

Military OneSource Podcast — Engaged Parenting for MilParents

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. Our guest today, returning to the podcast, is Shannon Best. Shannon is a licensed marriage and family therapist who serves as the child abuse and neglect lead for the Defense Department's Family Advocacy Program. Shannon, welcome back to the podcast.

Shannon Best:

Thank you for having me. It's great to be back.

Bruce:

We're happy to have you with us today. We're going to talk about parenting. So, what we're going to do is we're going to start off with two types of parenting. It's engaged parenting and positive parenting, and I, frankly, don't know one from another.

So, let's just start off by getting some definitions. If you could just tell us what is engaged parenting and then positive parenting, and how are they different from each other.

Shannon:

Sure. Well, I would say positive parenting is kind of more of an umbrella term in terms of how parents engage with their children and teens, being, in the name, a positive interaction. And that can include activities, as well as discipline in a constructive, positive way that's teaching children, providing structure for them.

Engaged parenting is a piece of positive parenting. Engaged parenting involves intentional interaction with infants, children, teens — that is their interests, that is teaching them things, basic life skills and again, is an intentional, active interaction as opposed to a passive or not really being involved doing different things or maybe not even at all.

Bruce:

Right, which we can all relate to, especially in this terminally online age that we live in. What would be some examples of ways parents can connect with their children?

Shannon:

This can be anything that you might want to do. It could be inviting the child or your teen into your activities, whether it be cooking dinner, folding laundry, going outside to play catch or play cards. And it doesn't have to take any money, amount of money, fancy toys or gadgets. Anything that we have around the house, you can turn into an engaged activity.

And this, of course, is going to change depending on the age of your child, their interests, abilities, in terms of what you might do to be engaging with them. It also can just be a conversation, from driving from one activity to the next.

We know families are very, very busy these days, and just that car ride in and of itself can be a great time to have an engaging, active conversation with your child, especially teenagers. That tends to be the hardest group to interact with. So, even driving from one place to another is a great way to engage with them.

Bruce:

I've read that, that driving is a great opportunity for some of the more serious conversations. So, let's talk about how children are different. So how may engagement differ? How would the approach differ from child to child?

Shannon:

Well, this could just start off with age. Engaging with an infant or a young baby or toddler is going to look very different from a school-aged child to a teen. The younger baby or toddler, those younger years, your engagement is going to be things like reading books, giving an opportunity for those babies and toddlers to explore their surroundings.

A great activity to do with young ones is to go on a nature walk, and that can just be walking around the block using some painter's tape or packing tape that you can put reverse-side out.

So, the sticky side out around your wrist, or if they're old enough loosely around their wrist where the toddler can pick up little flowers or grass or things and stick it on that tape bracelet. And you can talk with them about what they're smelling, what they're seeing, colors to teach them at that age, or even singing the ABCs.

And as children get older, again, it's really never too late to start engaging with them or talking with them about your daily activities. Research has shown that by talking out loud, basically narrating your life to infants and toddlers, will help improve their language and reading ability and reading comprehension. Something like, "Right now I am putting the silverware away from the dishwasher."

It might feel very silly to do, but again, it's a way to engage and teach them those languages. And, as kids get older, like I said, all children are different, teens are different, that we don't have to necessarily need to manufacture those interaction and engagement opportunities.

By following your child's lead and your teen's lead about what they are already interested in. Sometimes that might take a little bit of effort on our part as the adults to research.

I have little boys. I know nothing about dinosaurs, but by researching them I'm able to pronounce [their names] and talk to them about the different things that they do and it's a way they get really excited.

Or to be inquisitive and just curious and let them tell you about what they are interested in. And again, playing different sports or art activities are another great way for all ages to engage with children.

And teens can get a little bit more challenging at that age, but I think it's best to always follow their lead, whether or not they want you to necessarily be a part of it. But just showing some interest and being able to ask questions so that they get to be the expert and teach you or tell you about it is, again, a great way to engage with older kids or teenagers as well.

Bruce:

Yeah, raising a teenager is a lot like being a diplomat. You really have to figure your way around things. And then on the other side of it, I will see parents and they've got a kid in the stroller. They're in the store. They're in the store and they're pulling cans off the shelf and they're explaining to the kid, "I'm pulling cans off the shelf. This is a can of XYZ. This is what I'm doing."

They're just talking to the child nonstop. Which leads to my next question, is there such a thing as a parent being too engaged with their child?

Shannon:

Well, sometimes we hear the term these days like "helicopter parenting," and I think there's a difference of that versus being engaged.

Engaged is an active; it's a way of showing interest in the person that your child or teen is becoming, teaching your young ones about the world, but at the same time, giving them space to make mistakes.

And especially young kids sometimes can really want to explore and climb on things that we might not want them to. And generally speaking, I think you can be nearby. As your child gets older, that distance can increase versus when they're young. Of course, we want to keep them safe.

But sometimes saying a phrase, let's say if a child is climbing something that you might be worried they're getting a little too high. If we say, "Hey, be careful about this," that a young child doesn't necessarily know what that means yet.

But if you tell them, "Hey, be mindful, you might be getting a little high and not know how to get down." Or, "Be mindful. There is that branch there that you could bonk your head on."

Things like that, to be specific about what it is that you are concerned about and with your words and voice as opposed to having to be physically so close to them at all times.

And giving your child or young ones opportunities to safely make mistakes. Sometimes, they just need to skin their knees a little bit to know that's not the place for running.

Again, not that we want our children to get hurt, and I say that more figuratively than literally, but ... as kids get older and our teenagers, there are some life lessons that they just have to kind of learn that hard way that you can provide that guidance interaction.

And again, that's a way to stay engaged while still letting them navigate the world on their own. And that will change depending on what's developmentally appropriate at their age and various abilities.

So again, I think there's a difference of engagement versus what we've kind of coined as helicopter parenting now. Another phrase that comes to mind is not preparing the path for your child, but preparing your child for the path in life.

Again, giving them those life skills and how to navigate social situations — it might be a bad grade — and talking with them about how to talk to their teacher about how they can improve next time, or extra credit, as opposed to contacting that teacher for them on their behalf.

Bruce:

That's a really interesting range of parenting styles. How do children differ in terms of how they respond to these different parenting engagement styles?

Shannon:

That can vary as well, and even within a family. Each person, ourselves included, and children are different. So the way that one child might respond to certain discipline in terms of rule-setting or consequences may be different than another child.

By getting to know your child and your teen and what motivates them will allow you to differ the way that you may engage or discipline them in a way that will be impactful.

Some children are more physical, so doing physical activities as opposed to reading or artwork or playing board games. Some children want to play chess and do strategy games, and that's a way that you can talk and educate and stay engaged with them as opposed to playing catch in the backyard.

That's something that's more of a physical activity. So being flexible as a parent or even a trusted adult, as a neighbor, or if you have nieces or nephews, being flexible to their

temperament, how they're developing at any given point. Things that may have worked for that child at one point, but as they've gotten older, we need to change our approach and that's OK too.

Bruce:

Shannon, this is good information. Maybe a different question here along the way. How can parents begin to connect with their child if they haven't engaged with their child actively early on?

Shannon:

This, I think, is a really common either concern or just a reality for us these days, and particularly in the military. Again, you don't have to be physically present to be engaged, but sometimes we feel like maybe we've missed the boat on that early on.

But I will say it is truly never too late to engage with a child or a teenager.

Again, regardless if you're parent or if you're just a trusted adult. And the best thing to do is just to stay curious about who they are, about what their interests are, who their friends are, by asking those questions or volunteering at their school to see who they interact with.

To invite those children over for playdates or to meet up at a park is another great way just to get to know who they are.

And once you do or you have some ideas in those interests that they maybe don't show the same interests at home that they might at school, or talk with their teachers about who their child's hanging out with and the games they like to play during the school day could be great ideas and starting points for you to bring home or do at home just to help start kicking that off.

And then, like I said, it's never too late to building that engagement and to have that intentional interactions with your child and teenager. As they get older, it may take longer, it may take time, but I promise if you stay persistent and consistent, it will pay off.

Bruce:

So, being a parent means you have questions, you're always trying to figure out what to do next. The Defense Department has a program; it's called the New Parent Support Program. How can this program help parents who have questions about parenting?

Shannon:

Sure. This program specifically is designed for those who are either expecting or have a child under the age of three. Now, despite the name of it saying New Parent Support Program, this doesn't necessarily mean that it can only be for a person or a couple's first child. Even if they have older children, as long as there is a child under the age of three years old or if they're expecting, they're eligible for this program.

The goal of this program is parenting education and support. The primary service from the New Parent Support Program is home visitation.

So that's one-on-one directly working with a New Parent Support Program educator — they may be a social worker or a nurse or a therapist — to provide that parenting education and support to talk about things, about attachment and bonding, building safe sleep environment and safe environment for the child to play and explore in, developmental milestones and other ways, again, to have that engaged and intentional relationship and building that attachment and bonding from an early age.

Bruce:

We're going to put a link in the program notes to the New Parent Support Program. I can't say enough good things about this program. I first learned about it when I was in the Navy and I met some of the people who do home visitations. And just being with them, the level of care and the degree of calm and patience, it's just so amazing. I encourage people to really look into this program.

Shannon, let's talk a little bit more about military life. In what ways can a military parent stay connected with their children during deployments or just long periods of separation?

Shannon:

I think this is a big concern for military parents, both for the parent that is with the children at home and, in particular, for the military parent who may be away for those military duties, whether it be a deployment or long training type of situation. And this is where technology absolutely works in our favors.

There are toys and books that you can get that have recording devices, so it can be a story that the military parent can record by reading the story out loud. Again, this can start for infants or children of any age that they can then use on their own.

It doesn't necessarily even need to be the other parent there with them. And as they turn the pages, it's the parent who did the recording reading the story to them. Or a stuffed animal that they can squeeze that can say a message like, "Mommy loves you," or, "Daddy loves you," each time they squeeze it. So that's something.

But again, using technology to stay engaged. If you have older children or teenagers that may have their own devices, to use some of the social media apps to send messages back and forth to each other throughout the day is one avenue, or texting and messaging.

Again, depending on the age of child, using the video chat features that are available through social media or through our phones and computers as often as possible.

For younger children, sometimes it may be easier if that's a set schedule. Like every Sunday afternoon, depending on the other parent's time zone is, that's our video time with that parent and they can count on that.

Having some sort of stability and routine while one parent is away can be a way to help them through that and a way that they can be excited and count on that time with their parent who is away and then to stay engaged with them.

Another way to stay engaged is reading or sports. Whatever the child's or teen's interest is, is to follow along or maybe read that book together at the same time, almost like a book club.

And that weekly check-in, talk about that chapter that you read. Whatever that child or teenager is interested in, that you would be able to have that discussion and engaged activity when you're together.

There are ways to be creative and think about how to do that apart, depending on how long that is. It can even be a physical journal each way or taking pictures with, say, a stuffed animal.

Bruce:

I just had a flashback. I don't know if you ever heard of "Flat Stanley." Do you remember "Flat Stanley?"

Shannon:

I have not, no. Oh, yes. "Flat Stanley." Yes, I have.

Bruce:

Yeah. Yeah. So, you pass around Flat Stanley and Flat Stanley would be in photos of here and there all over the place. And it was a great way for a child to follow the parent's travels and to learn about geography and all kinds of other stuff.

There's really, really cool examples. But also there's concerns when we're talking about social media. So, let's just stay on this for a little bit longer. What are some ways that parents can model healthy habits when it comes to smartphones and computers and social media?

Shannon:

Well, there are great ways that technology can serve us and help us stay connected, but, of course, there are some downsides to that.

And I think the number one thing is modeling that healthy relationship and boundaries with our phones and with our technology. If an adult or parent is glued to their phones and they're always watching it, texting on it, responding to people or scrolling through social media, that's what children and teens are going to do themselves and model themselves.

On the flip side of that, as a parent, to have certain times that you set your phone down and know that's not the time to be texting or scrolling through social media.

When you do have your child there with you, that's the time to have that intentional, get engaged interaction with them as opposed to constantly going back and forth or

looking at your phone, and even to tell them, “Hey, mommy, and daddy, I’m putting my phone away right now. We’ve got the timer set for 20 minutes and it’s our time together to do whatever game you want right now.”

That’s a way that they can feel special about that, but see that boundary as well.

And I know that could be really challenging for a parent, again, especially if one is away, to not want to always be ready in case they contact you. But again, having those healthy boundaries for ourselves, turning our phone off or social media off and having the same rules for teens and our older children and following those ourselves.

It could be really challenging, especially for teenagers, of course, not everything is going to be the same, but when it comes to technology, screen time, if they think that it might be too drastically unfair.

But those could be ways that we can model and demonstrate whatever it is that we’re wanting them to do and lessons that we want them to learn in terms of engaging and using phones and screens and social media, to be doing the same thing ourselves and modeling those healthy habits and boundaries between the two.

Bruce:

And what about other healthy habits? What are some other healthy habits that parents can model for their children and teens that help with engaged parenting?

Shannon:

Well, like I said, this isn’t just modeling our use or how much we physically have our phones on us or in our hands. But if the healthy habits are for nutritional, eating, and eating to fuel our bodies, and are not snacking all the time.

Active, remaining active. Again, this is something that research has shown that children who are raised by parents or an adult who is routinely engaging in physical activity, something like walking on a routine basis, playing sports with friends, basketball in the driveway, they’re more likely to live active and healthy lifestyles as well.

This is also true for emotional regulation. We think of toddlers being the ones having the tantrums all the time, but the reality is that sometimes as adults, we can do the same thing, not just in the car with road rage.

If you don’t want your kid doing the same thing, then also not screaming at other drivers. But even for ourselves. And it can be really challenging. Children and teens can be very challenging.

But remaining calm, taking deep breaths ourselves before we respond to them, as hard as it is, sometimes that is a way of modeling that emotional regulation. If we want them to learn how to calmly respond when they’re disappointed or when they’re frustrated, then we have to do the same thing.

Bruce:

Shannon, as we wrap up our conversation, I want to point to a number of resources that we have in the program notes. All very helpful. One in particular, I would just like to have you describe it for us, and it's called the New Parent Resource Center page on Military OneSource.

Shannon:

Sure. The Military Parent Resource Center is a landing page that we have on Military OneSource as a one-stop shop for all sorts of parenting needs.

Again, regardless if you are expecting or you have elementary, middle school, teenagers. There's various direct links to resources on there as well as just other education materials.

So, a link to the New Parent Support Program or the New MilParent Consultant on Military OneSource, resources and education for their infants and young children, for adoption, foster care, school age and, again, for youth and teens as they get older.

It's just a great webpage starting point, if you will, for any sort of parenting resource education needs that you might have in the military.

Bruce:

Great. We'll leave it there. Thank you, Shannon, for joining us today.

Shannon:

Thank you for having me.

Bruce:

Absolutely. Shannon Best is a licensed marriage and family therapist who serves as the child abuse and neglect lead for the Defense Department's Family Advocacy Program. Great to have you with us. Come back anytime.

And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We have a link in the program notes, so you can send us a comment, a question, an idea for our future episode.

Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.