

Military OneSource Podcast — DASD 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.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Making sure military children, youth and teens are cared for and supported is an important way the Defense Department takes care of its people. Every April, Month of the Military Child provides the opportunity to celebrate the contributions and support the unique needs of this important part of the military community. My guest today is Mrs. Patty Barron, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Military Community and Family Policy, MC&FP for short. We'll talk about MC&FP tools and resources, including Military OneSource, of course, all of which support the well-being of military children and the readiness of parents. Ma'am, welcome aboard the podcast.

- **[Patty Barron]** Hello, Bruce. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

- **[Bruce Moody]** I'm excited to have you with us. Before we get into the conversation of Month of the Military Child, let's give folks a chance to get to know you. Again, you're the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Military Community and Family Policy. First question is how does it feel to have the longest job title of your career?

- **[Patty Barron]** You know what? First, I actually love it because I always win having the longest title in the room. If I can just monetize that, I would be rich.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Excellent. In the military we love our job titles, the longer the better. So we're glad to have you with us. And you serve military families — that's really the distillation of your job title — and you have a military family. So talk to us about your background, your family and the path that led you to MC&FP.

- **[Patty Barron]** Absolutely, Bruce. I'm always super happy to talk about my family. My husband served in the United States Army. He was an infantry officer for 30 years, and I was along for the 30-year ride. We actually met in school and got married right after he was commissioned. We moved 14 times, seven CONUS and two OCONUS. And as a registered nurse, I'm also licensed in seven states. And many of my fellow nurses that are military spouses will understand exactly what I'm talking about. I raised three military kids to adulthood, and all three of them make me incredibly proud. My two older kids went to four elementary schools, two middle schools and three high schools. That's an awful lot of transition. Their military childhood still affects them to this day. And my youngest had a more stable school experience. And I think that they give him a hard time because they tell him that he didn't have it as rough as they did.

So it's always an interesting discussion at the Thanksgiving table. My daughter served in the military, and she deployed to Afghanistan where she met her husband, who is also in the United States Army. She was medically retired and now is a military spouse. And she's raising two absolutely adorable military children who happen to be my military granddaughters. And I know I'm a little biased, but I do think they're adorable. And the last thing I'll let you know is that before I came to DOD, I was at the Association of the United States Army where I served as the military family readiness director there, which I was very proud to have that job for the longest I've ever had a job, which was nine years.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Well, it's great to have you with us. And I'm sure all of that really plays a part in what you do for us on a daily basis. So here's a number, when we're talking about the number of military children, youth and teens in military families. The most recent number that we have is 1,651,414 military children, youth and teens. So as a military mom who serves military families, what is your message to these kids and their parents?

- **[Patty Barron]** Isn't that a huge number? 1,651,414. Absolutely amazing. And what I say to them is how amazed I am by their tenacity and by their adaptability. We extend a heartfelt gratitude for everything that they do and all of the support that military kids provide to their service member parent and their family every single day. As we know, our nation's service members don't serve alone. Those that have families count on that family support, and alongside many of them are amazing military kids who make significant contributions to the country in their support of their service member parent while dealing with uncertainty and concern.

I know I saw that with my own kids constantly. So, of course, we pay tribute to our military kids by designating the month of April as the Month of the Military Child. And that's how we get to express our thanks and support with special activities, focusing on military children and the unique and invaluable role that they play. And we also have to ensure that they have access to support and resources as they need, because that's widely important as well. I have to tell you, April is one of my very favorite celebratory months.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Oh, absolutely. It's a high holiday around here. So let's talk about the experiences of military children and youth and teens from the position that this is the understanding that ensures that our efforts are relevant and impactful.

- **[Patty Barron]** Absolutely, Bruce. From my own personal experience, I know that military kids can experience a range of unique challenges and transitions that result from the military life. Certainly, as I mentioned before, my kids went to an awful lot of different schools and had to adjust to those schools. They include frequent moves, family separations, worry about the safety of a deployed or absent parent and missing the support of extended family who likely live far away. I can't tell you the number of birthdays, baptisms, family celebrations that we missed to the point where my military family was more of my family than my family of origin. And that happens an awful lot because we depend so much on our friends and military family members.

To that extent, parents, too, can have increased stress regarding their children's well-being, their care and their education. Trying to find a quality, affordable child care to ensuring that their older child has the right requirements to graduate on time, despite going to two high schools in different states while dealing with all the emotions that come along with changing schools, my kids and many kids had to learn the state history in order to meet that graduation requirement. So my kids know the history of the state of Georgia, the state of Pennsylvania and

the state of Virginia. I mean, they just had to do it because that was part of the graduation requirements. So, we really do understand the plethora of challenges that are out there.

- **[Bruce Moody]** So, adding to the challenges, how has the global pandemic intensified these challenges and increased stress levels?

- **[Patty Barron]** I would say, Bruce, how has it not? I mean, the COVID-19 has placed so much extra stress on our families. And at the individual level, families have had to adapt to them over and over again, including remote learning. Sometimes you're remote, sometimes you're not. So that going back and forth. Disrupted or delayed PCS moves. I know that my daughter — she PCSed from Hawaii all the way to Germany. That was not a fun PCS at all last year. And, of course, spouses who might have lost jobs and then, consequently, have a reduction in income at home. Those are just some of the individual stressors. At the societal level, families face the national crisis in child care. All over the place, across the nation, we see this reduction in child care options. Also the expanded experience of food insecurity or housing pressures, many families are going through that.

And so now more than ever a focus on supporting the mental health and overall well-being of our military children is absolutely critical. The increased stress and dealing with more uncertainty than civilian children is part of being a military child. That's not to say that civilian kids don't have challenges because, of course, they do. But our military kids have unique challenges that we have to respond to. And we know that the high stress levels can be dangerous for kids of all ages and can have lasting effects. Early childhood and even adolescents are particularly vulnerable times because of the capacity to cope with stress and because of the rapid brain development during these two periods. We know that the early years of brain development are incredibly crucial, but we also now know that during the adolescent phase, there's also more brain development that we have to be attuned to, and stress can negatively impact that development if we're not careful.

- **[Bruce Moody]** So, how are we finding ways to mitigate the impact of stress and help improve the experience of military children?

- **[Patty Barron]** This is a key aim for the Department of Defense and for this year's Month of the Military Child celebration. I'm incredibly proud that this is something that we are looking at. We are leveraging research on resilience, which shows in children that a number of positive influences can stack the scale in favor of overcoming adversity, right? So the more positive connections and positive experiences that a child can have, they build that armor against the negative experiences that, of course, they will also have. When these factors are present in a child's life, they counteract the negative effects of stress. So supportive relationships, a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control, adaptive skills and self-regulation, sources of faith and hope and cultural tradition — these are all incredibly important. And these all connect to hopefulness and meaning-making, which again helps to arm us against those negative challenges.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Absolutely. So, ma'am, you spend a lot of your day talking with senior leaders, both in the Defense Department and other agencies, talking with members of non-governmental organizations that serve and support military families. So what are you saying to them about our military families?

- **[Patty Barron]** First, Bruce, I let them know how much I appreciate the attention and support that they provide to our military families. At the highest level at the Department of Defense with all that they have to worry about, they also are just as equally concerned for the health and

well-being of our families. And I can't share that thankfulness enough. We share a mission, as you know, to recognize and support every military child, youth, teen and parent. Together we celebrate and acknowledge the Month of the Military Child in April with a focus on the overall mental health and well-being of military children of all ages.

And the Department of Defense, along with the White House, through the Joining Forces and our military support organization friends, know that mission readiness depends on a strong and resilient homefront. Let me say that again. Mission readiness depends on a strong and resilient homefront. And we honor all those people that make it possible, our nation's military families and our military children. And then, of course, I tell them to go to MilitaryOneSource.mil to learn more about services, support and resources for all military kids and families. It's, of course, something that we always talk about — Military OneSource.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Well, we appreciate that. And there's a lot to it. There's a lot in the website, and there's just absolutely no way we could cover everything that's in the site during the span of this conversation. But in the context of Month of the Military Child, what we want to do is focus on one section in the website called the Parenting Resource Center.

- **[Patty Barron]** This is Military OneSource's A-list resources for MilParent, and we put them together through feedback from parents. That's important to know. We really listen hard to what parents were telling us worked and helped. These are resources that parents have found most helpful. We grouped the resources into three sections — infant to preschool, school-age children, and youth and teens. I actually wish we had another section. So, I'm going to plant the seed for college-age students, because they required an awful lot of support as well.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Okay. We'll put a pin in that. We'll get back to that.

- **[Patty Barron]** Great.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Okay. All right. Deal. So we're going to look at three resources today. And so let's start with the first, and that is Military OneSource's New MilParent specialty consultation. Can you talk to us about that please?

- **[Patty Barron]** We know that the scariest time in a couple's life is when you're welcoming a new baby into your home. I tell you, it doesn't come with a rule book. I wish it did. It just doesn't. And so the way that you get through it is by leaning on friends and family to help you through — especially the very first month. So if you're getting ready to welcome a new baby or are currently parenting a young child, you might need to lean on that support system because we know that parenting is such an adventure. It's a great adventure, but it's an adventure. But it's not one that you have to take by yourself. New military parents need backup from their family, from their friends, the unit and the entire military community. And they're there for you, but they're not always there when you need them. That's why Military OneSource offers the New MilParent specialty consultation.

I'm so proud of this program. It's designed with expecting parents and parents of children up to the age of 5 in mind. It's free. You guys, it's free. And it's individualized, confidential support for new and expecting military parents. All you have to do is call Military OneSource 24/7, or you can start a live chat to schedule your New MilParent session. We also have OCONUS calling options for our overseas families. We haven't forgotten about you guys. And the way that this works, it's just beautiful, because it's very flexible. You can set up a series of video or phone sessions with experts whenever it's most convenient for you. Like at two o'clock in the morning, when that baby just doesn't want to go to sleep, you can actually call and get some support. The

consultation provides service members and families access to support and resources on a wide variety on parenting topics. And that's no lie. Just about any topic is available for you to get support on.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Well, you did say that parenting is an adventure. So the specialty consultation is not the only thing we offer. So next up is the New Parent Support Program. So, the New Parent Support Program, which I love, I really do. I think it's a wonderful program. This program helps military parents, including expecting parents, transition safely into parenthood, and it provides a nurturing environment for their children. So, ma'am, if you would tell us about this program and the support and guidance it provides to parents.

- **[Patty Barron]** Absolutely. As a registered nurse, this is one of those programs that's very near and dear to my heart because I used to be a community health nurse. And part of that is to do home visits. And that's what parents can expect with this New Parent Support Program. The program focuses on providing one-on-one support to new and expectant parents through those home visits. Especially, sometimes you just need someone right there to show you how to do it. That's exactly what this program offers. Now, some installations may offer parenting classes and groups, which is great, and the services vary by service branch and by installation.

But they mostly can include home visits, as I mentioned before, referral to other resources, especially local resources, prenatal classes as you're getting ready for that new baby, parenting classes as you're parenting that new baby to toddler and classes for new fathers. For new fathers especially. How do you hold the baby? How do I talk to the baby? Does the baby even know I'm here? Yes, the baby knows you're there. And good interaction is incredibly important. And also play groups. Because sometimes play groups can provide a little bit of respite care for that mom or support with other new moms that can help you through some of those difficult times.

The New Parent Support Program home visitors assess the strengths and needs of participating families with a variety of tools to understand a family's unique environment. That's a key phrase, your own unique environment. What is going to work for you in your home. Anything you share with a program staff member is confidential, including health-related information, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act that protects that. We know that HIPAA is very important and protects your privacy. So you can feel free to discuss personal issues with the staff so they can better help you and your parenting concerns. And also find your resources when maybe it might not be a parenting concern but other things that you might be concerned about.

- **[Bruce Moody]** I've met a number of the folks who work through this program, and they are just amazing people. They are the nicest, the most patient, the most nurturing. I could just go on, but they're the kind of people that you meet and you think, I hope this program flourishes. I hope people take advantage of this program because there are some genuinely beautiful people who just want to help people feel comfortable and confident in being parents.

- **[Patty Barron]** I agree 100%. It's a special type of person that can do this type of work. And it's so heartwarming to see the help and support that they provide.

- **[Bruce Moody]** It really is. They're special people. So let's move on to our third and final topic. This addresses, I guess, the somewhat older children. So, the topic is school liaisons. And people might not be familiar with what a school liaison is, ma'am, so if you could talk about how a school liaison helps students realize their educational goals.

- **[Patty Barron]** Bruce, I can honestly tell you that one of the things that parents worry the most about is what type of school and what quality of school are their children going to attend when they move. As a matter of fact, that spouse network, it's one of the first things you do is you call a friend that's in your new duty location and you say, where should I live? Where are the good schools? So we know that education is absolutely one of the most critical topics that we discuss as military parents. And, of course, parents have a lot of concerns about their kids' education and how military life can impact education. So it's hard to find answers. You can find them obviously by going to the school websites, you can talk to someone at the school that can help you, but there's also a phenomenal resource in the school liaison — because the school liaison really understands the life that we live as military family members.

And they can connect you with the support that you need to make that transition from the old school to the new school as easy and as smooth as possible. The School Liaison Program offers an array of services and resources to support children, parents, installation leadership, schools and their surrounding communities. So they're in on all the meetings, all of the information gathering. They try really hard to think about any question that a parent might ask or has asked before so that they can provide those answers to incoming parents and children. So, by working together with these stakeholders, the school liaison builds a support network to provide the best possible education experience for military-connected kids and youth worldwide. It's such an essential service, and they really do try very, very hard to provide a good support to incoming families.

- **[Bruce Moody]** So, there's a page on Military OneSource that addresses the school liaison, and it includes in there a really important link which is why it's so big. You click on this link to identify your local school liaison. Really important. We'll include a link in the program notes to this episode.

- **[Patty Barron]** Absolutely. And one thing I want to add about when you go to that link and find your local school liaison is if you have an EFMP family member, especially a family member that might need an IEP transition, work with that school liaison to make sure that it gets done as quickly and as timely as possible. It's one of the things that we hear from our EFMP families quite a bit is that's an area that can be very clunky and can take an awful lot of time. And kids don't have that kind of time; they need to get right to school and get on with it. So, I do think that the school liaisons are a great resource when a family moves to a new community. As I mentioned before, they are experienced professionals that will advocate for you and will help you get the support that you need from the school.

They can also provide assistance with transferring credits and registering for classes, perhaps even that advanced placement that we already have. And ask the school liaison about so that you might be able to get into programs earlier on, and also provide parents with information about private and parochial charter and homeschool options. Those seem to be popular with a lot of our military parents. If you're transitioning and you know that your service member is going to deploy soon after you get there — that happens a lot in our military community — the school liaisons can provide deployment support, such as parental absence coping strategies, educator awareness of deployment cycles, accommodation compliance and non-medical counseling referrals so that we can minimize the negative academic, social and emotional impact. They offer so much. I can't tell you enough how much I think parents should connect with their school liaison officers.

- **[Bruce Moody]** You touch on the fact that these resources, they really are military centric. They're created for military parents. So this is really what we're talking about here is a small sampling of the military parent resource center on Military OneSource. And we're going to put a link to the center in the program notes of this episode. And you're really going to want to check this out. There's whole sections. The list just goes on. It covers adoption, child care options, not to mention material from our friends at Sesame Street for Military Families. And for the teens, there's information about relationships. We address bullying, dealing with deployment, preparing for a job, managing money and, as they say in the commercials, so much more. So, ma'am, as we wrap up today's episodes, do you have any final thoughts to share?

- **[Patty Barron]** Oh, you know me, Bruce. Absolutely. The first thing I want to say to parents that might be listening, educators, service providers and on the off chance that we might have some military kids and teens listening in, I want you to know how much military kids and teens are loved and appreciated, not just by their families but also by the military community writ large. There's something really special about a military kid, and that April is all about military children. It's really an opportunity for us to show how much we care. So let's celebrate. Let's get out there and learn together through new content and exciting events that we've got planned on Military OneSource. Some of those events will focus on the overall mental health and well-being of military children of all ages. But you know what? We are also going to have some fun. We're going to ask you to Purple Up, to share your photos with us.

You can't see me, but I'm wearing purple in honor of this podcast. And it's just a fun thing to do to show our support and our love for our kids. Parents and teens can join in the events and engage with the resources provided during this month. You can strengthen skills and relationships and build resiliency so that you and your family can thrive. I want nothing more than for all of you to thrive. As a military parent myself, I know that it's a difficult thing to do to raise happy and healthy children who thrive, but it absolutely can be done. We've got resources to help you. You've got family and friends in the community that love you. And we want all of us to celebrate military kids through the Month of the Military Child. So, happy Month of the Military Child.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Well, thanks, ma'am, for your enthusiasm and your support. And folks, I can attest, she is wearing purple. And we appreciate you being all in. Ma'am, I know you've got a lot going on. We appreciate you being with us today. You're doing a whole lot of work. It's all for military families. So I hope you'll be back with us on the podcast soon. We'd love to hear from you.

- **[Patty Barron]** I would love to come back. Thank you, Bruce.

- **[Bruce Moody]** Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department. We've got tools, websites, apps, and there's a call center — and now we're a podcast — all to help military families navigate military life. 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 thanks for listening.