

Military OneSource Podcast — Solo Parenting During the Holidays

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

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. Today we're going to talk about solo parenting during the holidays with our guest. So welcome to Tiffany Joe Kelly, who is an Air Force spouse. Glad to have you with us.

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

So we've got some advice to share, maybe some stories to tell. So why don't we begin by hearing a little bit about you, your background, and what you're bringing to the conversation?

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

Perfect. So thanks for having me. First off, my name is Tiffany, we are an Air Force family of five total. So we have a 26-year-old, a 12-year-old and a 13-year-old. The 12- and 13-year-old are still in the home. We have been married for almost 17 of his 24 years of service. So lots of deployments, 15-month remote tour. We jokingly say that we have parented and been married through more holidays celebrated on non-traditional days. And what I mean by that is just because Christmas is marked on the calendar by December 25th, we're really going to celebrate it whenever he actually makes it home from the TDY, or the training op, or even just a regular shift work schedule.

He is by trade security forces in the United States Air Force, which is a heavy ops tempo and lots of shift work. So for the first two to four years, I would say we rotated 12- to 14-hour shifts. And it's 24/7, security forces doesn't take off for the holidays. So we learned that while it's marked on a calendar, that doesn't mean we actually have to celebrate it on that day because leave is never guaranteed. So it's one of my favorite things. When the children were little, everybody else was talking about Christmas and we're like, "We're going to have Christmas when Dad gets home." And I think the flexibility that military families inherently learn through the holidays is that just because it's on the calendar doesn't mean that's the celebration day.

Bruce Moody:

Oh my goodness, that is it. I'm retired Navy and I can tell you, you got to make your own holidays. If you go by the calendar, you're going to be setting yourself up for difficult times. So what are some other activities, resources, that you can recommend for people who will be solo parenting over the holidays?

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

There's always the option to travel home to be closer to family, and I always encourage people to do what is best for them. Our first few holidays apart I did just that. And there were some people that were like, "Oh, it's so expensive. I can't believe you would do that." But at the time, that's what I needed. And as I've grown through this military spouse life, I have also learned what building community means, and that means building community wherever ZIP code is called home right now. And what I did is I really leaned into on-installation resources, which means I had to go and say, "Hey look, my husband's going to be gone X, Y or Z. I have a 2- and 3-year-old. What do y'all have? Is there a potluck? Can we go over to the DFAC? Is there a breakfast with Santa maybe through MWR?"

And I think it's about really reaching out and being able to build that community with friends and family. And friends and family aren't always those that you're related by blood with. It's who you've connected with within your community, be it through your church or your career, the community centers that are on base and off base. What I loved the most when my children were younger was the base library. That base library had craft days. And I could sit and read a book, or I could talk with the other parents that were also solo parenting, and my kids were making turkeys from their handprints, and we were making Christmas tree out of macaroni noodles. Those are the things that your children will remember, not just that their service-member parent is gone.

And so locating that MWR office or your 4th Support Squadron or your ASC, if you're Army, plugging into those resources were vital for me. And the resources are not lacking. We just have to be able to find them. And I think that's a pillar of where I have

leaned in during the time when I had children to keep them engaged and to help distract me and to distract from the missing during the holidays.

Bruce Moody:

Right. So going home, if you can, is awesome. It may not be feasible financially. But to your point on installation, and I've been on a lot. I've been on remote tours, I've been overseas, I've been here, there. It is really interesting just how much stuff is going on. And there's so many different avenues that you can take within the military community to include your own that you generate. I just think it's so important that people take a moment to look around and see all of the opportunities that are there. They may live off post, off installation. It is a good idea maybe to get on the website or just to get onto the base and talk to people, just get a sense of what's going on, and see where the conversations are.

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

I agree 100%. I guess when we very first got married, I had always heard that you have to be stoic, you have to be strong, you have to lace up those bootstraps. That doesn't mean you have to do it alone. I can lace up my bootstraps, but I can tell somebody, "Hey, these boots are really heavy today, and I need a break." That's a heavy responsibility. And sometimes we don't know how to ask for that help, or we don't know how or where to go. Maybe they're in a remote location. We were stationed at a Guard base in Tennessee. My children were **1** and **2** and then **15**. And that was a really hard season because I didn't have your standard base facilities. On a National Guard base, they don't have a chapel that's open seven days a week. They don't have a military spouse community necessarily, but what I did is I really leaned into some of the nonprofits.

We actually did utilize Military OneSource for some counseling services because we had just moved our oldest son during his freshman year of high school. And I will 100% continue to share that Military OneSource, the non-medical counseling that was afforded to our family during that transition, truly saved our family and pulled us up out of the trenches. And even though we didn't have a med group or a behavioral health on post, those resources were there, and that counselor plugged us into Operation Purple Up, and they provided activities and retreats right there in East Tennessee that we could participate in that reengaged our family during a really difficult time for us when we couldn't go home.

It was about being able to say, "Hey, we're in a tough spot, and we need some help navigating this as an active-duty family stationed at a Guard base." And those resources were there. And it was during the holidays. We could not afford to travel home. It was tough, but there were resources there in our local community that we were able to lean on. For our families who are in remote or maybe on a recruiting tour where there's not

the same on-base facilities, there are resources there. We just got to dig in and find them.

Bruce Moody:

You bring up a lot of really excellent points, one of them, of course, Military OneSource. What I would say about Military OneSource, like you said, they do have available to them a lot of local knowledge. So you may be in a remote situation. And folks, just so you know, just as Tiffany is talking about, you can be in the continental U.S. and be in an absolutely remote situation. But you can call up Military OneSource, and they will point to stuff that's in your ZIP code and help you out. But at the same time, because we partner with them, your local installation. I don't want to say just call Military OneSource — your family resource center. Every service calls them differently, but you know what I'm talking. Those family resource centers, they know what's going on and they can put you in touch.

Tiffany, maybe you can talk to this because there are the people who are maybe shy and not wanting to talk. But so many times I find people who are trying to be strong, because they feel other people have it really hard and what they have doesn't really rank compared to what other people are doing. But you know what? You still are entitled to reach out to get help, to talk to a friend. I really would like to hear your thoughts on encouraging people to make that first call to a friend, to a neighbor, to the local group of spouses.

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

Right. I know it's hard, and I am a very type A, very driven, independent mother and wife and just spouse. It's inherently who I am and how I was raised that we just put your head down and plow through. What that did the first couple of years when I did not want to reach out is it built a lot of resentment towards my husband and his service. And it made me angry, which drove a wedge in our marriage, which was already difficult to navigate because of his job and his career. So when we did spend time with each other, it was more me being upset because I wasn't getting the support that I needed and he just couldn't be there. And so when I finally did make that reach, it eased so much of the burden in so many areas of my life.

And I would encourage spouses that are in that really tough season, be it you're parenting, or you're really focused on furthering your education, or ramping up your career goals, that making that phone call and saying, "Hey, I'm at this place and I'm not sure which way to turn or who to go to," because there's only so many phone calls to your mom or to your sister or to a really great best friend who may be three times zones away, and getting that local assistance on the installation, the MFLCs that are embedded in your Military Family Readiness Centers, in your ASCs, in your Fleet and Family Support Centers.

And I know that is a really difficult phone call to make. And I know it's hard to say, "Hey, I need some help." But I will tell you that those services are there because the military recognizes that this is not easy. And they know that from years of data-driven information that's been collected, and that's their job. "Let's help them earn their paycheck," is what my husband told me when I very first ... when I very first went to him and he was like, "I don't know how to help you. I don't know how to make this any easier on you because you've always been so independent, and you've always been so incredibly strong." And now it's not weakness to say "Hey, I don't know."

You don't know what you don't know until you've been there. And just because spouses before my time had struggles and hurdles and suffered does not mean that I should struggle and suffer through it, because the military and the DOD with various initiatives is recognized these are needed. So we need to use them. And I'm going to encourage you to pick up the phone. And if you can't pick up the phone, if I can't tell you how many spouses I've said, "I'll meet you at Military and Family Readiness Center. I'll walk in the door with you."

And I think we need to be able to say that to one another to say, "Hey, you don't have to do it alone, but you do have to do it and I'm willing to walk that path with you." So find somebody that can walk that path with you there. And I promise there's more of us out there that are willing to walk with you than are going to say, "Hey, you need to suck it up and just trudge through it because we know how hard it is."

Bruce Moody:

So holidays, of course, are really heavy on tradition. Then you throw a deployment, or a TDY, or just an assignment that keeps somebody incredibly busy, like security forces, or working at basic training or something like that. There are some jobs where people are still coming home at night, but they are working crazy hours and they're exhausted. So if you have a holiday that is intersecting with a deployment or just military duty, what do you recommend for an untraditional holiday season? What sort of tips or stories can you share for your recommendations?

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

So one of my favorites is during the holidays when my husband has been deployed or TDY, we make it completely different than traditional. We will have Mexican food, because I'm from Texas. And so we're going to have enchiladas and tamales instead of turkey or ham. And so we make it fun. And then when my husband returns home, guess what? We have a traditional Thanksgiving or holiday ham or whatever he wants, and we actually celebrate with him home. Like I said, just because it's on the calendar doesn't mean that's when we have to celebrate it. You can still make remarkable memories with your family even though it may be the middle of January when they finally make it back.

And so we've celebrated many of July 4ths. He is typically gone in that season for us, so he misses a lot of the sports, and he misses a lot of our summer activities.

So one of my favorite things is to ask one of my spouse friends, "Hey, would your husband mind going with us or can y'all go with us to the baseball game and cheer on our sons?" And I know that may sound awkward, but we are a family in the military. And so this last deployment that we just endured, I actually did that. And we had a couple of big baseball games and some celebrations. And I asked one of my dearest friends here in Georgia that, "Hey, would your husband mind going?" And I actually had an event here on the installation that evening, a formal event that I needed to attend, and somebody stepped in for us. And that's what I mean about building community. You don't have to do it all alone, there are people that will rally behind you.

One of the other traditions that we do is that both of our children were born in the fall, and for some reason, he also goes away a lot on TDYs and training ops during the fall season. So you know how you buy birthday gifts or you plan a birthday party? So what I did, back during the 15-month remote, is I took the kids to Target and gave them a budget, and they were allowed to buy whatever they wanted. And I had my Starbucks. We look back at that time, my children do not recall the 15-month big trip Daddy was on. You know what they remember? They remember going to Target.

And that's what I'm saying. Let's replace the memory of "Daddy being gone for 15 months" with "How did we adapt and make it fun and enjoyable?" to where we can bank some of those good memories other than just the missing. And I think that plays into the resiliency that is exhibited by military families, and we can share those stories. So those are my favorites, is that asking friends and doing something completely out of the ordinary.

One wanted to go to her favorite Mexican food restaurant and have chips and salsa and guacamole and the other wanted to go to his favorite pizza place. You let them pick. It took a lot of the planning off of my plate. I didn't have to plan a lot. I just had to schedule a couple of hours in Target and let the kids get what they want. So that was a really fun way for us to take the focus off of my Dad's not here, and it made it about them and the time that we were able to spend together.

Bruce Moody:

That's really nice. Thank you for sharing that. What I would like to do is a couple of quick questions about being a solo parent. So if you're preparing to be a solo parent, what advice would you give?

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

It's just a season, not a permanent sentence, and set some short-term goals for yourself and your kiddos. One example I have is that my daughter wanted to redecorate her bedroom, and we gave ourselves one month's time from planning to completion. And so that gave us something to do just her and I. And **Dad** really didn't get to say anything, and we didn't let him get out the laser level to measure and make sure everything was even. And it was really fun because it's like, look, we can do this, you and me, just her and I.

So I think that was one of the big things is to set some short-term goals, or that you want to do so many activities during that time period. Those were the fun ones. I want to take the kids to four museums because our children love museums. We set short-term goals to prepare, and we took some time to do it. Let's be honest, Dad wrangles everybody a little bit better than what Mom does. And so we needed to learn how to wrangle two small kids or two teenagers now at this point on how to get through those short-term goals.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. So next one here. Preparing yourself and your children before the holidays. Are there any special steps to take knowing your service member is coming home?

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

Yes. Be realistic. You've navigated how many ever days, weeks or months leading up to them coming home, and you've had to figure it all out by yourself. And now your partner, your person, is about to come home, your co-parent who hasn't really been there making any decisions with you, they're about to be there and they're going to throw a big wrench in the whole routine that you've established and you have successfully conquered. Let them ease that burden. If they're going to load the dishwasher for you, let them. It's not going to be the way you did it, but the dishes will still get clean.

And also, remind your spouse that's coming home, "Hey, the kids have been sleeping on the couch on Friday and Saturday nights and it's OK." You can't come home and go back to all the rules because you've been gone for six and a half months, and Mom let us have campouts and we got to stay up till really unrealistic hours of the night watching TV or playing video games with our friends. And remind the service member that we've been doing this, and we all survived it and we're all better for it. So before you come in here and set all the rules back down, let's ease back into a whole family unit again.

Bruce Moody:

I'm going to totally have you back on this podcast. All right, last question, because we've already touched on the holidays. Can you give a parent some advice on how to readjust after the holidays are over?

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

Yes, absolutely. Number one, I always struggled with feeling a little guilty because I might've blown the holiday gift budget or the holiday traveling budget. You can always make more money. You cannot make those memories again. I promise it's going to be okay. So just readjust, redirect your energy into going, you know what? It's going to be okay. Don't beat yourself up because it wasn't perfect. None of this is going to be perfect, and none of it's permanent. Military service comes to an end, deployments come to an end, TDYs end. What you do with that time, it is paramount to the success of being able to get through the next one. And so after the holidays are over, get back into your routine, find a new rhythm. Get something else on your plate to focus on because the holidays, they do end, and you got to readjust back to getting back into the rhythm of everyday life.

Bruce Moody:

Awesome. And we're going to have to end it there. Tiffany Joe Kelly, an Air Force spouse talking to us about solo parenting during the holidays, and so much more. And we're going to absolutely have you back on the podcast, but thank you so much for joining us today.

Tiffany Joe Kelly:

Thank you, Bruce, I appreciate it. And to the team, I appreciate y'all.

Bruce Moody:

Yes, absolutely. Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We want to also remind you that we have a link in the program notes and you can send us a question, or a comment, or an idea for a future episode. And 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.