

Military OneSource Podcast — Strengthening Family and Community Bonds With Sesame Street for Military Families

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. We're always pleased to have on the podcast the Sesame Street Workshop. Joining us today is Tara Wright, who is with the Sesame Street Workshop. Tara, welcome to the podcast.

Tara Wright:

Thanks for having me, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

Sesame Street is one of those streets that needs no introduction, but I would gather to say that most people are less familiar with Sesame Workshop, the folks that bring you Sesame Street. So let's just begin there. What is Sesame Street Workshop?

Tara Wright:

Right. Sesame Workshop is a global impact nonprofit educational organization. We actually work in many, many countries across the world, and we bring you not only Sesame Street, but we have productions across the world. But we also have social impact content both domestically here in the states and abroad.

And we try to create resources for the youngest children, that age group of 2-5, 2-8, going through really difficult situations. So, you'll find our work helping children in refugee camps. You'll find our work helping displaced families due to conflict. You'll find our work on the border helping migrant children and families.

And then you'll find our work here in the states — we are helping children who are going through really difficult things, perhaps experiencing life in foster care or experiencing homelessness for a time. Those types of tough topics we like to address with child appropriate developmentally appropriate resources for the children themselves and for their caregivers and the providers who support them as well.

Bruce Moody:

I've been to your offices in New York City, and I could tell you, you would want to work at Sesame Street Workshop. It is the most stimulating, creative juice-flowing place I've ever stepped into. And just as you're describing, as you walk from one set of the office to the next, you see those different communities that are being served.

So, let's bring it around to military families. So you have Sesame Street for Military Families. Give us a quick overview of what that is.

Tara Wright:

That's right. Well, I will say the office is a very special place. I'm actually based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, now, but we spent several years in New York City and then Virginia. I'm actually a military spouse myself, so that's kind of how I ended up back home closer to family, just so I'd have a little bit more support while my husband is away at training and things like that.

But of course, we also support military families through our Sesame Street for Military Families initiative, and it's obviously an area that's close to my heart. But this initiative really started — I think we're at 17 years now. So it's been a longstanding initiative. One of our pillars of content, and it really began kind of in the aftermath of 9/11 when so many families were experiencing multiple deployments and some homecomings.

And we knew that we needed to support those families, especially those young children who were having those big, big changes. And families needed guidance and support to talk about what was happening in their lives, those changes and the changes in routine and all those things.

So, over the years, the military families initiative has grown from just a handful of those really tough topics to include resources to support military families at every point along their military journey.

Bruce Moody:

I would say that when it comes to Sesame Street, most parents would say, unflinchingly, they know how to talk to kids, nobody else does. Sesame Street, they know how to talk to kids. But how does it come to be that Sesame Street knows how to talk to kids in a military family?

Tara Wright:

Well, I think the biggest thing to note is that with all our work, including our military families work, but really beyond into all of our social impact work — and even with the show — we do so much research. Really everything is founded in research, and that means that we're talking very often with military families themselves.

So, that could be through surveys. Oftentimes we have online discussion boards where we're asking questions about the things that military families are experiencing and what challenges they're facing, what resources have they used that are really helpful, who are

the organizations and the people that have really helped them in different areas of their life?

So, we're listening all the time. I think that's the biggest way we get to know what military families are experiencing, what they need, what they want. We ask and we listen. And that's the gist of it really.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. And also, you're a military spouse, which is awesome. It's great to have someone who's on both sides of the experience.

Maybe what we can do is talk through some of the aspects of military life, and you can talk through them and maybe talk about some of the content found on Sesame Street for Military Families and what it addresses.

Tara Wright:

Sure.

Bruce Moody:

Let's begin with military families moving a lot, having to adjust to new communities over and over again.

Tara Wright:

Yeah, that's definitely the case. I would consider my family personally to be kind of new to the military. But even in our newness, we've been probably about five years, we have experienced some moving. So, we were in Virginia for a little while my husband was training, and then we moved home.

And of course he travels monthly, he's a reserve officer. So, he travels monthly, sometimes for several weeks at a time. So, the thing that I've learned personally about military life is that even if you're not PCSing, that sort of consistent change, right? Constant change or expectation that things could change without really clear timelines sometimes, or very last minute timelines can be just something that kind of underlies your sense of how you live your life. So, I think that's a really common experience, and I think it can affect military families in many ways.

So, if we're thinking about more traditional PCSing and you're moving every three years or so to a different place, for young children especially, that can affect how they feel rooted in a place and find their sense of belonging and identity. It can also affect how they make and maintain friendships. And for parents, of course, it can cause some feelings of disconnection or just feeling reluctant to maybe plug into their broader community. So in terms of moving, there are a couple of topic pages that I would recommend families look into, and you can find all of these at SesameStreetforMilitaryFamilies.org. But of course, we have a topic page all about relocation. So you can visit that, you can watch some videos.

There's actually an app that we have called The Big Moving Adventure. So you can download that, and it kind of takes you through the process of packing and looking toward your new community with expectation and excitement and kind of building some things to be excited about as a family. And kind of make a plan of how you're going to plug into your new community and how you're going to retain the connections that you may have in your community at the time. So how are you going to keep in touch with friends? How are you going to use this experience of moving as a real strength and an asset for your family? So, those are some themes.

There's also one of our more recent topics is around family and community bonds. And in that topic we talk a lot about making the effort to plug into your community, even if it's just a community that you're going to be in for a little while. Why it's worth the effort to find those connections and find people who can support you and that you can support in turn. Because we also know that thinking of others and serving others can add to your sense of well-being and purpose as well.

Two more that I would point out on this topic would be transitions in health care. When you go to a new community, you have to kind of set everything up from scratch and you have to find new providers and new health care teams. So, we have resources around that and just helping kids get ready to go to the doctor and things like that. So that would be a good topic as well.

Bruce Moody:

You bring up so many great points that we could just go in all different directions. And you mentioned the word traditional, traditional PCSing. And it's interesting, because more and more, year after year, military experiences for individuals are anything but traditional.

And so your husband, for example, he's traveling a lot, but it's not technically a deployment. And I almost want — and this, we really can dive into this as a whole episode — but what if we substitute the word deployment for simply being away? Because sometimes it's school, it's training, it's field work. A lot of times people are on the same installation but they're out in the field training and it's the same as them being on the other side of the world.

And I love the fact that Sesame Street for Military Families can really get into the life experiences of military families as they really are today. And maybe you could share with us some of the unique factors experienced by the National Guard and reserve community.

Tara Wright:

Sure. So, like I said, I'm a reserve family. Yeah, I think you put it really well that the travel is anything but typical except that we can expect that it's going to happen. So my husband will go anywhere from three days to five days on a pretty regular basis, and then he'll have training. So, he's set it out actually on Sunday for a few weeks to support a different unit. So, kind of out of our typical routine, but again, expected because we

know that they can be called up for all kinds of reasons. So, I think that it's hard to put into words how that experience feels as a parent and for our children — I have three boys, five and under. So, they're really in the Sesame sweet spot here. And it's interesting to kind of explain to them in ways that they understand how their dad is going to be gone for a little while.

I think what the biggest effect it has on us, for instance, is really how our routine changes while he's away. So, we kind of have routines when he's here, and then we have different routines when he's not here. And that's kind of routine for us. We kind of know what to expect at this point. We know that drop-offs from school are going to be different, pickups are going to be different.

Maybe my parents who are in town as well can pitch in a little bit more. We often have more friends over when he's away around dinnertime, which is kind of an unusual thing when he's here we don't have as many families over for dinner. But I find dinner and bedtime to be difficult as a solo parent. So, we'll have families over to ease that burden and just kind of fill in some of those gaps. So, I think that that's a way that this particular life experience feels.

It can also be difficult for National Guard and reserve families because they're often disconnected from the base or a military community. For instance, my husband, his unit is out in Boston and I'm in Oklahoma. So, that's a big difference. We're not getting to know the families necessarily that he's working with and making friendships with. So, there's some disconnection.

I think there's also disconnection from just resources that families might have if they're closer to a base. So, there's that kind of disconnection, but there's also a sense of pride. I think there's this disconnection from the military community, but there can also be that disconnection from your civilian community that you might be living in because there's not that many military families it feels like, and not everybody really understands that experience.

In one of our latest topics, we have a video that we did and Mae, who is Elmo's mom — I don't know if you guys know this, but Elmo is a military child and he's featured in all of our military families work.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, yes.

Tara Wright:

But specifically his dad, Louie, is in the National Guard. We were able to kind of make that official either last year or the year before. So, we have a recent video of Mae who is solo parenting at the time. Louie is off at training, and we really are able to model just showing that she's taking on a little bit of extra things that he normally helps out with. And we see one of the community providers, Elmo's art teacher, kind of pitch in and encourage her that she's got this and that she can take care of Elmo for a little while.

So we're really able to model how community can pitch in, especially like a civilian community. Just by when military families just express what they're going through, kind of tell their military experience. I think even whether they're military or not, people really want to help and they may not know how. So, that's another thing. I think reserve families, especially National Guard families who have this kind of strange routine can talk about their experience a little bit more, and that really helps others step in to fill those gaps.

Bruce Moody:

I'm retired military. I was active duty. I say this just about every time I get the opportunity to speak with people who are in the Guard and reserve. I was active duty. I had one job in one life, one community. You have this split existence and it's not easy. And it took quite a while before I was really exposed to just how challenging life and the Guard and reserve can be. Strengthening bonds within the family and within the community are so incredibly important.

With that, I want to ask a question about what you offer through Sesame Street for Military Families. For people who have only watched Sesame Street, the program, a program which is really for children, talk to us about Sesame Street for Military Families as it is a resource for parents. Because you mentioned you've got three boys under five. I mean, any parent with three boys under five has questions. You've got questions. So, what is Sesame Street for Military Families doing for parents?

Tara Wright:

That's a great question, thank you for asking. Yeah, what are we doing for parents? I think the biggest thing is we're providing a mirror. So, we're really allowing parents and whole families to see themselves in our resources. So, hopefully they see themselves and their experiences reflected in the videos that we create, and that helps them feel less alone. It helps acknowledge some of the sacrifices and challenges that they do go through. And I do hope it helps them recognize their strengths.

At Sesame, especially Sesame Street for Military Families, we always want to take a strength-based approach, and we want to be encouraging. We want to help families really recognize all the good things that they have going for them and how to tap into those strengths to leverage them as a family to be the best that they can, no matter what challenges they're facing, whether they're really big or really small. So one thing that you'll see on the website particularly is that we have videos. Those are typically made for co-viewing. So, both kids will get something out of them and their grownups will get something out of them: some key messages, some lessons learned, some activities that they can try to emulate. They're usually very silly, very playful, very heartwarming and heartfelt.

Then there are also printable activities that kind of help families take some of the strategies or key messages that were in the videos and really put them into practice. So again, things that they can do together. Right now I'm looking at one that's called Our Adventure List. Say you do want to plug into your community. Well, how are you going

to do that? Let's make a plan together. What excites you? What excites your children? What are you guys curious about in your community? And make a plan to do those things together and who can we invite to go with us?

And then another thing we have especially and specifically for parents, are articles. And these are short, they have bullet points, they have talking points, things they can practice with their children. For instance, I'm looking at the Family and Community Bonds page, and we have articles. One of them is called When Grownups Feel Lonely. So, we of course want to acknowledge that children feel lonely sometimes, and there are things that you can say to them.

But we also want to acknowledge that as grownups and as parents, especially military parents, we are inclined to have some big feelings ourselves. And so how do we talk to ourselves? How do we kind of cope with our own feelings, regulate our own emotions, and how do we just tap into the strength that we have to keep going and showing up for our children and for ourselves? So, those are some things that we offer for parents on this website.

Bruce Moody:

We've covered a lot, and I want to wrap things up by inviting you to give a final pitch for Sesame Street for Military Families, and just give us a sense of what you're working on now — what you think the next batch of materials for families might look like.

Tara Wright:

Oh, I am deep into the work actually, as we speak, and I'm not sure how much I'm supposed to share.

Bruce Moody:

Oh, I'm sorry.

Tara Wright:

But I will. I'll give a little bit.

Bruce Moody:

I don't want to get you in trouble.

Tara Wright:

I'll just hint that parents can look forward to even more strategies and resources for them in their parenting, in their everyday family lives, some things that they can do together with their children to maintain really good relationships and positive, healthy habits. This next round of resources will really be helpful to families to support them in those day-to-day challenges and day-to-day joys as well. I think this is going to be a really fun set of resources coming up.

Bruce Moody:

Well put, but you're constantly moving forward in developing new material, even if you're not allowed to talk about it before you pull back the curtain. I get it.

One last question for you, Tara. What is the typical way that people react to hearing that you work with Sesame Street?

Tara Wright:

Shock and awe. It's funny. We used to live in New York, and in New York everybody has more or less interesting, fascinating jobs. You meet somebody and you're like, you do what? And people just think, oh, yeah, that's pretty cool. But I do this. It's pretty common to meet people who are doing some really, really interesting things.

And back home, the people are equally as interesting and lovely and wonderful, but there's not a lot of big global media companies based in Tulsa. So, every once in a while I'll say what I do, and it's usually a big smile and disbelief and then a whole bunch of questions about Muppets.

Bruce Moody:

Of course. Of course. Well, Tara, it's wonderful to have you on the podcast. I just want to say that we're going to put a ton of links in the program notes so people can find Sesame Street for Military Families. It's a great resource for military families. I also want to mention Military OneSource. It's something we're just so, so proud of, and Military OneSource really has that 24/7 support.

You can call, you can chat. We're available for families who just need a help figuring out the next step on things. So, give Military OneSource a try, give Sesame Street for Military Families a try, and we'll have sunny days. See what I did?

Tara Wright:

It was really nice. Very good.

Bruce Moody:

All right. There we are, see. Thank you so much, Tara. Really appreciate it.

Tara Wright:

Oh, thank you so much. Thanks for having me, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely.

I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We love to hear from you. Click on the comment link in the notes, send us a comment or maybe a question, maybe an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you get your podcasts, because we cover a wide variety of topics to help military families navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.