

Military OneSource Podcast – Support for Military Parents Without Judgment, Part 2

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Parenting in the military can feel isolating, especially when you're far from home and trying to figure things out. But support is closer than you think. In the second part of our deep dive into the New Parent Support Program, we explore how connection and community make all the difference.

You'll hear from Sarah Grantham, a home visitor, and Cassidy Babin, a military spouse and mom who's found real value in playgroups organized by the New Parents Support Program.

Together, they share how this program offers judgment-free support, developmental guidance and a sense of belonging for new parents. You're also going to hear from Matthew, who is 6 months old and really wants us to know he's in the room.

Before we get started, I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with personalized support tools and resources for every step of military life.

If you have any questions or comments about today's conversation, send us a note using the link in the program notes. We'd love to hear from you.

And a reminder you can subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen, so please do. OK, let's jump into today's conversation.

Sarah Grantham and Cassidy Babin, welcome to the podcast.

Sarah Grantham:

Hi.

Cassidy Babin:

Hi. Thank you for having us.

Moody:

It's good to have the two of you. It's actually three of you. We have Matthew joining us. So, Cassidy, maybe you should introduce Matthew and then go ahead and introduce yourself.

Babin:

So, first we have Matthew. He is 5 weeks old today.

Moody:

Oh, wow.

Babin:

Yeah. And, I'm Cassidy.

Moody:

Well, hello.

Babin:

Hi. Yeah, I'm just the carrier of Matthew over here.

Moody:

OK, and where are you?

Babin:

I'm in New Bern, North Carolina.

Moody:

New Bern, North Carolina. OK. I know you're at Marine Court, Cherry Point. Which is also by Camp Lejeune.

Babin:

Yeah, it's about an hour away from Lejeune.

Moody:

OK. All right, thereabouts. OK. And Sarah, welcome to the podcast.

Grantham:

Hi, so I'm Sarah Grantham. I'm a home visitor at the New Parent Support Program here for Cherry Point.

Moody:

OK, well good to know. So Sarah and Cassidy, let's have a conversation about the New Parent Support Program. How did you initially get connected to each other?

Babin:

So, when we first moved here — this is actually my first duty station with my husband. The first time that I moved away from home. So when we first came here, I was desperately grasping at straws to find something to get outta the house.

I actually have an older daughter. Her name's Maggie. She'll be 2 in a couple weeks. So I was looking for things to get me out of the house with her.

And I think it was like my first or second time on base I saw a billboard that kind of advertised different things going around base — on this digital billboard, and one of them was tummy time. So I gave that a shot and Sarah was there and very welcoming. And we just kept going.

Grantham:

It's crazy to believe that was two years ago, 'cause Maggie's ...

Babin:

Yeah, I know. She was 4 months when we went.

Grantham:

Yeah. So we host a tummy time playgroup every Tuesday in our Public House building. We wanted to get it started as a way for moms to get outta the house with no expectations.

So, you can come however you want. Just to get out, meet other moms, practice some tummy time 'cause babies don't always love it. So it's nice to get other tips and just get to know each other.

Moody:

Sarah, this is a really interesting job to me. So what drew you to this sort of work?

Grantham:

So I actually stumbled upon it a little accidentally. I'm a registered nurse. I've been a registered nurse for almost 15 years, and I've worked in and out of intensive care units and NICUs and mother baby labor and delivery, all that sort of stuff.

And I met one of the other home visitors when I was taking a test. And it's what I wish we could tell patients in the hospital when it comes to educating about your new children. And we actually have the time to, so I ended up in the world of new parent support with Cherry Point, and it's been wonderful.

Moody:

Now, what are the sort of things that you tell people about being an expectant parent? Like common questions or challenges that you hear about?

Grantham:

Yeah, so we hear about everything. So for the new, new baby, we did talk a lot about how to get baby to sleep, how you can get some sleep just with routines, how to get everybody used to each other.

When I first started, it was mid-pandemic, so lots of health questions and all that sort of stuff, but we use evidence-based parenting curriculums, and there is a handout or a answer sheet — pretty much anything you can think of from a newborn all the way up until they're 5 years old. Which is wonderful.

Moody:

Let's talk about the New Parent Support Program. So how is that program specifically addressing those kinds of concerns?

Grantham:

Our primary mission is home or office visits. So we meet with the families either in their homes or office and help families establish individual goals.

So whether it's potty training for your 2-year-old, or how do we get maybe in a better sleep routine or babies having developmental delays, we can help with activities and things like that.

And then the other arm of our program which is really cool is our outreach, where we can do the playgroups. So we can host places for families to bring their children and have just social connections in a kind of relaxed environment.

Moody:

You know, I just want to pause and really make the point that this is a wonderful program. It's a beautiful program.

The home visits, we're going to spend some time talking about those. And the way that you tie other parents together is just one of the best things that we've got going for parents. I'm just so, so thrilled to have this conversation.

Cassidy, what were some of the biggest challenges that you were facing as a new parent also navigating military life?

Babin:

Oh, well, you said it. That was my biggest challenge. I was a brand new parent, brand new mom. Just had my baby and moved away from my family for the first time. So that was all very daunting and hard mentally for me. As well as trying to figure out my new routine and getting established in a brand new place.

So that was all very hard.

Moody:

What is the sort of resources or support that you're finding to be the most helpful so far?

Babin:

Well, absolutely the playgroups that we've been going to, the outreach program that Sarah mentioned. We started at tummy time with Maggie, and she kind of outgrew that. She was walking, and we saw that that was very dangerous very quickly for the other babies that were still doing tummy time.

Moody:

Oh, no.

Babin:

Yeah. And we aged up to the toddler group, and that has made a world of difference. It gives you something to look forward to in the middle of the week. It gets us out of the house. It gets Maggie socializing with other kiddos and myself, socializing with other moms. So it's been really great for us.

Moody:

Sarah, the primary service of the New Parent Support Program is the home visits. But let's also talk about the playgroups. What do these look like?

Grantham:

So our playgroups, they're all of course free of charge. And we have them at various places around the installation — when the weather's nice, not a hundred degrees with a hundred percent humidity like we have now. We meet up at playgrounds and we have like little staged developmental activities to work with more preschool-aged children.

And our tummy time group is just for children zero to one. It's an indoor air-conditioned welcome space. And then our toddler group meets on Wednesdays, and that is inside an indoor area. And when the weather's nice, we can go out to the playground as well. So it's just an hour-long meetup for kids and parents to build social connections through the military community.

Moody:

Nice. Cassidy, what was it like attending the playgroup for the first time?

Babin:

It was nerve-racking for me. I think it was only my first or second time ever on any base, ever. So like getting there, going through the gate for the first time, thinking, like, I don't know these people, and kind of walking in and feeling really welcomed by Sarah.

And there weren't a lot of moms there my first time, but it felt like a small, welcome embrace right away. And it's like, OK, this is great. This is why I came out of the house. This is what I need to be doing — conversing with moms, talking to people who are going through the same thing that I'm going through.

So, it was a great experience, and it was good enough to have me come back every single week. Sarah couldn't get rid of me (laughter).

Grantham:

We loved having Maggie (more laughter).

Moody:

And so what would you say to parents who are expecting to go their first time into one of these sessions?

Babin:

Oh, I absolutely encourage every single mom that I see. And you kind of see it when you're out in the wild or out on base.

Moody:

Out in the wild (laughter)!

Babin:

You kind of see the look of like, oh my gosh, the exhaustion in a new mom's face. So I always make a point to go up to those moms especially and say, "Hey, did you know that there's this group on base?"

And so many of them say no. It's like, mind-blowing. So, like, hey, there's this group you can go. It's unstructured. Your toddler's not expected to sit — 'cause that's always the thing. Like they go to story time and expect their 2-year-old to sit — they're not gonna do that.

Moody:

Well, talk about that so people know the structure of these events — whether they're relaxed or formal. What should people be expecting?

Babin:

Oh, it is totally open, free play. Like Sarah said, come as you are, come in your pajamas, roll out of bed, come with a coffee. Just show up and chat.

Your toddler can play. If you're going to tummy time, you can set your baby down on a mat. Sarah has toys, there's mats. It's all clean, and you just kind of go and it's open-ended. You take from it what you want.

Moody:

And what are the age groups again?

Grantham:

The tummy time playgroup is for zero to one And then we have a toddler playgroup, which is one till right before they turn 3 — those early walkers. And then we do seasonal popup groups for 3 to 5 (baby gurgles).

Moody:

Nice. "Hey, how you doing there Matthew?" Oh, good, good. We love the baby cameos (laughter). Um, so Cassidy, can you give me an example of some activities that you and Matthew really enjoyed or moments that stood out for you?

Babin:

Well I haven't been anywhere with Matthew on base yet, but ...

Moody:

Oh yeah, it is a bit early.

Babin:

Yeah.

Moody:

Oh yeah. I don't mean to be rushing things.

Babin:

No, we actually planned to go this week. My husband went back to work, so he's going to get his introduction very soon.

Moody:

Oh, nice. So Matthew, only 5 weeks old, a bit early for the playgroups. But for Maggie, what kind of activities or moments really stand out to you?

Babin:

Well, just starting out in the tummy time group it was great to see her interacting with other kids her age.

I don't want to say that I was comparing her to other children because we never compare kids right in the street (group laughter).

But it was nice to see her going through those milestones early on with other kids her age. And then, it's been even better in the toddler group because she's able to interact. She's talking now. She's playing with other kids.

Actually, just a couple weeks ago she's gotten close to another boy. They're about a few weeks apart in age, and she's actually a bully. She's kind of mean (group laughter).

She will take toys, and he just is the most mellow boy that you've ever seen. He'll just let her do it. But then the other day, they took their shoes off to play and he went and grabbed her shoes for her and helped her put them on. And it's just moments like those that ...

Moody:

Aw.

Babin:

... it's really nice to see her interacting with other kids her age and getting that time in.

Moody:

Sarah, what is it like from your point of view as you see all of this and what kind of feedback are you getting from parents?

Grantham:

I love watching these little guys just age up over the months and years, and I also love watching moms. When you come into the first tummy time group and they're super nervous, your baby's like 2 months old and they don't have anything they just feel like to give to the group.

They're just asking lots of questions. And then three or four months later, they're the moms. They're now giving advice to the new moms coming in with the younger babies. And just watching the kids develop over time and form strong connections. It's really cool.

Moody:

What about parents who don't have access to playgroups? Is there an alternative? A way that they can still connect?

Grantham:

So we don't have anything like other than our home visits at the moment, other than our playgroups.

Babin:

And I would say that the playgroups are more of like a gateway into the home visits. At least for me, it was a little bit more of a low-stakes way to kind of get out there and get interacting.

But then as other moms came in and they started talking about how they have been doing home visits, and Sarah talked about how she does home visits. In the back of my head, it was something that I thought that I didn't need. But over time I saw the benefit of them.

Moody:

So through the parents in the playgroups, you were learning about the home visits?

Babin:

Yeah, so it was a good gateway for me, and some people do it vice versa. Some people start at home visits and then learn about the playgroups. But for me, playgroups were a nice, relaxed way to get out there. And then through those, the home visits came.

Moody:

And we talked about this a little bit earlier, but let's talk about parents who maybe feel less connected. And how are the playgroups allowing them to feel a little less isolated?

Babin:

Well, for me it's kind of like a built-in sense of community. You see the same moms and families kind of coming consistently every week, and you start to get to know them and you start to get to know their children.

And it's just a good way to feel like you're not in the newborn trenches alone. Or you're not in the toddler trenches alone when your kid is acting up. And then the kid across the room starts to throw a tantrum, you're like, oh, yeah, OK, so my kid's not the only one who does this.

So it makes you feel like you have a group, you have some support. And I would say that Sarah's really good about kind of throwing in nuggets and not preaching, or really taking the pressure off of parenting.

Like we'll converse among the group, and Sarah's really good about throwing in a nugget or two based off of what we're saying. And I really appreciated that going to tummy time, because I didn't want a mom kind of telling me everything, because I already had my mom at home in my ear. Like, "put those socks on that baby." Or, but whatever.

Moody:

Sarah, how do you occupy that space? 'Cause you're not Cassidy's mom, but you also have this real relationship.

Grantham:

Yeah, so it's an interesting place to be, and me as a person I'm generally like, everybody does things differently and that's OK as long as everybody is happy — most of the time — and how we can navigate through those things.

But a lot of times just letting parents kind of troubleshoot and talk about things. And then when there really is a question like, oh, should they be doing that at 2 months or 4 months or 6 months or what's the rule?

That's kind of cool that we've got the information to share. Like, oh, actually that's a skill that, yeah, they might start at 4 months, but it's not really mastered until 6 or 9, so kind of taking the pressure and anxiety off as a parent.

Because I know I felt that personally. You go to the doctor's office and then give you the questionnaire and your kid's not doing a hundred percent of all the things, and then looking at the bigger picture, there's so much more to it.

Moody:

So how you are describing yourself, honestly is what I hear from so many of the people who are part of the New Parent Support Program.

It's not judgmental. It's not an examination. It's very, very open-hearted and very, very open to people's personal styles and where they are on the learning curve. Can you kind of talk about that nonjudgmental aspect of the whole program?

Grantham:

Yeah, so that's my favorite part about New Parent Support Program. So almost every home visitor I have ever interacted with, we're all on the same playing field, that we remember what it's like to be new parents or to be in social interactive settings and trying to figure things out.

And we just kind of strive to make families feel welcome and help educate when the education is needed. But we're not here to tell you how to do everything. 'Cause that's part of your journey as a parent is figuring out how to raise your kids in the way that you and your partner want to, so ...

Moody:

And Cassidy, you had mentioned about that, the nonjudgmental aspect of it showing up. Do you feel that sense of openness when you're at the playtime and some of the other activities?

Babin:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I mentioned that Sarah's not my mom, but it does feel like family when you go in there. You're embraced, you're welcomed, you're met with a smile every single week. So yeah, absolutely no judgment in welcoming.

Moody:

That's wonderful. Well, I want to wrap up this conversation, but I kind of want to ask each of you to kind of do one final pitch to other parents out there that haven't gotten connected to the resources that we're talking about today.

And maybe Sarah, let's start with you.

Grantham:

So my big thing is just reaching out to parents and letting them know that we are here to help you with whatever your individual needs and goals are.

So we're not here to judge or tell you how to do things, but if you really want your kid to crawl and you can't figure it out and you're really concerned about it.

Or if you have a really sassy 3-year-old that just does not want to potty train. We're here for it to help you as a parent problem-solve that level of development with your child. And we're free, and we're welcoming and it's a great opportunity to build your community through the military installation.

Moody:

Nice. And Cassidy we'll give you the last word.

Babin:

Yeah, just try it. I tell everyone to just try it. It's low stakes. Go out there. Your kid can have fun. But honestly, I don't do it for Maggie. I do it for me. It's a nice community.

There are other moms to talk to. You're speaking to adults and not a toddler or a newborn all the time. It was the greatest thing that I tried when I got here. So, I encourage everyone to try it.

Moody:

You know, I do have another question for you, Cassidy. 'Cause we haven't mentioned your husband, who's in uniform. He's going to work. He's focusing on the mission.

How is this program allowing him to better focus on the mission?

Babin:

That's a great question. He was very worried about me when we moved here. Just because this was my first time moving away from home. I think he felt a little bit guilty bringing me away when we had just had a child.

So it took a lot of pressure off of him when I started to go out and I started to talk about, "Hey, I'm going to playgroup," or, "Hey, I met this new person," or "I'm going to coffee with this mom."

He was able to kind of breathe the sigh of relief that I had my own thing going on here, and I started to develop these new friendships and these new commitments. So I think it's been good for him as well.

Moody:

Good. Appreciate that. Appreciate you both sharing what you do and what you're experiencing and what it means to you. And we appreciate you joining us here today.

Babin:

Thank you for having us.

Grantham:

Yeah. Thank you so much for having us.

Moody:

You're absolutely welcome. And I will wrap up by saying that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have any questions or feedback, any ideas for a future episode, we'd love to hear from you.

So we have a link in the program notes for that. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families (baby sounds), help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody and that is Matthew. Take care. Bye-bye.