the parents increase, and I've seen better relationships built between not only my family but more successful outcomes in the kids. So I think that's a really big thing. In fact, you know, I - the two-year-old I just adopted, her mother was in foster care, her whole childhood, when she had this baby, who was going to be just a weekend placement that, you know, we just adopted. But she just had another baby and I was with her in the room when she had the baby. And she's called me - I mean, I'm almost like her surrogate mother too. So, you know, we've probably prevented the child from coming in.

HEADLEE: Which would be amazing. We also have a call here from Julie in Wisconsin. And, Julie, you've been a foster parent for, what, a quarter of a century?

JULIE: Almost 24 years.

HEADLEE: Yeah. And what one thing do you wish people knew about foster parenting?

JULIE: Well, there's a couple things. I do teenagers and - like I was talking to the gentleman on the phone, you know, the thing is that I wish they knew that how much patience you have to have, you know? And you have made a comment about, you know, you wish that they would be able sit down and kind of, like, help them, you know, decide where they're going to go. We take teenagers, and there's no way any teenager will go, yeah, I'm going to stay here, you know? They come in, going, you know, I don't want to be here, you know? So I think there's a little difference on there.

And then the other comment I want to make was you had just mentioned about people staying in contact. I still stay in contact with the third child that I had in my home. I still talk to her and her mom all the time, you know? And these kids come back, and they come back for food.

(LAUGHTER)

JULIE: You know, they come back for just talking, going, what do I do? You know, some, you know, get pregnant, you know, before they showed and - you know what I mean? I just - there's a lot of - I
guess, for me, I think that every child that comes into my home, there’s always a reason. There are things that we can teach them. And when they walk away, I know that they walk away with a little bit that - just a little bit that, you know, we’ve taught them somehow.

HEADLEE: Thank you so much for your call. That’s Julie in Wisconsin who’s been a foster parent for nearly a quarter of a century. Dale Margolin Cecka, one of the things that many people keep mentioning is the misconceptions that people have about biological parents.

CECKA: Right.

HEADLEE: How does the case worker fit into all this with the foster parent?

CECKA: It’s very complicated. In the whole - our whole child welfare system is complicated because it’s contradictory in many ways, because the system is supposed to be both helping the family and reunify. But at the same time, the system is also making a case against the parents and for why they need to be removed from the child or why they need to be services. So there’s very often a rather adversarial relationship between the case worker and the biological parent. And then that can also translate into they’re being an adversarial relationship sometimes if - between the biological parent and the foster parent, even if, you know, I’ve seen - like our callers have said, I’ve seen many, many biological parents and foster parents get along wonderfully, but oftentimes, they’re not - they kind of feel that they are sort of at odds with each other.

And then from the foster parent perspective, a lot of times, foster parents aren’t necessarily receiving all the services they need or the support they need so they may have some, you know, some animosity towards the foster care agency or towards their foster care case worker so there is not - they’re not always very smooth relationships, and people are often just very dissatisfied all around. And it, you know, it comes from in the - they were just very difficult situations and sometimes because things are litigated in court and because there always seems to need to be a winner and a loser, people think that, you know, we can’t just work better together. It’s very adversarial.

HEADLEE: That’s Dale Margolin Cecka. She is a professor of law at the University of Richmond. Also directs the law school's family law
clinic. Joined us from our studio at Richmond, Virginia - soon to be a foster parent herself. And we spoke with Michelle Burnette, foster parent for more than 15 years and has fostered more than 40 children. God bless you, Michelle.

BURNETTE: Thank you.

HEADLEE: She joined us from her office in Leonardtown, Maryland. Coming up, when disturbing images of the dead and dying provoke change, we're going to talk about the difficult decision some families make. Stay with us. I'm Celeste Headlee, and it's TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

Web Resources
Sharon Astyk's Science Blog Piece "What Foster Parents Wish Other People Knew"

©2013 NPR