

Military OneSource Podcast — Supporting Youth and Teens During Deployment

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. We're going to talk about how we can support youth and teens during deployment. And with us, to have this conversation, is Shannon Washburn. Shannon is a school liaison, and she's at Marine Corps Air Station New River, which is across the river from Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Do I have that right? Do I have my geography right there, Shannon?

Shannon Washburn:

You do, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

All right, well welcome to the podcast.

Shannon Washburn:

Well, thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Bruce Moody:

Glad to have you. Let's begin with what is a school liaison, because I think that might be new for people, and we can kind of go from there.

Shannon Washburn:

OK. Yeah, absolutely. So it's still a little new for me because I've only been in this role about a year and a half, but essentially school liaisons help with all of the military families that are attached to an installation who have school-aged children from pre-K through 12th grade.

And we kind of help them with registration or getting their records, making sure that their children are set up for success as they move from place to place and in whatever their education choice is, whether they are going to on-base schools, they're going to off-base schools, private schools or homeschools.

We are just there to support, to ensure that everybody is mission ready and that our littlest service members are also mission ready.

Bruce Moody:

Nice. Now tell us a little bit about yourself. You mentioned you're relatively new to being a school liaison, so what's your background?

Shannon Washburn:

So it's education. I started off as an "English as a second language" teacher, and I taught grades K through 12 actually. Then I went into the classroom, still as an "English as a second language" teacher teaching second grade, and I taught that for about nine years in Virginia and down here in North Carolina. And then I just kind of wanted to branch out and try something new beyond the other side of the education world and be able to reach more families and more children.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, you've got the pronunciation of North Carolina, that Northern latitude background just can't match the way you smoothly say the name of your state, so very cool. But let's get a sense of what it is that you do to help families and to help youth, what resources you have when it comes to dealing with a deployment.

Shannon Washburn:

Yeah, for sure. So that's definitely something that's on the rise in this area. I'm sure it is at most of our installations with what is happening in the world right now. So we are there to support the families, support our military family life counselors that are embedded within our schools, our children and even some of our other programs with leading some different opportunities to support our youth.

So one of the things that I'm able to do that I love from my teacher heart is to do deployment groups out in some of our elementary schools with kids that have a parent who is leading up to deployment, is in deployment or has just returned from deployment. And really it's just an opportunity for kids in different grade levels to kind of come together and speak with other kids that are going through what they're going through or have gone through a deployment and gives them a chance in a safe place to kind of speak whatever's on their mind and talk about their feelings.

And there's all kinds of things that we talk about and just trying to keep it upbeat and help them really understand what their parent is doing is important and it's special and it's unique. And so are they. They play such an important role in what their parent is doing while they are deployed. Just supporting parents too, because sometimes being a classroom teacher, if you have a parent that's at home and they're really struggling with the deployment, that's going to reflect on the child that's coming to school.

You're going to see that in their behaviors and their academics, even if they're just overly tired or snappy or even super excited on the other end of the spectrum. And that, of course is going to impact how they're doing in school and their academics. So being able to support the parent that's left at home or younger siblings, older siblings.

And so one of the ways we do that is we can connect them with their DRC, which is their Deployment Readiness Coordinator in the Marine Corps, and that person is embedded in the unit, and they can help make sure that that family is getting whatever help and support that they need from a different avenue.

And then of course, if the child is struggling with behaviors or just the way that they're feeling, there are lots of counseling services on the installation that are available to our families. One of the big ones is FOCUS, which is Families Overcoming Under Stress, and they will sit down and they'll work with the child, they'll work with just the adults, they'll work with the whole family, and it's like a six- or an eight-week course that they do, and they just help them with coping skills and overcoming what they're going through in that moment.

And then of course there's community counseling. And then like I had mentioned before, there are MFLCs, so our Military and Family Life Counselors, and we are pretty lucky here at Camp Lejeune, New River, that all of our base schools and most of our off-base schools have an MFLC that provide those one-on-one sessions or small group sessions to our military kids. And many of them do deployment groups specifically for those kids that are going through that situation. So that's a really good thing that we get to do in this role.

Bruce Moody:

You touch on a lot of stuff that you do with the Marine Corps, but of course deployment is universal across all of the services. And maybe to kind of illustrate that, I wonder if you have any stories to share either about what parents experience, what kids

experience, what you see as an impact of a deployment on a family, individuals or as a unit.

Shannon Washburn:

Sure. So one in particular that comes to mind, it was a fifth grader, and he had a lot of absences, and it was very out of character for him, for that family. And then there started to be some behaviors. I mean, you could tell he's just kind of overly stressed, like something was going on at home.

Well, once we did a little research, especially to kind of dive into the attendance issue, we discovered that Mom was at home with a new baby, and Mom was just having a really hard time. She just wasn't getting enough sleep. She couldn't get up. She was crying. She was stressed. And of course she has this older child that's trying to be supportive, trying to be the dad, and they shouldn't have to do that. They shouldn't have to feel like they need to support Mom, and Mom shouldn't feel like she's alone either.

So with that case, we talked to the school obviously about the attendance issues and kind of how to deal with that and Mom, and then we reached out to the DRC, and the DRC was able to help this mom meet other spouses and kind of feel like she wasn't alone and get herself back on track and just feel like she was OK. Because even if you don't have somebody on deployment, having a new baby is stressful. So it was just one of those extra things for her.

Bruce Moody:

As we look at deployment, we look at a lot of the phases of deployment, and of course we all see the picture of the emotional reunion afterwards. Let's take a moment and have you talk to us about the impact of the period leading up to a deployment. And then we can talk about during a deployment after that.

Shannon Washburn:

So obviously it can look very different for each child, for each adult spouse that's staying here. I think most tend to feel sad and maybe even angry. I had a little girl, she was eight and her dad was going on the first deployment since she was like two. So she really didn't remember. And she was definitely upset, but she was also like, "Why does he have to go? Why can't somebody else go?" And I'm sure there's lots of kids that feel that way.

So just reassuring them that what their parent is doing is important and helpful, and it's not because they want to leave or they feel that they have to leave. It's just part of their job, and it's something that they want to do and it's their calling, and they're trying to keep all of us safe. And so, she was just having a hard time with it.

So once we worked through it, it got easier for her. And I think I've had a few different spouses tell me that six weeks tends to be the sweet spot. It takes about six weeks to kind of get into your groove without that other person. During that six weeks, from what I understand, it's a roller coaster. There are days that are great, they're good. There are days that parents and kids are a mess, and everybody's upset. And then there's obviously stuff in between. There's days that are OK where you just have a moment.

So it can look very different for all types of families. And of course, like you said, it's not just in the Marine Corps. It's at all of our military branches that have to go on deployment at some point or another.

Bruce Moody:

Let's get back to that reunion picture that everybody has their own version of, right?

Shannon Washburn:

Yeah.

Bruce Moody:

There does seem to be a lot of pressure on that. So how do you prepare a kid for that? That seems to be as much of a good news event as it is the level of anxiety and anticipation just must be through the roof. How do you prepare a kid for that?

Shannon Washburn:

One of the biggest things that I noticed parents were doing was just kind of reassuring their child that they're going to come back, it's going to be OK. But also giving them that time to almost grieve. It's like you lost something, because you were excited and you knew that they were coming back in.

I think it was supposed to be January, and then all of a sudden you're told, nope, it's going to be February. And then you're told again, it's going to be even later. So I know towards, in March, I even had a parent say, "We're not even sure. So at this point, we haven't even told our child that they might be coming back in March because we don't want them to have to feel the excitement and then the instant sadness of, 'Oh, by the way, it's another 30 days.'"

So we didn't really talk about dates. I think it's more of a timeframe and doing cute little things, like we made cards for the dads. But I think it's all about really staying positive, knowing that they're doing something that's important, and they're making a difference in the world and keeping the child distracted. I think that's been a big one that I've

heard from a lot of families is keeping them busy, keeping them in their sports or their activities or whatever that looks like.

Bruce Moody:

I'm so glad that we're having this conversation. It's so interesting listening to you talk about what you do with these families. It almost doesn't even sound like a job description. It just sounds like you are with these families, and you're helping them through an ordeal, a deployment, but really this is you working as a school liaison.

So let's talk about that for families who are dealing with deployment. Let's talk specifically about the School Liaison Program. What it has to offer, what sort of resources and support is available?

Shannon Washburn:

So obviously we're always here as a shoulder. I mean, we always tell our families that you can call us even if you just need somebody to listen. We were all educators, and so we all understand the education world, and we understand kids and families. And so just kind of letting the families know that they have somebody to talk to. They have somebody that's on their side, they have an advocate in their corner. And then we have lots of little trinkets in our toolkits.

But then there's also a lot of things that we can refer our families to. So I know that we do pre-deployment briefs for families, and we have tips for kids and tips for parents, and then activities for kids and while someone's deployed. And then one of the big things, especially for the younger kids, that we refer families to is Comfort Crew.

And Comfort Crew is a great, great little website, where a family can go on, and you just kind of put in your address, you put in whatever kit you want. There's four different kits: there's a deployment kit, a reunification kit, a wounded kit and then a grief kit.

But the deployment kit comes with this cute, cute little white bear, and his name is Cousy, and he's named Cousy 'cause he cares. And so he's just kind of a special little friend for kids while their parent is away. And then also within the kit, there's a journal that the child can start with Mom or Dad before they leave, and it's something that they can continue while they're gone.

And then there's even little activities for when they get back, and it's something that they can show their parent about what they did while they were away. So that's a great little thing that we refer to families. I mean, I've even given them to parents that have a two and a three-year-old, right? They're not even in school, but it's not age-specific, right? It's a cute little bear who's there to be your friend.

And then Trevor Romaine has the "While We Wait" series, which is a great little series, there's lots of different books that come with that. And then Sesame Street is a huge

one, especially for those younger ones that aren't even in school yet or the early elementary grades.

So Sesame Street has a whole website that's dedicated to just military families, and it's not deployment specific by any means. There's all kinds of things on there: transition, making new friends, and then of course, dealing with the deployment or reunification. And there's the videos, and there's activities that parents can print off. And some of the puppets even have somebody in the military, like Elmo. Elmo is in the reserves. How cool is that? I didn't even know until I got this job. So that's another great one.

And then if they have a child that's struggling with school, [Tutor.com](https://www.tutor.com) is something that can be helpful for our families just to kind of make sure that child stays on track academically, and it's free for military families. You create an account, and it's all subject areas, all grade levels, 24/7. It's a live tutor. That's another wonderful, wonderful resource. We get that a lot too when a parent is away, and the parent that's here is like, "I can't, my child doesn't want to listen to me." Or "This math is just way too hard. I can't help. I don't know what to do." So that's another one that we refer a lot of families to.

Bruce Moody:

We're going to put a lot of links in the program notes for people to get started. Of course, they can call Military OneSource anytime, they can call or chat. We've got the contact information in the program notes. You can reach out anytime to just say, "Hey, I heard this conversation about school liaisons and helping out during deployment. What's up with all that?" And they can get you in the right direction.

But Shannon, I wanted to ask you specifically ... So these resources for family and children, they're not just limited to one installation or service? I'd really like you to talk about that.

Shannon Washburn:

No, I don't believe so by any means. They're just for all military kids. It doesn't matter what branch your parent is in, you're a military brat no matter who you fall under.

Bruce Moody:

Or in your case, what side of the river you're on.

Shannon Washburn:

Yes, that too, right? Yeah. They get a little temperamental down here too because Lejeune's the ground side, and we're the air wing. So even within the Marine Corps, you

have that. But yeah, no, these things that are built for all military kids, all military families, it's not age specific, and it's definitely not military branch specific by any means.

Bruce Moody:

Shannon, this has been a really interesting conversation. I'm just so inspired by the heart that you bring, so individually, one-to-one to the families that you serve. I just welcome you to share any final thoughts on this topic.

Shannon Washburn:

Yeah, for sure. I just thought about another little resource as far as what we have here.

Bruce Moody:

Here we go.

Shannon Washburn:

And I'm assuming most of our military branches have libraries, right? So I know our library here, they do a lot of things for kids and for teens, and they will focus on different subject areas or content areas. So they'll do stuff that's specific to deployment as well. But there again, that's something that if you have a child that needs a distraction and there's something fun going on at the library, take them to the library.

And I would imagine probably most installations, their libraries do some fun stuff for kids. And then we also have team building here. So just kind of getting out there and finding out what your installation has to offer, talking to your school liaison, which we are also in most of our installations as well.

I know all our military branches have school liaisons. So reaching out to your school liaison, finding out what is available, and realizing you're not alone. One thing I've learned in this job is you don't know what you don't know, but sometimes it's like, who do I ask?

And I tell families, even if you call us and it's not something that's in our wheelhouse, we'll help you figure it out. We'll point you in the right direction. We'll find that subject matter expert that you need to talk to. We don't just tell a family, "Hey, you're on your own, sorry. It's not an education question." No, no, no. So I think utilizing what is on your installations and realizing that there's so, so much for these families is a great, great thing and a great way to realize you're not alone.

And spouses too, reaching out to the spouses. I know a lot of the units and the battalions and the squadrons, they do a lot with spouse events and getting together

with children. And again, I feel like that's probably something that across all military branches. So just kind of reaching out to who's in your group, who else is kind of feeling the same way, or knowing who to ask, just knowing who's there to support you.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, and as you said, even if you don't know, try because whoever you end up speaking to is going to set you in the right direction. Shannon Washburn, what a pleasure. Thank you for joining us today.

Shannon Washburn:

Thank you, Bruce, for having me. This was great.

Bruce Moody:

Well, we'll have you back some time.

Shannon Washburn:

Sounds good. Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you. Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. We have a link in the program note, you can send us a question or comment or an idea for a future episode. 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 deal with military life. I'm Bruce Moody, thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.