

Military OneSource Podcast — Military Child Care Overview: Accessibility, Availability and Affordability

Child & Youth Programs

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information, and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Today we're going to talk about military child care. And joining us today from Military Community & Family Policy's Office of Child and Youth Programs we have Stacey Young, who is director of the program. Also with us is Heidi Welch. She is associate director of Child and Youth Program Operations. So, it's great to have the both of you with us today. Welcome.

Stacey Young:

Thanks, Bruce.

Heidi Welch:

Thank you, Bruce. Thanks for having us.

Bruce Moody:

It's just such an important conversation. And Stacey, just to kind of get things rolling, I really want to have a general idea of the military's child care system. What is its purpose? What is the mission? Why do we do it?

Stacey Young:

Thanks, Bruce. There's a lot to talk about there, so I'm going to try and be as succinct as possible. The military child care system is comprised of four components. Our child development centers for our birth to 5-year-olds, our school-age care programs for our 5- to 12-year-olds, our military certified family child care homes, which can take care of

a combined age group of children from birth through 12 years, and then our community-based fee assistance program which also serves all ages.

And you asked, why do we do this? Well, child care has been a pretty big issue for the last few years across the nation, especially during COVID when child care programs were shutting down and parents weren't able to get to work. And so, bottom line, if we don't have child care, our military members, our service members, their spouses can't go to work and they can't support their families. So, it's a readiness issue. It's a workforce enabler that really impacts the readiness, efficiency and retention of the total force and their families.

Bruce Moody:

There's a number of factors that go into making child care available, such as affordability. I know there's more, and so I'd really like you to get into those underpinnings of the program.

Stacey Young:

Of course. We look at our program, and we kind of compare it to an iron triangle or a three-legged stool. If one of those legs is missing or if a side of the triangle is missing, it collapses. And those three components within the military child care system are quality, affordability and availability. So, we need those three components to have the most success in our programs.

Bruce Moody:

Heidi, I want to bring you into the conversation and maybe focus a bit on installation child care. What are the benefits for military families who choose to have on-installation child care?

Heidi Welch:

Bruce, there are so many benefits, but let me just go through some of the ones that I think are really important to emphasize with our audience today. Fees are based on total family income, like Stacey has just mentioned. And one of the things that I wanted to add to Stacey's information is one of the things that we've done in terms of trying to make child care more affordable, we actually decreased on-installation child care fees for nearly all of our families with a total family income of \$120,000 or less.

So that's not typically something we've done, but that is one of the things that we focused on this past year, in terms of trying to make child care more affordable to our families.

Access to quality child development programs, all of our programs are required to be nationally accredited by an early care and education accreditation body. These are the indicators of program quality, sort of like that housekeeping seal of approval. Staff training and professional development, all of our staff are required to go through an 18-month competency-based training program. We also have ongoing professional development for our staff through the Virtual Lab School.

Our staff have access to a quality early care and education curriculum called Early Learning Matters. Rigorous inspections and oversight is another indicator that we're very proud of. And a little bit of information about the inspection process. These are not just showing up at the door of the child development center, these are very thorough inspections. The installations go through a rigorous inspection, and they're also required to correct the items that are found during the inspection within 90 days. So that's kind of one of the things that makes it very rigorous. There are also other installation inspections by our component friends in the fire department, in public safety, as well as the public health. So that's some of the information in terms about rigorous inspections and oversight.

All of our staff are also required to go through comprehensive background checks. These are very comprehensive in nature. State criminal history checks, child abuse reporting within the state, as well as sex offender checks as well. So those are some of the things that I really think are important about our military child care system.

Bruce Moody:

Thanks, Heidi. I wanted to ask you about who's eligible for these programs, but also as we're talking about eligibility, the way we prioritize people for the programs is really equally important. Kind of get into the both of them, if you will.

Heidi Welch:

As Stacey mentioned previously, we view child care as a readiness and workforce enabler. In terms of eligibility, active-duty military service members are eligible, Guard and reserve on active duty or inactive duty training status are eligible, and DOD civilians. We do have a priority system in place, and we want to ensure that our centers are fully staffed, so we give the highest priority for child development program staff.

They are there to man our centers. They have to be there to ensure that our military can access child care. So, our child development staff have first priority. Our second priority is for active-duty military, then Guard and reserve on active duty or inactive duty training status. And these folks can either be working full-time, or in part-time positions, or even seeking employment. And then of course, our DOD civilians.

Bruce Moody:

Heidi, there's a lot of information to unpack beyond what you were just discussing with us. Where can service members and spouses find more information about military child care?

Heidi Welch:

Bruce, we've really worked hard over the last several years to ensure that military families know where to find information. Our first gateway for military families is through our [MilitaryChildCare.com](https://militarychildcare.com) system, and that is our online request-for-care and waitlist management system that allows families to request care anywhere in the world and provides a mechanism for our leaders at the installation to manage our child care waitlist.

So, there's a lot of information on [MilitaryChildCare.com](https://militarychildcare.com). Also, families can go to their installation child development center or their installation school-aged care program and get information. And then, of course, we have a lot of information available through Military OneSource in terms of our available programs at our installations.

Stacey Young:

If I could just add onto that, Heidi, that was a really great comprehensive description. I want to make sure that everybody also knows that when you're requesting care through the military child development system and you go to [MilitaryChildCare.com](https://militarychildcare.com), you're going to be able to request care for both installation-based programs as well as fee assistance.

And there's a listing of providers that are participating in fee assistance that families will be able to access. But I want to caution people here, because if you have a provider that you are interested in using for fee assistance and they're not on that list, you may be able to still help them get eligible to participate. So, there is that as well.

Bruce Moody:

There's a lot going on in this space, and that's one of the reasons that we're going to be talking about it over a series of episodes within this podcast. Heidi, just give us a sense of the topics that we're going to be hitting going forward.

Heidi Welch:

Well, Bruce, in our next podcast, we're bringing in our experts from our [MilitaryChildCare.com](https://militarychildcare.com) system. So, they're going to come in and tell our audience a little

bit about how the system works, how to utilize the system to your benefit and then just go through just some of the parameters of what the system can do.

In our third podcast, Bruce, we're going to be bringing in Nichele LaGrand-Murphy. Nichele has been our project officer leading our fee assistance expansion effort, called Military Child Care In Your Neighborhood Plus. Nichele is going to come in and talk with us about the work that she's doing with the states to try to bring in providers to participate in our fee assistance program. So that's one of the initiatives that we're really proud of, and Nichele will participate with us in our third podcast.

Bruce Moody:

Yep, this is a busy, busy space and an important one. As we wrap up, Stacey, from where you sit, I really want to get your thoughts on child care as a department priority, what its intent is, just give people a sense of what it means to the department to provide this service.

Stacey Young:

Thanks, Bruce, for letting me close out with that, because child care is one of the department's top priorities. It is something that we have been working on for a few years here since we got out of COVID and the availability of providers across the country significantly decreased. And we need the entire scope of all child providers out there to help us take care of our military families.

Without child care, our service members, our DOD civilians can't go to work. If they can't go to work, then we're looking at not being able to successfully accomplish the mission of our national defense. So, it's extremely important and something that is highly valued throughout the department and that we've been working on a significant amount in these last three years to expand opportunities to improve affordability and improve access as well. So, thanks for closing us out with that.

Bruce Moody:

Well, thank you. Thanks to the both of you, Stacey Young, Heidi Welch. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Stacey Young:

Thank you. It was great.

Heidi Welch:

Thank you, Bruce. We appreciate the opportunity.

Bruce Moody:

Awesome. Always great to have you back. I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we always like to hear from you. Click on the link in the program notes. You can send us a question, a comment, an idea maybe for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.