

Military OneSource Podcast — Sesame Street and Month of the Military Child

Program title: Month of the Military Child

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Podcast transcript:

- **[Speaker 1]** 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](https://militaryonesource.mil).

- **[Bruce Moody]** Hi, I'm Bruce Moody, and welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. The Defense Department is committed to supporting the health and the well-being of all military children. So how do we do it? Well, one way is to bring in people who are really, really good at working with children. And if you grew up watching Sesame Street, and of course you did, you know what an amazing national treasure Sesame Street is. And my guests today are from Sesame Workshop. They're the people who bring you Sesame Street, the characters, the sunny days. And they bring you something called Sesame Street for Military Families. And we'll talk about that in this episode. So let's just get right to it. Let's bring our guests from the Sesame Workshop. We have with us today, Anna Carbone and Sabrina Huda. Welcome to the both of you.

- **[Anna Carbone]** Hi, Bruce. Thank you so much for having us today. We're really excited to dive in and talk more about Sesame Street for Military Families. My name is Anna, and I'm a project coordinator here on the U.S. Social Impact Team at Sesame.

- **[Sabrina Huda]** And I'm Sabrina Huda. I'm a project director here at Sesame Workshop, and I am so humbled to be working on our Sesame Street for Military Families initiative.

- **[Bruce Moody]** I'm really excited. I'm so glad that we're having this time together. Let's just begin with where we are. It's the month of April, and it's the Month of the Military Child. And it is a time when we recognize the role military children of all ages have in supporting the military service of their parents and their family. And so I just want to welcome the both of you from the Sesame Workshop and just get your thoughts of what the Month of the Military Family means to the team, your colleagues at Sesame Workshop.

- **[Anna Carbone]** You know, Bruce, April is such an exciting month for us at Sesame because we really get to spend the whole month just celebrating and honoring military kids and families throughout the whole month. And we do a lot of different things to keep the excitement and the celebrations going, and there are tons of ways that all of our listeners here can join in on the fun. So we're lots of time engaging with families on social media. Every Wednesday, we share a trivia question on Facebook. So make sure to throw your hat in the ring and see how much you know about Sesame Street for Military Families. We also have gathered some beautiful quotes

from military kids, talking all about what makes them awesome, and you can amplify those on your own channels. And we also got to celebrate Purple Up! Day in person for the first time in two years with some yummy purple treats. And you can check out our Facebook for some pictures there. But, overall, it's just a really special month, and we love being able to celebrate.

- **[Bruce Moody]** That's great. It's great. I'd like to see some of the pictures of the purple treats. But let's back up a little bit. Sesame Street is a program which needs no introduction. But maybe what we should do for the benefit of people who are listening is explain what Sesame Workshop is. Who are you and what is your mission? Who do you serve?

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Yeah, Bruce, of course. I can take that one. It's Sabrina. And many people, like you mentioned, know the wonderful show that's 50 years running. But a lot of folks don't know a few things about Sesame Workshop. One, that we're actually a nonprofit organization, and we have been supporting military families for over 15 years now. It really started post 9/11. We created a program. It's free. It's bilingual. It includes multimedia resources, and it's really to support all military families through all the milestones of military life, from deployments to homecomings, caregiving challenges, as well as grief and then transitioning to veteran life. So this program is called Sesame Street for Military Families. And all of the resources that we're talking about can all be found on SesameStreetforMilitaryFamilies.org. We know the military loves acronyms, so we call it SSforMF.org. So that's an easy way for all of your listeners to come to.

It's really important. We learn from military families what do they need in real time. So it's really important for us to hear from the families. And that's really how we create new resources every year — listening, learning with our partner organizations like Military OneSource, and then from parents who reach out and say, "This is what my family needs right now." So Anna and I are very excited to be a part of a small team who gets to do this amazing work at Sesame Workshop.

- **[Bruce Moody]** It is amazing. And we're just so thrilled with a level of talent and understanding that Sesame Workshop brings to all that you do. We have 1.6 million military-connected children. And while, of course, we have our heartfelt gratitude for all that we do, we support them. We show our gratitude through action, by taking steps to actually support them. And so our focus this year is on the mental well-being of our military children. And so a big portion of that is how we empower parents to look after the well-being of their children. I know that you and the Sesame Workshop, you have a lot of health and wellness resources, and I'd really like for you to talk about them and how they benefit military families.

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Of course. First, I want to start by saying yes, definitely with Sesame Street, how do we support families? Our goal is looking at it from a very strength-based approach. We know how strong, resilient, amazing military families are. But we want to make sure that when they look at our characters, little kids can see themselves. So Elmo is our little military Muppet. His family is serving. And we always use Elmo in our videos and our content to really talk about all those little challenges, changes that families go through in the eyes of a 3-1/2-year-old.

And then for our veteran families, any who are here, or families providing caregiving, we have Rosita that everybody knows. And many people may not know, but Rosita's father served, and he is now in a wheelchair. So he has both visible but also silent injuries. And we talk a lot about caregiving duties that a lot of young children end up doing that sometimes they're not recognized for. They are our silent heroes. So I just wanted to give that kind of little cute

example of really how we're supporting military families and looking at their journey through little kids' eyes.

And then of course, for family health and wellness, I'm so happy. We know that it is really top of mind. One thing for us is all of our resources look at health and wellness, but for military families specifically, we know that those parents — they have regular day-to-day responsibilities as parents, from taking their children to school, daycare, fixing meals, running errands. But on top of that, what do military families have? They have that extra demand of military life: planning a PCS, deployments or temporary duties, establishing support networks. And now, what we really see more than ever, after and during COVID, military families tend to be our frontline families whenever there's some sort of national urgency, a disaster. They're the ones who are being deployed to that area. And we want to make sure that Sesame Street is committed to help families realize that even when things are difficult, they can stay strong in mind and body. And how can we give them some tools and strategies to do that? One of the things we really know with young children is if you build those everyday tools and resilience, giving them routines, giving them strategies, then when the real hard stuff come along — those challenging obstacles — they can really learn and grow and overcome them. Right?

So, what we've really curated is simple actions a family can take so that they can be ready for difficult times. These are activities parents can do with their children, as a family or even alone. We know that our main suggestions on how to build resilience, to bounce back more quickly and keep forward — we built it around three different, really key points. One is helping to build a hopeful, confident attitude, and that's really that mental health. But then also the physical health — developing a strong, healthy body and lifestyle. And then, also, what are you putting in your body? Learning to eat mindfully and healthily. And then, I'm sorry, there is a fourth one. It's that self-care. This is something all parents don't do, we believe, but more so the military parents who are taking care of their young ones.

A great example, Bruce, of how we do this is we created a video called Big Bird's Comfy-Cozy Space. So it's something — it's a game, it's a storybook — it's something parents can do with their children. So, whenever they're having a challenging moment. Helping them create a safe space, both physically — maybe in their house, they're creating a fort —but also in their mind. If they don't have a go-to space right away, it's a great technique through this game that we've created, this video that reinforces that message on how to remember to calm your body and your mind. And it's a strategy they can practice every day, especially when a little one's having a hard moment — they're moving, they're going to a new school or they just don't want to eat their broccoli for dinner. So it's really important when they know that strategy. Then when the big things happen, how can parents remind them, "Oh, what do we do when we're feeling really not safe, or we're feeling a little overwhelmed?"

Similarly, we have this great video on our website called Count, Breathe, Relax. We know lives can get so hectic now more than ever. It's a simple strategy to help little ones relax, like counting birthday candles and helping them to learn to remember to breathe. So simple, simple things.

And the last one I have to mention, Bruce, that's also on our website — it's called the Feel Safe and Calm. It's a printable. We know little kids and parents learn in different ways — sometimes through videos, sometimes through drawing — so we've also created these very simple black and white printables, easy to print. And it's really helping little kids learn different yoga moves. When we feel better inside, our bodies are relaxed. So there's a really sweet one about how to

help a little one with really clear instructions. Pretend they're a turtle. They can feel safe inside their shell. Then they can draw out Grover doing the same pose as well. So these are just some of the examples of resources we have. It's all listed in this topic called Family Health and Wellness, or just Family Health, if you go to the website at www.SSforMF.org.

- **[Bruce Moody]** It's a really fascinating website, and I was going through it. And you're right, these are simple activities. They're very, very simple. Honestly, they're so brilliantly conceived and the way in which they guide parents. So in the section of the website, there's one called Games for Military Kids. And there's two which I just think are brilliant. And one is called Breathe, Think, Do. And it guides parents in teaching kids how to breathe deeply so that they can calm down. And, of course, that's just something that you can take with you through all stages of life. And the other one that I think is just terrific is called Mood Monster. And the Mood Monster helps kids explore how their faces and their bodies show emotions. And so can you talk a little bit about sort of the premise of these games? Because it really seems like we want to validate and help build a real ability that the children already have but really need help in developing their ability to be resilient and how these tools help parents to help their kids.

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Yeah, of course. No, thank you. I'm so happy you got a chance to look at some of the resources. One thing that's really important to mention is Anna, myself, our team — we're not military connected at Sesame Workshop. So for us, and this is for all of the resources we create, Bruce, it's really important to make sure we know what we're doing. And for that we do a lot of research. We talk to military health experts, whether they're in the healthcare field, whether they're educators, anyone really working directly with children. What do you need? What's a great way to help children give them language to talk about their feelings, if that's the important piece of resource we want to be able to create. And then, what we learned is sometimes there's a disconnect between what people who serve family say versus the family. So we make sure we back up that research and then go interview parents and families as well. Okay, this is what we're hearing that could be helpful for you.

And a lot of the challenges are how do I help give my children language skills? How do I help them express their emotions so that they're ready when a big milestone happens for our family? And that's really the foundation of a lot of these games. There's another one we created — it's my favorite actually — it's called Feeling Faces. And what it does is, it's really a language game. It's really cute with Elmo, Rosita and Oscar, because sometimes we feel really grouchy. And we name over, I think, 30 different emotions in there. It's like a little glossary. I love that because, especially young kids who don't have the language skills, it's a great game for parents to play with their little ones to help them build those language skills. So when they can actually say what they're feeling, it can help them feel more heard, maybe less tantrums, because they're now being able to express what they want.

And then the other thing with these games that we do is we do a lot of testing with them. So even with our games — it's a little technical, when we go to a beta phase — when they're pretty ready to go, we actually test them with families to make sure that they're doing what they said and helping really engage that rich conversation that parents can have with their children, that children know how to play these games and it feels very user friendly. But again, the goal here is really hearing from parents and providers what they need. And for most of our military resources, it's always, our goal has been, how do we help children feel safe, feel like they're cared for and loved, especially as they're going through transitions. And our goal is with these

sort of games, we help them do that by helping to build that everyday resilience. And we are so sorry. There's some drilling going on at the workshop today.

- **[Bruce Moody]** No. I was actually going to say something about how you continue to grow. So there needs to be drilling every now and then.

- **[Anna Carbone]** Exactly. I don't know.

- **[Bruce Moody]** I'm going to jump back into the conversation here. So these tools, these resources, one of the ways in which these are so helpful and resonate so well with military families is that Sesame Workshop, as you were talking about, really works very, very, very closely with the military to understand not just the how the military works, but the culture and the language of the military, what people are experiencing when they move. And you really get a sense when you look through Sesame Street for Military Families. And one thing I want to point out on the website, as much as we talk about deployments and we should, of course, you have a new section there which gets into temporary duty, which is very much like a deployment, of course, but it is different. There's a lot of differences between temporary duty and a deployment. And, as a result of what Sesame Workshop does in working with the military, you have a whole section about temporary duty. Can you talk about that very briefly?

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Of course. It's really one of the new topics. I think we're all just also so proud of. When we first started this initiative 15 years ago, deployments were years at a time, multiple deployments. That's what families were experiencing — huge separations for long periods of time. That's not what deployment looks like right now anymore. Right? There's a lot of short spurts of trainings, leaving your families for a long weekend or a week for training or a weekend assignment, and then you're back. So deployments are much more frequent. They're also very unplanned right now. That's one of the big things we heard from parents especially, that it could be at a moment's notice that my wife or husband will be called to go to a training or go to a frontline for serving some specific need in the military. So we wanted to make sure in those sort of situations, how do we really look at what is that family going through?

And with temporary duty, we created actually one of our newest video series in a long time with Elmo, whose daddy is doing temporary duty. They are a National Guard family, and Louie's been called away. And it's right when Elmo has a big baseball game coming up. It doesn't sound like, oh my God, that's so important, but for a 3-1/2-year-old, that's the world when daddy's not there for his big game. So we wanted to make sure in these series of videos, we really help families talk through the strategies that they can use before they're planning for this temporary duty because they just found out about it, how they stay connected during that temporary duty, and then how do they reconnect back when daddy's home. What do they talk about, how do they make sure that they really revisit the things that they missed in each other's lives, and kind of just bounce back right where they left off. So really, really excited about this content. And again, I think it's just a testament to how we really want parents and families to know we're listening. We know this is what deployments have really evolved to look like this now. And we wanted to make sure we were responding in that way.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Yeah. And it does bear repeating because it's essentially the behind-the-scenes work. But there is a lot of it. There's a lot of cooperation between the military and Sesame

Workshop, honestly, just to get this right — to identify the needs, to identify the path forward for families and for children. So what's next for Sesame Workshop?

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Yeah. My goodness. So on a content wise, it's really looking, Bruce, and that's why we wanted to talk a little bit about health and wellness. But we're really looking at mental health overall for military families. Family readiness is so important to the family structure in the military and what can Sesame Workshop do to help support that in the years to come. So just mental health overall, especially what our country's been through in the last few years. That's something that's really top of mind for us as we look to continue to do that sort of support. And then, on a more fun note, I think Anna has something really exciting to share just about how we're also reaching out to more families through our social channels.

- **[Anna Carbone]** Yeah, absolutely. So in addition to the new content that we're developing, we're also always looking for new ways to connect with families, especially in this very virtual world that we're living in right now. We will be launching an Instagram account in May that we're so excited about because it's just a new way for us to get to know all of the military families that we're creating content for and, also, the providers and the folks who are working with those families on a day-to-day basis.

And we've already fostered an awesome virtual community on Facebook. We've had our account for so many years now. But this is really just a new, exciting way to do more of that work. And we know that social media is such an important tool for family members to connect with one another as well, who are living through similar experiences that they are. So we're happy to be part of that communication. And it'll be a place where we can share more of our activities, principles, videos and just engaging with family and providers in a new way. Of course, also, it's a place that you'll be able to go to get words of encouragement from the Muppets and lots of new tools. So be sure to give us a follow, and we will see you online.

- **[Bruce Moody]** We will. Thanks Anna. And when that launches, we're definitely going to update these program notes with a link to the Instagram account. And so, as we have been talking, Anna, about the degree to which Sesame Workshop works with military families, with the Defense Department, can you touch on the degree to which... So, for families who are saying, "I've never had the opportunity to tell Sesame Workshop my thoughts on what I need Sesame characters and their games and their tools to address." So to what degree are these channels — you mentioned Facebook and Instagram — to what degree are they a channel for families to let you know what they need?

- **[Anna Carbone]** Yeah, absolutely. We are always kind of checking our messages and comments and hearing directly from the community in that way. But we also have a form that we share periodically on our social channels and with our partner organizations that allow us to collect feedback in this larger way. So we like to celebrate military families and their stories on Military Family Fridays, as we call them on social media. And it's a great opportunity for us to just hear your story. You can send in photos, you can let us know what your kiddos have learned from using the resources and also, what they'd like to share with other families and really giving them a platform to do just that. So there are a lot of different ways that we like to collect that feedback, and you can learn more about it from following us too.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Fantastic. Yes, Sabrina.

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Another thing I'd love to add, Bruce, is for any parents out there, any of your listeners, if they have a question, they can also always email us. We have an inbox. It's very, very simple. It's called militaryfamilies@sesame.org. And we check that, like Anna also mentioned, very often to really see what families who may have come across our resources — what they're looking for, what they need, any questions we can definitely respond to. I do apologize in advance for all your listeners who want Elmo at their next birthday party. We can't help with that. But if you're really looking at “I want to know Sesame's really working on resources around food insecurity” or something, we can help maybe point you in the right direction. But it's also really helpful for us to let our team know this is what families need right now, this is what they're asking us for. So what can we do to make sure we can be prepared to respond?

- **[Bruce Moody]** And as you hear from families, what are you hearing with regard to COVID? What are families telling you that they need at this point?

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Really timely question. We're actually right in the midst of doing research. We're doing a bulletin board with parents as well as providers who are supporting military parents on this, exactly what you said — how has COVID really impacted their family and what are they needing? We have created at Sesame Street some general resources to support families during COVID, as well as really, again, really focusing on social emotional. So it started with a lot of health messaging, but it really evolved to what kiddos were going through from experiencing people around them being sick, and grief, and then learning how to be really flexible, because things keep changing for them. Wearing masks, which I'm not even used to that still.

So one of the things I know, I mean, this research isn't been completed yet, but the one trending thing I keep seeing over and over again is just how isolated military families feel during this whole process. I think our whole nation felt that way. Beyond our nation, but specifically for military families where community is so important for them because they jump from community to community with PCSing. So thinking about what can we do better to support them through that, the social isolation that they continue to feel.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Well, it has been an absolute pleasure, Anna and Sabrina, to speak with both of you. Any final words?

- **[Sabrina Huda]** Oh, my gosh. Thank you so much for having us here today. And we look forward to doing this more in person. Anna and I always say, it's 15 years that we've been celebrating military families at the workshop, but there's a new generation of military families every year. And our goal is how can we make sure they know about these great free resources that are available to them.

- **[Anna Carbone]** I just wanted to say thank you so much, Bruce and Military OneSource, for giving us this platform to just talk to your audience and always looking for new ways to connect with the amazing families that we're creating content for. So, thank you so much and look forward to chatting with you again.

- **[Bruce Moody]** That would be great. I look forward to our next conversation. Thank you to the both of you for speaking with us today.

So Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department and we've got tools, websites, apps, there's a call center, and now we're a podcast — all to help military families

navigate military life. So be sure to subscribe to this podcast because we'll be covering a wide range of topics for military families. I'm Bruce Moody, and thank you for listening. Bye-bye.