

## Military OneSource Podcast — Understanding Military Child Care with Expert Advice

### Episode transcript

**Bruce Moody:**

When military life gets busy and it always does, finding quality, affordable child care can feel overwhelming, but support is out there, and today's guests are here to help you find it. Hi, I'm Bruce Moody, and today I'm joined by Michelle Crawford and Molly Hill from the Air Force and Marine Corps Child and Youth Programs.

**Bruce Moody:**

Both are not only experts in child care for military families but are also military spouses who have navigated the system in their own unique ways. They will break down the many options available, from on-base centers to in-home child care fee assistance, explain how to use military child care.com and share how programs like the Early Learning Matters curriculum support your child's growth no matter where you're stationed.

Before we get started, I do want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military, for the military. We are your first line of support, giving warfighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive. You can visit our website or call us anytime. We've got the note and the website in the program notes.

All right, let's jump into today's conversation. Well, Michelle Crawford and Molly Hill, welcome to the podcast.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Thank you.

**Molly Hill:**

Thank you.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Happy to be here.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, we're happy to have you with us. We're going to talk about child care, but first let's get some introductions. Maybe Michelle, we'll start with you. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your role in military and child care programs.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Well, hi, my name is Michelle Crawford, and I am a child development and youth program specialist for the Department of the Air Force here in Washington, D.C. I have been a part of military child care programs for more years than a lot of folks, but that is at almost 30 years now. So lots of different roles, lots of different challenges come with those types of roles, but I'm really happy to have joined the headquarters office a little over a year ago.

**Bruce Moody:**

Nice. Nice. Molly, why don't you tell us about yourself?

**Molly Hill:**

Yes. Hi Bruce. Thank you so much. I am so excited to be here and really grateful for the chance to introduce myself. My name is Molly Hill, and I serve as an operation specialist for child and youth programs at Headquarters Marine Corps. For the past 17 years, I've worked supporting Marine Corps child and youth programs in a variety of roles.

I've been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work in our programs — in Okinawa, in Quantico, and I've served in school-aged care programs, child development centers. Most recently, my work at headquarters has really focused on implementing new initiatives, conducting inspections and developing policy to strengthen our programs across the Corps.

So, thank you, Bruce. Happy to be here.

**Bruce Moody:**

Well, thank you. And boy, the backgrounds that you both bring are, I think, reassuring as to why we chose you to be on this episode today to talk about child care. You've lived and breathed child care. For people new to the military, though, you know, it can seem complex, so let's kind of break that down.

And Michelle, let's just start with you. Set the stage for someone who might be looking to get child care for the first time. What are the options? What are the programs available to them?

**Michelle Crawford:**

There are a multitude of options that are available for child care. And child care, just to kind of frame that, does begin a little bit after birth all the way through the completion of sixth grade within the Department of Air Force programs.

So we have a variety of center-based programs, which are traditionally what we call child development centers. We also have school-aged care programs. That's for once you enter kindergarten and all the way through sixth grade programs. And also we have some community-based programs that you can get some fee assistance when maybe there isn't a military child care option near your installation or your duty location.

So, many opportunities, many options out there that best fit the needs of you and your family. And there's one central place that you go to find that, and that's [militarychildcare.com](http://militarychildcare.com) that will give you all of your options. And that's also how you sign up. Let the program know that you need care on a specific date.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, a lot of good points in there. And one point I'd like to make, and thanks for that, Michelle, and you're referencing a lot of your programs over at the Air Force, these programs can be found at all the services. Different names, of course. They all go by different names.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Absolutely.

**Bruce Moody:**

You know, honestly, the department's policy drives these, and so what we're going to describe maybe during today's conversation is going to have some Marine Corps terminology, some Air Force terminology, but you're going to find it through every service. We'll put a link to the website. You know my mind is a blank. Tell me again that website,

**Michelle Crawford:**

[Militarychildcare.com](http://militarychildcare.com).

**Bruce Moody:**

There we are. I knew if I tried to remember it, we'd spend way, way too much time.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Yes.

**Bruce Moody:**

It's a.com website, but please, folks, you need to know this is a military owned and operated website. It's by the military, for the military. So you're going to the right place if you click on that link and we'll have it in the program notes. So child care. It is legendary for the cost. So let's talk about how the military child care fees work.

**Bruce Moody:**

Maybe Molly, you can have a go at that.

**Molly Hill:**

Yes, Bruce. Thank you. I'd be happy to answer this one. So within military child care, we do operate on an income-based system. So what that means is that the fees that our patrons pay for child care are determined by what we like to call total family income, or of course in the military we have an acronym for it, TFI, which includes most household earnings.

So once we gather your TFI, you are put into a category, and each category has a set fee range. And so the more that you earn as a household, the more you would pay. If you're in a lower category, you would pay less. And so that is how we operate our fees within military child care.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Add on to what Molly shared where we might differ from some community-based programs is that with that total family income and that flat rate fee, you don't pay any different whether your child is an infant or a toddler or a preschool child. It is just a flat rate for child care, so you don't have to worry about those extra expenses if you have, say, an infant. Infant care is very expensive in the community, where with us it's the same cost. With that, we also included in that, besides the care and education that we're providing, you also receive meals, and that includes formula if your infant is on formula.

So just something to think about when you're thinking about cost is that ours is a standard fee for child care, not for the age of your child.

**Bruce Moody:**

That's a really important distinction. Do you have any stories? Any examples of how child care fees made a difference for a family? Because that might give some illustration as to what we're talking about. Either of you, both of you.

**Molly Hill:**

Well, Bruce, I do have a story, but it's more connected — I think we were going to talk a little bit about our fee assistance program.

**Bruce Moody:**

Okay. Yeah.

**Molly Hill:**

Is that a good time to kind of dive into that?

**Bruce Moody:**

This is an excellent time.

**Molly Hill:**

Okay, perfect. So if you're not familiar, we call it Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood or MCCYN.

And that is our off-base child care fee assistance program really intended for those active duty and civilians who support the military. If they don't have access to installation child care because they're too far away or there's a long wait list, this program helps to offset the cost. Because we know that child care fees off base are very expensive, and what we're working to do is to try and help those families pay what they would pay on base in a community program. And so MCCYN, it really helps to keep affordable child care in reach for eligible families. And so one example that I have of how fee assistance has been so impactful, we had a family where the father was going to PCS to a new installation. The mother was going to stay back because she was finishing her higher education degree, and the child was enrolled in a program out in the community. They were receiving fee assistance, and one of the key points with fee assistance is that that child has to reside with the service member. But the mom wanted to keep the child with her so she could finish school.

The child could remain in the program they were currently enrolled in, and so we were able to provide an exception and allow that mom to finish her degree, keep her child in care and still keep getting fee assistance, which was really helpful for that family. So that was one great story that I loved hearing where we're helping a spouse get higher education and we're also supporting the family through Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood.

**Bruce Moody:**

No, thanks for that, Molly. It's really important, and we'll have a link to the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood program. It is rolling out across the country. It's most of the way there. It's a lot of the way there. So you can click on the link and see where that program is in your community.

Michelle, before we move on, I'll just offer you the opportunity to jump in and share perspective on the fee assistance.

**Michelle Crawford:**

I don't really have a specific example that I can think of or draw from at this moment, but I do know that we work really hard to try and get families care, whether it's on our installations or off of our installations, and this is a way where families can have even more choice, right? If they want to look at some programs that are closer to their house because maybe they have to drive a ways to an installation, particularly in regions like the NCR here, where child care spots are hard to find. It does open options and support families so that they can ultimately go to their job of supporting our nation.

**Bruce Moody:**

And those are really important comments to make about our military family communities is not cookie cutter at all. And sometimes you can imagine as you're adding up the cost of child care, you know, what it's going to cost a family with one kid versus five or more kids. It's going to be radically different from family to family. Also, just because as you mentioned, you mentioned the NCR, so that's the National Capital Region, AKA Washington, D.C.

When you move to a populous area, that doesn't necessarily mean, oh, there's a ton of spaces. Because there's just more people. So the challenge to finding child care and then something that matches the needs of your family and the needs of your budgets. There's a lot going on. So some people are in remote areas, some people are in highly populous areas, some people are overseas.

So let's talk about that briefly. What does the child care landscape look like for families who are stationed overseas compared to those who are stateside? Also, let's make sure that we're also talking about community-based programs and whether or not fee assistance would fit into community-based programs overseas.

**Michelle Crawford:**

So really the landscape is very similar in most locations overseas. Where there could be some variances would maybe have to do with host nation rules or other agreed upon agreements with those host nations where maybe we aren't able to operate family child care homes, or we could only operate those homes on an installation and not off the installation. So you are overseas, most overseas assignments are going to have your child care centers, your school-age programs, and your youth, which is for those older kids' recreational programs, and some have family child care. It just depends on that location. But there are also some locations where you're a little more remote or there's less families maybe in that area.

And so there are some locations that you are able to use specific community-based programs that have been, I'll say the word 'vetted,' right through our stringent set of criteria that then kind of model what our child development centers or school-age programs provide, and then there is a financial help to attend those programs. But that said, some of those programs off the installation do offer things that are different, right, than our

programs. And I always like to highlight the language immersion that does happen in an overseas environment where the language is different.

**Bruce Moody:**

It is very cool. We really do bloom where planted, and we really do identify what kind of resources are available to us, like the language immersion. It's very cool.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Mm-hmm.

**Bruce Moody:**

Let's kind of go in that direction for a couple of minutes because you've both worked. As we're opening up the program and you're introducing yourselves, I mean, you've done this for a long time in a lot of different places and capacities. You know, when you look back, what has kind of surprised you about how military child care actually works? Give us a sort of behind-the-scenes look.

**Molly Hill:**

Yeah, I'm happy to answer that question for you, Bruce. I see. What surprise me the most is just really how complex the system is behind the scenes. You know, on the surface for our families, they see classrooms, teachers, paperwork, but underneath there's a huge amount of infrastructure that balances mission readiness, child and youth development standards, staffing challenges, federal policy. And child care really is a readiness program because if families can't trust that their children are safe and taken care of, then you know, our service members can't focus on their mission. Another eye-opener has really been the resilience and adaptability of the entire military child care system. You know, policies shift annually. Budgets fluctuate. Our programs always find a way to be innovative and support children and families. And speaking of staffing challenges, retaining employees in child care is a challenge, and one of the most amazing things that has happened recently is providing our staff with child care fee discounts.

So we're really working hard to highlight that, to recruit and retain staff, is that they do get a discount on their own child care fees if they're employed with us. You know, I'm also really impressed by the dedication of the people who make it work. You know, our teachers in the classroom to our policy teams at the department level. There's just such a great shared understanding that military child care isn't a benefit, but it's really a necessity, and that really helps keep people in the system moving forward, even when it seems like we have a lot of challenges ahead of us. So it's been wonderful.

**Bruce Moody:**

Thanks for sharing that. I see that from where I currently work and you know, I'm in the Pentagon, and my colleagues, a lot of them, are writing policy. It is really something that as somebody who's writing policy, they never lose the awareness of what it is that they're

doing and the impact that it has. And that impact, you know, includes the whole mission of the department. You know, why are we doing this? There's a lot of reasons that we do this, and one of them — a huge one — is that we have people in uniform who have to focus on the mission.

We can all relate to this. Everybody can relate to being distracted. For whatever is going on in your personal life, back home, whatever, if it is occupying your brain while you're trying to work, you can't do your job. And for people who are warfighters and they're trying to focus on the mission, that can have really strongly negative consequences.

So we do this for families with whom somebody is serving in uniform. So let's talk about those families. They've just discovered that they're expecting a baby. This is a hypothetical, but uh, happens every day. A family has just learned that they're expecting a baby. What is the first thing that they should do with regard to child care?

**Molly Hill:**

We talked about it a little bit earlier, but that the website that we mentioned, [militarychildcare.com](http://militarychildcare.com) or MCC, is really the go-to resource for military-connected families where they can learn about, search for and request child care that will meet their needs. So MCC helps families search for child care. Families can conduct unlimited searches to find military child care providers close to home or work, request care at any time from any location. It's such a flexible website. It helps families to choose and to request, which is what we want.

**Bruce Moody:**

So we're not talking about signing up for child care when the baby is born?

**Michelle Crawford:**

No.

**Bruce Moody:**

We're talking about getting involved. When we find out, guess what, we're having a baby, that's actually the point at which they should begin. Is that what you're saying?

**Molly Hill:**

Yes. So thankfully most of our military-connected parents have great maternity, paternity leave. But you know, when you find out that you're expecting, you really should start to think about child care and your options and, you know, start to tour places if you have an idea already of where you want your child to go. But the sooner you do that, the better it is for you and your family.

**Michelle Crawford:**

I'll just add a couple of things with regard to the website itself. You can use that when it's on your telephone, on your laptop, on your iPad. So after you've created that account, you have that ability to go in and even change locations that you might want to attend and be on their wait list.

But one tip that I like to share with families is to make sure that when they're creating their family account that they use at least one personal email address so that they will receive communication when, like Molly alluded to, is when you're on maternity or paternity leave, and if the only email that you have put in there is going to your official email, you won't be getting that communication to confirm that you might still be needing care or that you're getting an offer for care because that's automated in the system.

Make sure that you have any email that you have access to right at all times. And just because you have a request for care doesn't mean you have to accept that care. Right? So any amount of, I think we might be PCSing not just having a baby, but we're also going to PCs to a new location, make that request so that it's in there and you are in the queue whether or not you end up using it, is one of my tips that I think is important to share.

**Bruce Moody:**

Thanks Michelle. That's a really good point. What I wanted to say is that one of the benefits of having your child care lined up by the time the baby is born is, I think, I'm going out on the ledge here, but just help me out here. But I mean, it does seem to me that when you're looking at something like the military paternal leave program, having child care lined up just allows you more freedom with their program, more opportunities to use that program in ways that means something to you. Because you don't have to take it all in one chunk, you can take that in increments.

So you may decide that you have the child care and you're going to use the bits of the paternal leave time allotted you a little bit more down the road, just as more flexibility. Anyway. All right, let's get back to it. I'm really valuing this conversation because I think that it's giving a good picture into the child care program, especially for new military, new couples who are going to be parents. And I would imagine that a lot of people are going to see child care simply as babysitting. Now let's talk about that. You've mentioned a bunch of programs that you have offered from day to day. Let's break those down and talk about some of the programs and just the general concept of what child care is, maybe versus babysitting.

**Michelle Crawford:**

One of the things that I like to remind folks about is that what we're actually doing is, I call it developing little humans, and I say that because our programs are structured in such a way. With support of our training programs for our staff and our curriculum so that we are building on skills that are developing all the way from infancy through the pre-K years.

And all of that builds on school readiness. And so we do that also through not just the everyday interactions. It's through interactions, it's through play. It's how we arrange our classrooms and our environments, the materials that your child has access to. All of that is very intentional and based on research and development of children.

And so what you might not realize is that your time that your child is with us in our programs, we are observing development. We are creating learning experiences that might be individualized for your child that week or over the course of time, and you're going to have opportunities to have parent conferences that will go over where your child is and some next steps. Or where your child might be having a little bit of a challenge, and what are we going to do work together to further emphasize and practice maybe some of those skill sets. So we have a professional training program that is through a partnership with the Ohio State University. It's called the Virtual Lab School.

So that is a training program for our teaching staff. We also have a full-time training and curriculum specialists is what the Air Force calls them, but trainer. And their sole job is to develop our staff, right? And they're looking at children's development as well in order to support the staff and families. But their job is to meet staff where they are and to grow them to make sure that they're able to provide that developmental care. So, Molly, can I tag you to do more about ELM?

**Molly Hill:**

I would love that. Thank you, Michelle. That was a great segue because like Michelle mentioned, all those things that we're doing with children in our child development centers, a big foundation of that is our curriculum that we use across child development centers and the Air Force, the Marine Corps.

A few years ago, the department partnered with Purdue University, and they developed a curriculum for military child development centers. It's called the Early Learning Matters curriculum or, or ELM for short. And I know the Air Force transitioned a few years ago, the Marine Corps was right behind them, and we implement ELM across the enterprise and it's an amazing curriculum.

You know, as children grow, the curriculum guides everything from language and literacy to math, social, emotional skills, self-regulation. You know, we're doing language and literacy and math activities daily to help children get ready for school. I love that ELM has a social-emotional component and a self-regulation component.

We know that when children have those skills, when they can regulate their emotions, when they know how to explain and express their emotions in an appropriate way, that just sets them up for success and later on, so we're not just filling time. We have a curriculum that we implement where every activity, whether it's tummy time for babies or reading a story with our toddlers or some type of an art project with our preschoolers, it is all very intentional and it's designed to help those kids reach developmental milestones, like

Michelle said, and be ready for school. And it really gives those parents peace of mind knowing that we are working on these skills with your children.

It's hard to do some of these skills at home, and the limited amount of time that you might have to spend with your kiddos. You know, you drop them off in the morning, you pick them up in the evening, but when you get home, you've got to eat dinner, take a bath, put them to bed. The weekends can be busy with activities, and so we are there to help teach your child these skills right alongside you and just let you know that your child is thriving while they're in our care, and we do so much more than just watching them.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Yes. One last thing I would like to add is that we are also accredited programs through a national early childhood association. Right? So that is the standard. A lot of people like to call that the gold standard of care, but our programs are accredited and it's not just about maybe the curriculum and the development that we're doing, but there's a variety of other requirements, from how much we pay our staff to whether we have a break room, whether there's bathrooms and the playground and all kinds of things. But that is also not just babysitting to achieve accreditation.

**Bruce Moody:**

I'll jump in here to say, this is what's really interesting about hearing the two of you talk. Michelle, you're with the Air Force, Molly, you're with the Marine Corps and the two of you are talking about what appears to be the same program, and it really is, it gets a different face.

The Marine Corps is going to put a Marine Corps face on it, and that's awesome. But it's the same program. I mean, you mentioned the accreditation. It's the policies and the programs, the fee structures, all of the Early Learning Matters curriculum. All of that is consistent from the services, also from installation to installation. That's just really, really interesting. What does that translate to for families? What is the benefit of having this curriculum across installations, especially when families are moving so much, what does this do for families?

**Molly Hill:**

Yeah, Bruce, I'm happy to chime in on that one. There are really so many benefits to having, what we call in our world an approved standardized curriculum, you know, is the approved curriculum for the Marine Corps, for the Air Force, and I think we strive to create standardization and consistency across all child and youth programs. We want our parents to know that, whether they're at Camp Pendleton or Camp Lejeune that they're going to receive the same quality care wherever they go throughout the Marine Corps. And so this curriculum helps support that. And one thing I'll mention is ELM is made up of 52 weeks of amazing preschool activities. We've got 25 blocks that support our infants, pre-toddlers and toddlers. And so we standardize which blocks and which weeks are implemented across the Marine Corps. And so if you were to leave one installation, and it's week 20 and you go to another one the following week, we're going to pick right back up with week 21. So

your child's not going to miss out on any of those activities that we would be working on and their skills that we would be developing.

I also think that a lot of our staff are also spouses. And so when they move from one installation to another and they work for child and youth programs at multiple locations, it just gives them consistency across the board, too. It helps them to know that whether I go from one Marine Corps base to another, if I know Early Learning Matters, then I'm going to be successful in my job at another place. And it just gives them that peace of mind to know what to expect and to have certain expectations. And we just want to provide consistency and standardization for our families and children because they move so much. And if we can make this thing easier for them, then that's what we want to do, is just to make that transition a little bit easier for them.

**Michelle Crawford:**

I would just add that it also provides that consistency for the child. So even though he had different teachers, right. In a specific program, he can go to another program and there's going to be similar materials, they're going to be similar books or even maybe the same books. So there's going to be a familiarity with how the day operates and the type of things that he is experiencing, so that it also helps kind of bridge that transition. So that really, the unfamiliarity is just kind of with that new group of children that he's interacting with and, and teachers, right. And I think that that can help settle parents angst sometimes about moving. That being said, I'd also like to add, just add that because we're building skills and building on skills, like Molly mentioned, if you have a gap in there, when you get to that new installation and that teacher begins that initial, like, assessment, kind of where that child's at, there's an ability to do what we call scaffolding. And what that means is basically I'm looking at what the child's doing in week 22, and he's not quite there yet because he missed week 20 and 21. So I can go reach back into those skills that he might have missed and kind of tailor them with some experiences that are specific for him at that time.

So I, I think that helps with that flexibility because prior to standardizing this curriculum, it was very much a teacher decision in each classroom, sort of how they were going to go about developing those activities or what book they were going to read or those type of things. There is still flexibility within the standardized curriculum, but there's a baseline foundation of sameness, and it is a good thing for kids.

**Bruce Moody:**

So let's talk about how you provide support to the adults who care for the children in your programs and how parents can stay connected to what their child is learning and doing each week. Michelle, shall we start with you?

**Michelle Crawford:**

Sure. So I somewhat alluded to having the training and curriculum specialist on staff who supports our direct care staff as well as our other admin and our cooks, even. But there is a standardized learning course or courses. There's 15 of them that all of our staff in the department, across the departments actually, complete. And those lay the foundation for

early childhood education and what to expect. How do I guide children's behavior? How do I identify child maltreatment? What does it mean to look at cognitive development?

So there is a platform that was designed by Ohio State University. Again, that's called the Virtual Lab School or VLS for short. So that's kind of the foundation of how we begin our training program for our staff, and to couple that there's other required training topics that our staff have to be trained on, but then we also have a coaching model where our trainers are spending time in the classroom with the teaching staff and the children, and from that they're developing individualized training opportunities because maybe the classroom is struggling with getting the children to clean up before they eat lunch, which we call a transition. So the trainer may do some research on some tools and ways with which that classroom could better manage that transition, whether it's through a song or a game or only so many are cleaning up and maybe some children are setting the table, but it is very individualized. But then we also have that standardization of basic information we want all of our staff to know. Molly, do you have more to add to that?

**Molly Hill:**

I do, yes. Thank you, Michelle. I love Virtual Lab School. It is one of the best things that has ever happened to military child care. The folks at Ohio State are just incredible people, and we are so fortunate to have updated, ongoing professional development opportunities through Virtual Lab School and the staff at Ohio State. In addition to Virtual Lab School and our robust training program, I would also say that I think the services we're working hard to help our CYP professionals transfer from one installation to the other. I know for the Marine Corps we have what we call a nap transfer program, and so if you know you're getting ready to PCS to another installation, you can work with your HR and smoothly transfer to another Marine Corps installation. I know we're working as a military child care community to help make that easier for spouses. You know, we want to retain our seasoned employees, we want to keep them, we want to bring them back to CYP, even if they move from one installation to another.

I'd also say CYP does a great job of helping our professionals progress in their career. So, you know, Michelle mentioned Virtual Lab School, and that is one key component in helping our folks have some career progression. So you might come to us with no experience working with children, but as you have some time in grade and you complete a portion of your Virtual Lab School courses, you'll get a promotion and a pay raise, and then as you finish that track, like Michelle mentioned, let's say you're a preschool teacher and you finish the Virtual Lab School preschool track, then you're going to get another pay raise and promotion. You know, we want to reward our staff for the hard work that they do, for the education and time that they put into making themselves a better teacher. And so career progression is a big thing in our programs, and we want to continue to support and mold those teachers into additional leadership positions, whether they become a trainer or an assistant director or director.

We want folks who have prior classroom experience to lead our program and to help pay it forward and coach and mentor future CYP professionals. So I think we do a really good job of that, and we're continuing to improve upon our already built career progression.

**Michelle Crawford:**

It is a great profession for military spouses as they are transitioning because of that career progression. Like Molly, I started out as a family child care provider for the Army years ago as a military spouse, and then just kind of worked in various classroom positions and management positions and ultimately here, but it has the ability to support financially, right? While you're having to travel, move with your spouse, it is a profession that can travel with you versus maybe some others that it's much more difficult. Right. And just a foot stop one more time. We do give a child care fee discount when you do work for us in any capacity, whether you are a desk clerk, a direct care provider, teacher, or even our program managers receive the same discount.

**Molly Hill:**

And Bruce, you mentioned about, uh, helping parents stay connected to what their child is learning. Do you want us to touch upon that, too?

**Bruce Moody:**

Of course, of course. You know, that's the important thing. It's that peace of mind, you know, before you go to work, before somebody puts on their uniform, they want to make sure that things are taken care of back home. And so how can parents find out what's happening at their child care center?

**Molly Hill:**

Absolutely. We work really hard to make sure we have that open line of communication with our parents. In our child development centers, especially with our infants and pre-tots and toddlers, we have what's called like a daily note, and so we are monitoring your child's naps, what they're eating, how much they're eating, their mood for the day, what were they interested in, who did they play with.

And we record all of that on a daily note. So when you come to pick up your kiddo, we can provide you with that daily note so you can see how their day was and just that face-to-face interaction with our teachers. There's always conversation in the morning, like, how is he today? Did he eat breakfast before he came? Feeling all right, how's everything going at home? And then at the end of the day, we have a similar conversation about how their day went and, you know, what we did today and what we worked on. And Michelle mentioned this earlier, but we do hold parent-teacher conferences. We create portfolios for every child in a child development center, and that's where we keep our assessments, our observations, our tailored learning plans to help support them in those developmental skills that we're working on.

And then we offer family conferences where we get to sit down with the parents and go through that portfolio and talk about what we're seeing. We can get feedback from mom and dad about stuff they see at home and what they want us to work on while their child's in our program. And additionally, one of the most amazing things about is the parent resources that they provide. And so they have what's called Readiness Starts Early, and it's

tips for promoting your child's learning while your children are at home. So we give you an opportunity to kind of extend what we're doing in the classroom at home and to help just reinforce those skills that we're working on, which is one of the things I love. We do a lot to make sure that parents stay connected to what children are learning and doing each week.

**Bruce Moody:**

Before I let the two of you go, I want to step back to the beginning of the process because I really want to get to wait lists. That's just such an important topic. So maybe we can wrap this up, this conversation. I want to give the each of you a chance to comment on this. You know, for a parent who is overwhelmed by wait lists and all of the choices, what would you want to say to them right now? And what is the one thing that you wish every military family understood about child care?

**Molly Hill:**

So as a parent myself and to those parents who feel overwhelmed by wait lists, because I have small children, too. I have a 2-year-old, a 5-year-old and a 9-year-old. I would say, you are not alone in this struggle. And the frustration that you feel with your choices and wait lists, it's valid because parents across the country experience this. Navigating child care can feel like an endless maze but just remember that every little step you take, whether it's joining a wait list, looking at on-base options, looking at off-base community options, or even just asking for help from a neighbor who has been there or a friend who raves about the preschool program their child is at, all of that is an investment in your child's well-being. So, you know, give yourself permission to just take a deep breath and know that continuing to look at your different choices, even when it's exhausting, it does make a huge difference for your child. And one thing that I wish that every military family would understand about child care is that you have more support systems than you might realize. So beyond what we have with child development centers on base, there are family child care homes, there are subsidies that can open doors, you know, to civilian programs off base that we talked about with MCCYN and Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood.

You know, a lot of times I think families think that the child development center may be their only option, but really, we have a whole system designed with many different pathways that will help families find care that fits your needs. So understanding these alternatives can help to ease the pressure a little bit and to let you know that you have some choices.

And I would just say, too, if you don't know much about child care, you know, do your best to look at some of those accreditation bodies that Michelle mentioned because there are some great parent resources out there about what quality child care looks like. And then lastly, you know, lean into your parent intuition. And as a parent, you know your child best and you know what's going to be a good fit for them and just trust your gut.

**Bruce Moody:**

Michelle, we're going to give you the last word.

**Michelle Crawford:**

All right. So I would build on what Molly kind of said. I think it's important that you do your research and that you go visit the programs that you're looking at putting your child in. I think it's important for you to walk in and get the feel of your surroundings and where your child is going to attend. Take the time to ask the type of questions that are important to you. Is curriculum important to you? Is outdoor time important to you? What are you feeding my child? Like the things that are important to you, make sure that you are looking for those things in that best fit for your family. And you may find that a family child care home is a better fit for one of your children, but that you'd like a center-based program for your other child. So just go in with an open mind, but that mind is already framed in what you are looking for for your children because only you really know what type of environment it is that you would like them to be in while you're, you know, doing your very important work.

And secondly. I think that I would just like to just remind folks that early childhood is actually education, right? And it's not more important than what happens when your children enter that elementary school and beyond. But it's equally as important. This timeframe from birth to five is very important and critical for their future success and their school readiness.

So where you decide and how you decide these years of care look like for you, they are very important. And the last thing I would say is that once you've made that decision is to work really hard to form some positive, sort of reciprocal relationships, with your teachers that your children are with, but also with those administrators of those programs because that way you feel a little more at ease as you're leaving your children there knowing that everyone has their best interests as heart, but there are ways to be involved in the program that you choose. It will vary, but there are parent advisory boards or those types of things that you can be involved and really a part of what's happening for your child on a daily basis or children on a daily basis.

**Bruce Moody:**

So there we go. Covered a lot of ground. There's even more on the website. A ton of links in the program notes for you to explore. But Michelle Crawford and Molly Hill, thank you so much. Really grateful for what you do, for what all of your colleagues do and for joining us here today.

**Michelle Crawford:**

Thank you, Bruce.

**Molly Hill:**

Thank you, Bruce. It was a privilege.

**Bruce Moody:**

You're very, very welcome. And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is by the military, for the military. We are your first line of support giving warfighters and their families tools to stay well and thrive. Call us anytime. Visit us anytime. We've got our number and the website address in the program notes.

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