

Military OneSource Podcast — Support for Military Parents Without Judgment, Part 1

Episode transcript

Bruce Moody:

Today we're talking about the New Parent Support Program. Hi, I am Bruce Moody. I'm a retired Navy chief, and I've known about this program for years, more like decades. Anyway, a common misperception that I've heard is that when a home visitor from the New Parent Support Program walks into your home, they're there to inspect or silently critique.

But in reality, these visits are all about creating a safe space where new parents feel supported, not judged. The visits are built on empathy, not scrutiny. So this is the first of two episodes where we speak with a military spouse and her home visitor. They're going to share what the visits actually look like.

It's not about being perfect, it's about helping them, helping a parent feel empowered and prepared to provide a nurturing environment for their children. So I've met many home visitors over the year, and I can tell you these are the nicest people in the world. Also, joining us for today's conversation is a baby who is teething, and she wants us all to know about it.

Before we get started, I wanna remind you that Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with personalized support tools and resources for every step of military life. If you have any questions or comments about today's conversation, send us a note using the link in the program notes.

We love to hear from you. And a reminder you can subscribe to the podcast wherever you listen. So please do. OK. Let's jump into today's conversation.

All right. Welcome to the podcast. We have with us La Shante Francis, who is a home visitor based at Naval Station Mayport, which is in Jacksonville, Florida. Also joining us today is Catalina Chavez, who is a Navy parent at Kings Bay, Georgia, which is just up the road from Mayport and a beautiful, beautiful stretch of land.

Glad to have you both with us on the podcast. Welcome.

Chavez:

Thank you.

La Shante:

Thank you. Happy to be here.

Moody:

All right. And Catalina, your daughter is gonna be making cameos. Unannounced, expected cameos from time to time because she is how old?

Chavez:

She's six months.

Moody:

Six months. All right, good. We welcome babies. Well, let's get started. How did the two of you cross paths? How did that get started?

Francis:

So Catalina came to me as a referral and as new parent support does, we saw the need, we talked, and we have been going strong ever since. So it's been about a year that I've been working with Catalina and her family.

Moody:

And Catalina, how did all of this get started? What brought you into the, uh, New Parent Support Program?

Chavez:

Um, my husband decided that he was gonna sign me up for like 20 different things, and new parent support happened to be one of them. And, honestly, I was not too enthusiastic about it. But now, almost a year later, I couldn't have gone through a lot of the stuff that we did go through without La Shanta here.

Moody:

Nice.

Francis:

And I will say, Miss Catalina is being very gracious right now. She had a lot of transitions during that time. She is new military spouse, so her husband has been in the Navy for about a year.

Moody:

Wow.

La Shante:

So freshly into the Navy.

A lot of transitions during that time. So, definitely priorities — we're trying to get things in order — rather than services, which is understandable 'cause a lot of moving parts, but definitely grateful that she reached out and decided to engage in services.

Moody:

You know, I have to say, Catalina, for your husband, I mean, that's a pretty mature decision to make, to get involved with something like the New Parent Support Program.

I'm a retired Navy chief and I can remember year one. I mean, life moves really fast when you're new to the military, so pretty awesome that you got involved with us. And by the way, we're teething. Is that what we're up to today?

Chavez:

Oh yeah. Teething and, eating our feet pretty much.

Moody:

OK. OK. That's all. Great. Good.

La Shante, so what was your inspiration to work with military families?

Francis:

Growing up, I was a military dependent, so that was my first experience as a military family. My stepfather, he was in the Army though, so different branch. And also I served in the Navy as well. After my transition, I still had a helping spirit, so I just transitioned that to mostly child welfare.

I have worked as a child abuse investigator. I've served as a dependency case manager for the children in foster care and the families going through the dependency cases through the court system, and I had to go back home to the Navy to serve my families at the Navy.

Moody:

So let's talk about some of the services that you're providing. And by the way, so we're with the Navy today, but this is all available through all of the services. So talk about the various services available through the New Parent Support Program.

Francis:

So new parent support is super, super flexible. So we offer a expectant parent program workshop here, so that's on a quarterly basis.

And then we have a playgroup that we do regularly, a couple of times a month, and we just try to get our families out, engaged, because it's easy to kind of slip into, "oh, I'm a mom, or I'm a dad. Let's just focus on baby at home." But really encouraging our families to get out, engage with each other, and find a, a support system outside of the home.

And of course, then it turns into the home visitation program. So the home visitation program is definitely a lot more intimate.

It's what that family is looking for is what that family needs, and that's when we go into the home, we discuss all of the parenting things and go from there. It's really what the family wants, what we discuss. And we're just, just there to support.

Moody:

Yeah, and we're gonna talk more about those visits in just a few seconds here, but let's talk about the eligibility for the program. This is, to me, really interesting.

Francis:

OK. So foremost for eligibility, the criteria would be having a child in the home that is 3 and under, or you are expecting.

And when we are talking about expecting, we can be talking about a pregnancy, we can be talking about adoption, we can be talking about getting custody of a child through the legal system, surrogacy.

So we welcome all different forms of your parenting journey, however you enter it. But the primary focus are expecting parents and families with children that are 3 and under. So that means that if a family has a 16-year-old and they have started over, they are also eligible for the program.

Moody:

Now, La Shante, I would like you to talk about the process for getting started, for getting involved with the New Parent Support Program, and Catalina, feel free to chime in with your perspective on what that was like.

Francis:

So getting involved in new parent support is super easy. Definitely, you are welcome to come into our Fleet and Family Support Center and reach out to one of us there. Or if

you are getting services on base through medical, a lot of the times the expectant parents, they get a new parent support screener.

Every base might be different, but from there, those screeners are collected by your new parent support staff, and then someone will reach out to you from there. So services are voluntary, so we are here for assistance whenever needed.

But definitely if you are interested in services, reach out to your local fleet and family, and if there's a new parent support visitor there, I'm sure they're willing to help.

Moody:

And is there a cost?

Francis:

It is free.

Moody:

We like to say that.

Francis:

It is free, free, free.

Moody:

OK, good.

Chavez:

It was an easy process to join. Literally all we did was walk into fleet and family and we said, "Hey, we heard about this program," and they got us in same day. Thankfully, they had openings and we spoke, and then I later on went to La Shante and the first part of it was literally just getting to know what we needed as a family.

And then we've been smooth sailing since then, but it is such an easy process for the family side of it.

Moody:

Nice. Now, Catalina, before your baby arrived, what kind of support or preparation felt most valuable to you? Maybe it was new parent support or maybe it was something else.

Chavez:

Honestly, it was new parent support. I give so much credit to them because we were a new Navy family when we came here. My daughter was just about to be 2, and I was also pregnant, and so it was transitioning to the military lifestyle with a baby on the way and with a 2-year-old.

Not only that, but it was integrating my child into having two children in the household. Now, it wasn't just her. She couldn't just get spoiled by herself. So we had so many lifestyle changes.

It just kind of felt like I was underwater for a lot of it. And that new parent support is kind of what got my head above the water and what helped me see clearly with a lot of things.

And it got, it got my daughter to understand the sister was coming and it allowed me to learn how to handle my daughter and her emotions, 'cause I didn't know what I was doing at all.

Moody:

Nice (laughs). Let's spend some time talking about these home visits, and La Shante, perhaps you can get us started. What's the main goal of the home visits through the New Parent Support Program?

Francis:

I think the main goal is in our name, "support," so the visits are based off of a evidence-based curriculum, the way the visits flow is based on the family's needs. So if we're talking about baby proofing, there's evidence-based information on that.

But also we talk about the frustrations of, hey, she or he was just crawling. Now all of a sudden they're walking and I have to prepare for this new life stage. Like, I was not expecting this to happen so quickly.

I mean, we talk about it, but it's quicker than what we feel like we talked about. 'Cause kids just literally, it's like they go to sleep and then they wake up and then unlock a new level. It's like, you know it's coming, but it's like, oh really? It is really coming.

So talking about those things. And really, we are not here to say yes or no, "you are a good parent." We are here to build on the foundation that the families have.

So we are here for a listening ear. We are here for support.

I always say, the only time I'm gonna tell you don't do something, it's if there's a safety concern, but we really try to hone in on our families being individually them, and understanding that just because something worked for a family member or their neighbor or somebody else on the ship or at their command. does not mean that that works for you.

So it's finding your parenting groove and finding what works best for you.

Moody:

So what typically happens during the first visit and how do you help parents know what to expect?

Francis:

So, first visit is mostly paperwork. I mean, I call it my little torture devices. So it's, you know, paperwork isn't really the funnest thing to do, but we do have a privacy act so that clients do know that the information that they share is private.

It's not information that's going to be spread around similar to HIPAA. There's a rights and responsibilities, so, essentially what that paperwork entails is making sure they understand and know that, hey, we show respect on both ends. So you respect me, I respect you. Appointment keeping, expectations, things like that.

And then there's a screener that assesses risks. And I know people get kind of wary when you say risk, but I like to say it says risk on the paper, but it's just a room for improvement.

So there's nothing scary about that. And then after that, the first like two or three visits, it's literally getting to know the family, getting to know personalities, getting to know what they want out of the program. So it's not a plunge in like, oh, I enroll in this program and it goes straight to everything.

It's like, no, I want to make sure that you are comfortable with me to open up about these very intimate things, so it's kind of hard to open up to a stranger that you don't know, and especially if I don't have any background information.

So the first couple of visits are very, very even-keeled. Very, give me as much information as you want me to know, and then we'll go from there.

Moody:

Most of this is because life is moving really fast when you're in the military, new to the military — suddenly you got a baby coming. You're far from home, and having somebody to come into your home can just help you get ready for this huge change that's happening to your life, to your family. So what was that first visit like for you?

Chavez:

A whole lot of running around, making sure that my house was completely clean and ...

Moody:

I wanted to talk about that, yeah.

Chavez:

I was freaking out. We got a little bit of information from her and I heard like she had worked with CPS and things like that. She was on the abuse part of it. And even though my children, I love them, every piece, I'm like, but what if she sees one cup at a place?

You know, like, I was so scared and I had my husband there and he was just watching me. He didn't know how to help me, and we finally sat down to do this in-home visit, and I was thinking, oh my God, what if she goes into my bathroom and doesn't see that I have enough toilet paper — like it was thoughts like that that was coming to my head.

Moody:

Sure.

Chavez:

And funny enough, we sat in my living room, we chitchatted, we did a bunch of paperwork — like she said — and while we did that paperwork, I was like, is she looking around?

No. Her focus was on me and my daughter, and she asked us what we needed, what would be helpful to us, because for her, she individualizes her stuff because I may not need what another sailor's family needs.

And with that being said, after that first visit, I was not panic cleaning anymore. Whenever she comes over and if I have lived in, my daughter decided to pull out her Legos, I'm not having to worry about that.

And it's just getting comfortable and understanding that they're there to help you learn the changes that are about to take place in your life.

Moody:

So about those changes. And we love the baby cameos. I just wanna repeat myself. So sorry that you're teething, but we are glad to have you with us today.

So what I'd like for you to do Catalina, is kind of talk about how the visit helped your family, helped you shift your perspective regarding being a new parent.

Chavez:

Before La Shante came into our life, I was a very, very big introvert. I didn't stand up for myself. I was very closed off. I was afraid to ask for help. I was just honestly afraid all the time.

I didn't know what I was doing as a mom. I was afraid if I had asked for help that they would deem me as unworthy.

And being in this program, La Shante has completely brought me outta my shell. I am now going to the mom visits that are over here in Kings Bay. I haven't quite made it out to the Mayport ones.

But, I mean, I'm watching myself go on walks with different people. I went from having zero friends, zero family — nothing — to now all of a sudden I have a house full of people that love my children as much as I do.

And because of her, I have become a completely different person.

Moody:

La Shante, I really wanna hear your thoughts about this. 'Cause honestly, this goes beyond I think what most people would think of when they think of preparing new parents. How do you think that the support you're providing is relevant and meaningful to each individual family?

Francis:

So, I think the most important part is making sure they feel comfortable and understanding their needs. So the visits aren't about me. They're about the family. So really understanding their needs is the utmost importance. And then going from there. So if there's a specific cultural aspect, I wanna make sure that I understand their culture.

So I'll ask my clients like, hey, to make sure that you're getting the most outta your services, teach me about your culture so that I am aware of these cultural aspects, and then I can help you assist gauging a lot of the times what you want to keep versus what you want to kind of throw out from your own childhood and go on from there.

But really making sure they feel safe with me is the most important thing. This is a no judgment zone. We work off of what we have and we push forward.

Moody:

You know, I wanna get back to the different cultures and backgrounds. That's a really important point. It's a really interesting point to me, 'cause we have people from different backgrounds and cultures and traditions.

How does that all get discussed when you're working with new parents? Is there a baseline and you look to see what fits into it? How do you work with the different families and approaches to family life?

Francis:

So I think that happens during the intake mostly. So during intake I really try to get to know the clients.

So like, how did you meet? Oh, where are you from? Like, where's your family from? Like, do you have any fun family traditions? Like getting background saying like, did you grow up in the military or do you have family members in the military?

Because military is a culture all on its own, so if you haven't even grown up as a military dependent, you coming in to a military lifestyle is a shock on its own because you are brand new to all of the terms and all of the ranks.

So that's definitely a part of our intake process — talking about those intimate things.

Moody:

And Catalina, I wanna bring you into this 'cause we were talking about cultures, and you're right, being in the military, the military is a culture. And so for you, Catalina, you talked about this earlier, about how being a parent for you meant kind of getting out and meeting with the people around you.

What was that like and how did you find yourself balancing the demands of early parenthood?

Chavez:

Honestly, I didn't know what I was doing. It was hard being ...

Moody:

Who does when you're a new parent.

Chavez:

Yeah, it was hard being a parent too. And my child, we're currently getting her tested. She potentially has autism, so that's a challenge in itself.

So she has a bunch of services that she has to do, and La Shante pretty much helped me find all of the services, like where to even get started. Because I knew something was wrong. I didn't know what it was, though.

And she was quick to action, helped me get this settled, and once we got my daughter settled into her stuff, it gave me a chance to breathe and it allowed me to start branching out, meeting new military spouses.

It is a big different, culturally wise within the military part of it. I grew up military. I grew up around all Air Force, and going from a military child to now a military spouse and mom is completely different.

It's a whole different field, and it was hard at first managing that, but now that I've been doing it for a little while, it's like second nature.

Moody:

And as you work through this, I kinda want you to speak (laughs) on behalf of your husband. When your husband, who serves on submarines, is trying to go to work and focus on the mission, how does it help knowing that you've been through something like the New Parent Support Program and all that it brings to your knowledge of parenting and your help around the house?

Chavez:

It allows him to breathe. He knows that I'm taken care of. He knows that if at any moment I need help, not help as in like, "Oh, help me around my house — cleaning."

No, I mean like just the emotional part of it between the deployments, not talking to him, between everything that's happened in my life, 'cause I had a lot of transitions the last year.

It just gives him the moment to breathe. He doesn't ever have to worry that I'm not OK. Because I have these programs in place that help me make sure that I'm OK.

Moody:

La Shante, how do you see that from your side of the equation? How are you seeing service members who are able to focus because of the help that you're providing at home?

Francis:

I definitely think there is a peace of mind, especially if the active-duty service member is on a deployment, knowing that there is someone looking out for their family. They always enjoy when they're able to get the chance to actually come into the visits because the whole entire family is able to come into the visits.

So getting engaged that way, but it's definitely a peace of mind knowing that — I know the home visitor can't live with my spouse — but at least there is someone helping to navigate the rough water, so to say that may come through parenting, especially on deployments and underway, or even through new happenings or situations that they're like, is this normal?

You know, a lot of child development is very fluid and very odd sometimes, so just figuring out what is quote, unquote, normal, it's like that ease, like, OK, we're doing a good job. It's kind of like having a cheerleader in the background.

Chavez:

And she's definitely a cheerleader. She is a firecracker. The first time I met her, I'm like, how are you so happy all the time?

I don't get it. She is just a wonderful person to be around.

Moody:

And I'm telling you, I have been associated with the programs that offer the New Parent Support Program and the home visitors for years, and the thing that I remember most is just how good I felt just being around these home visitors.

They're such a wonderful group of people, and maybe as we kind of start to wrap up our conversation, for somebody who is pregnant and maybe feeling nervous, what's one small step that they could take today to feel a bit more confident?

Chavez:

Go to new parent support. That's been my answer, is to go there.

Moody:

And what would you want them to know?

Francis:

I think my answer would be, don't be afraid to ask for help. And knowing that you are not alone. There are a lot of people out here that want to help, but they don't know that you need the help. So the first step is the biggest step, which is showing that resiliency and stepping off on that ledge and asking for the help.

Moody:

And the final question relating to that, for those who are just hesitant about a home visit, about somebody who's gonna be coming into their home, what would be your final word of encouragement?

Chavez:

Don't freak out and clean like I did (Moody laughs). It's gonna be OK. She's not there to judge. She's not gonna nitpick, like, "Oh, you forgot to dust that."

She's just there to help to see what you need as a family. And don't worry. I had so much worry going into it, and it's something I laugh about now.

Francis:

I think for me, do not hesitate about home visits reaching out. It's OK if you don't want the home visits right away. If you want to, so to speak, "date the program," come to a playgroup, you know, get to know your home visitor.

Do office visits at first. Do phone visits at first, like, it doesn't have to be a home visit straight on. It's a voluntary program, so making sure that you are comfortable with it and then moving forward.

Just know that the visitor that comes to you is there with the intention to help and not to harm, and really and truly fleet and family — it stands true to its name. Like I would say my families, they have engaged with a lot of them. I have become like family too. So, understanding that this is something that could be gained and not necessarily a loss.

It's scary. I'm not gonna take away from that. It is scary letting a stranger enter your life that you know nothing about. But the benefit will outweigh the risk, I promise.

Moody:

And like you said, you can do it in bits and pieces. You can do it in ways that feel confident. You can go meet them in the office first. There's a number of ways to do this versus just, uh, jumping in full throat at the first time around.

La Shante:

Correct.

Moody:

All right. So, we are going to leave it there, and I'm gonna say thank you to the both of you and also to little baby. Good luck with your teething. I'm sure things will work out.

Chavez:

Yes (laughs).

Moody:

But thank you so much. Thanks for the three of you for joining us today.

Chavez:

Thank you so much.

La Shante:

Thank you.

Moody:

Wonderful. And I will remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department.

We always like to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes, and you can send us a question or a comment, maybe an idea for a 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.