

Military OneSource Podcast — Child Abuse Awareness and Prevention

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.

Everyone has a role to play in creating safe and healthy communities. This is particularly true when it comes to the health and safety of our children. Service members, family members and across the military community, we all can look out for our children by being informed, attentive and supportive. So, we'll talk about that. My guest today is Shannon Best, and she's with the Family Advocacy Program. Welcome, Shannon.

Shannon Best:

Hi. Thanks for having me.

Bruce:

Yeah, it's good to be talking with you about this. An estimated one in four children have experienced abuse or neglect at some point in their lives. Child abuse and neglect pose a serious public health problem, but it's also preventable. Shannon, maybe let's just begin by talking about the differences between child abuse and child neglect.

Shannon:

Sure. Well, "child abuse" sometimes is an overarching term that covers what we refer to as "child abuse and neglect."

But more specifically, child abuse is generally considered physical abuse, emotional abuse or sexual abuse. And physical abuse can be any sort of physical harm that is inflicted on a child, whether it be by hand or by object. Sexual abuse can be physical coercion for sexual activity or forcing a child or a teenager to watch pornography. And emotional abuse can really have quite a variety of offenses, such as name-calling, threatening children or withholding affection.

Neglect, on the other side, is not providing basic needs for a child or a teenager, such as food, medical care or education. It can also be a lack of supervision, and this can be both a legal threshold or just age-appropriate threshold with children being left alone in a

vehicle, let's say, or out to play when they're too young and could really get themselves in trouble.

Bruce:

How does child abuse look different in older children versus younger children?

Shannon:

Well, again, abuse and neglect, it's going to be the same act, really, across the board, but it can take on different forms when you're dealing with an infant or small children, more likely to have physical abuse for something because people think, oh, they can't report it, nobody knows what's going on. Where older children, again, may experience that same type of physical abuse or sexual abuse. And the emotional abuse might take on different forms for a younger child versus a teenager.

Bruce:

So, how would somebody in the community know if a child or a teen is being abused or neglected?

Shannon:

What I really want to stress here is that if you do have a concern about a teenager or about a child that you might be interacting with, you don't have to know for sure that there is abuse or neglect occurring. You might just have that gut feeling that something's not OK either with that baby or that child or the teenager, and you just might have that suspicion that you can see that they're fearful of their caregiver, that they don't want to go home, that they might have some unexplained injuries, that sort of thing.

Bruce:

So, relating to that, what are some signs that show that a family might need some help?

Shannon:

If there are concerns of physical abuse, you might see unexplained injuries like bruises, bite marks, burns on a child, or just odd ones that maybe are markings that you wouldn't see, especially for children that aren't age appropriate that they would have from regular play or roughhousing.

For sexual abuse, we might just see just a really difference in their behavior. Mood swings, again, fear or withdrawal from their primary caregiver.

And neglect, that can be things like regularly not attending school or not following up with medical needs that a child or teenager have, as well as, again, seeing a child or teenager that's just always without adult supervision or left alone when they shouldn't be. And that can vary by state and even county, where in some areas it's a recommended age and others, there is a specific age. And particularly for military families or the community with moving around so much, it's important to be familiar with what is the standard or what is the law in your county or in your state.

Bruce:

So, there's the laws, but also there's the signs. As you're taking all this in, as you're looking ... and you did mention just your gut feeling a few minutes ago. So how do you know whether or not you should report a suspected child abuse case?

Shannon:

When in doubt, I think it's best to err on the side of caution. Again, we don't have to know that something is going on for sure, in terms of seeing it with your own eyes, but at the end of the day, we all have that role to protect our children and teenagers, and that each child deserves to be and feel safe. So, like I say, you don't have to know for sure, but if you suspect, it's best to report.

Bruce:

So, reporting, OK. Where do you report? How do you report child abuse in the military?

Shannon:

Well, if there's an immediate concern for safety, always call 911 for immediate crisis intervention. But if you do just want to consult with a professional, or just want to, again, report if you do really think something's going on, you can call local Child Protective Services also in case of emergency or the nearest Family Advocacy Program, and that's a program that the Defense Department has at military installations, and their role is for prevention and response to child abuse neglect.

Bruce:

Let's get into the Family Advocacy Program a little bit more, because I know a lot of people may know about it, maybe they have concerns. Let's discuss what it is and what they can do for families, what sort of resources that they have.

Shannon:

For both prevention and response, the Family Advocacy Program has advocates, educators and licensed counselors that can provide groups and classes for positive parenting and interaction with children. There's also the New Parent Support Program within Family Advocacy Program that is specifically designed for parents or caregivers who are either expecting or have children under the age of 3. And that's to really, again, teach that positive parenting, engagement, attachment and bonding through primarily home visitations.

Bruce:

The New Parent Support Program, in my experience, it's a beautiful program. It's so supportive and they come straight into your home. So, it's different. The New Parent Support Program is a tremendous opportunity to get somebody in who can walk through your home and maybe help to childproof it. There are all kinds of wonderful things that they can do for new and expecting parents. Anything you want to add on about this program?

Shannon:

No, I agree. It's a gem that the military has this program available, just to provide that general parenting education and support. So, regardless if it's for someone's first child, if they're adopting or expecting, or if they have multiple children and just trying to adjust to having additional children, or being far away from family or that community that you grew up with for that support in terms of age-appropriate discipline, developmental milestones, that other sort of attachment, bonding and caregiving. The New Parent Support Program is fantastic.

Bruce:

Yeah. I mean, I could go on. In fact, I hope that we do a whole episode just on this program itself. And I think that one of the things that this program does, it really does eliminate just how much the Family Advocacy Program does, and if you could just talk about this a little bit because it supports all families. I mean, the Family Advocacy Program is not just for cases of abuse. Can you discuss that for me?

Shannon:

Right. That's a really important point. Not at all. The fact is that child abuse and neglect is preventable. So, there are groups and classes, education for parents, caregivers, really anybody in the military community. You don't have to be a parent in order to be influential on a child's or teenager's life, or to support other parents, and sometimes just having that education and information yourself is really the best way to do that, to be a part of the supportive community. So, through groups, classes and the counseling that's also available for parents or caregivers or for those in the community, whether it be individual or couples counseling, just to help to build healthier relationships, because one thing I didn't mention earlier is that child abuse and neglect can even be in that exposure to domestic violence or unhealthy relationships. It can have an emotional impact on children or neglect, depending on where they physically are in the home or around that in the environment. So, having that couples counseling or individual counseling available, or family counseling in some cases, just to help families get through some of the stresses of military life.

Bruce:

Yeah, how can somebody in the military community personally help keep children safe?

Shannon:

I think first of all it's just important to, again, be informed and be aware of what's normal for children, for age-appropriate development, to be aware of resources available. Like I said, our role in the community isn't just necessarily caregiving or being a parent yourself, but sometimes it's just supporting parents, letting them know that there are groups available near your installation, if you are living on base, or that the Family Advocacy Program is there for counseling to help them through the stressful aspects of parenting or military life. So, being aware of both what children and teens need, as well as what parents might need, that you can offer in that support when

needed, or recognize the signs if maybe something has crossed the line in terms of that child abuse and neglect, that you can be that trusted adult that a child or teenager can come to talk to about what they might be experiencing at home, or that you might just be the one to keep that child safe and to report it to the Family Advocacy Program, or the local authorities, when needed.

Bruce:

And, of the resources that you mentioned, there are a number of resources that we're putting in the program notes of this episode, and rather than talking through each of them, I wonder if you could just mention one or two that would relate to our conversation today, and how people can take advantage of it?

Shannon:

Sure. You can always contact the nearest Family Advocacy Program, and if you don't know where that is, the Military Installations page on militaryonesource.mil is available that you can search and find the nearest Family Advocacy Program, or if you really want a one-stop shop for reporting, you can call the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline, and that phone number and link is in the description as well, and they will make sure to get that child and the family the help and intervention that's needed.

Bruce:

Shannon Best is with the Family Advocacy Program. Any final words?

Shannon:

No, thank you so much. I really appreciate the opportunity.

Bruce:

Oh, it's great to have you with us. This is a big topic, and we will be back with more on the Family Advocacy Program and what they have to offer, because it's a lot and it's obviously very, very important. Shannon, thank you so much for joining us today.

Shannon:

Thank you.

Bruce:

I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We are a website, we're a call center, we're on social media and we are a podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts. So, go ahead and subscribe because we cover a whole range of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Goodbye.