

## PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	21
Guest:	Shelley Fenstermacher, PhD
Working title:	#21: PTSD and Parenting

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veteran's Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Pearl:

In today's episode, we'll discuss a very important topic, PTSD and parenting. I'm joined today by Dr. Shelly Fenstermacher, clinical psychologist and parenting expert with the family services section and women's mental health section of the VA's Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. Welcome, Dr. Fenstermacher.

Shelley:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Pearl:

So why is it important to talk about parenting when we talk about PTSD?

Shelley:

Well, we know that many Veterans are parents, and we also know that PTSD can affect the whole family, not just individual. VA is committed to supporting Veteran families and Veteran parents. I'd also like to mention that this information is meant for anyone in a parenting role. So while I will mostly be referring to Veteran parents here, this information and these resources can really be used by anyone helping to raise children.

Pearl:

Now we know that parenting can be a challenge no matter what your circumstances are. When it comes to PTSD in particular, how can PTSD impact the parenting role? How can being a parent impact PTSD or PTSD symptoms?

Shelley:

Yes. So first off, I'd like to highlight that many Veteran parents with PTSD are raising their kids just fine. But as you mentioned, we know that parenting does come with a lot of challenges and PTSD can make parenting even more difficult. Problems in parent-child functioning could also affect your PTSD symptoms as well. So the impact could go both ways. Specific PTSD symptoms like anger, withdrawal and avoidance, can really interfere with having positive interactions with your kids and engaging in family activities like going to school events or even soccer games together. Also, other symptoms of PTSD, particularly numbing, can impact a parent's ability to emotionally connect and really enjoy parenting. So over time, this can certainly affect the quality of parents' relationships with their kids and

just overall family functioning. But I also want to emphasize that there's hope. There are several things that a parent with PTSD can do.

Pearl:

You mentioned that there are a lot of challenges specific to PTSD and parenting, but that it's not hopeless, that there are some things that can be done to help. Can you describe what some of those things might be?

Shelley:

Sure. One strategy would be to learn more about the impact that PTSD could be having on you as a parent. The National Center for PTSD's website has a really helpful article titled "When a Child's Parent has PTSD" that describes how PTSD symptoms could affect you as a parent and how your kids might be responding to these changes. Another strategy could be to listen to the stories of other Veteran parents and their kids. There's an online self-help course called, "Parenting for Veterans." And this course features a collection of short video clips of two real Veteran parents sharing their experiences on many aspects of their lives, including living with emotional and physical injuries. And then another strategy is self-care. Self-care can be hard to engage in at times, especially when you're also caring for kids. But remember that every parent needs a chance to refuel both physically and mentally as well.

Pearl:

Excellent. And for those folks that are listening right now and just wondering, 'should I talk to my children about my PTSD? And if so, how?' What guidance would you give to them?

Shelley:

That's a really great question. It's certainly your decision. And a free VA-produced resource is the booklet, "A Veteran's Guide to Talking with Kids about PTSD." So this booklet can help you to decide whether this strategy is right for you, how you might prepare for these conversations and what information you might share with your children. Know that you don't need to talk to your children about your trauma to talk about how you're doing right now. And if you do decide to talk to your kids, be honest and provide accurate information. But also be careful not to share too much information like graphic details. So you could say something like, "sometimes parents have to manage difficult situations and I'm working hard to deal with some challenges right now." Also emphasize that they are not to blame for your PTSD.

Pearl:

That's really helpful. I'm curious about resources that are available for parents that want to get additional help for their PTSD and even parenting-specific help. Can you say a little bit about what services might be available for folks that are enrolled in VA care, as well as for those who don't get their care in VA?

Shelley:

So for a Veteran parent with PTSD who is looking for treatment, every VA offers comprehensive assessment and evidence-based treatment. And the focus and the goals for treatments are tailored to meet each individual Veteran's situation and preferences. So this could include family services and parenting as well. There are also unique VAs that offer more services, you can always inquire at your local VA. Vet centers are often places with particular expertise with PTSD, and in working with Veterans

and family members. But we are aware that we may need to make referrals to the community, such as local Y and local universities and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

Pearl:

I'm interested to know if in your experience as a clinician, if you have an example of a parenting challenge that a Veteran with PTSD has come to VA for help with, and what the outcome has been.

Shelley:

Sure. So one example I can think of is a Veteran father who was experiencing a lot of symptoms and what was really helpful for this family was the mother, the Veteran's wife, spoke to the children first about what was going on with their father. And then they heard it from their father's mouth directly. And it really helped this family to open up a discussion, that it wasn't something to be scared about.

Pearl:

It sounds like it helped the kids to understand that it was something that they then had space to talk about and come together about as a family. How did they talk about it? What about it was helpful and how might that look depending on the ages of the children?

Shelley:

The mother said to their children, "so when your father was deployed, he had some challenging experiences that are still affecting him and this is why he gets set off now." And the children responded that it was really helpful to connect their father's deployment to what they're seeing in the home right now. And in terms of ages, for example, younger children, they often have short attention spans and may only be able to listen for just a couple of minutes. So use appropriate language and take their lead. For older children and teens, it might be helpful to do an activity while talking, like shooting hoops together, for example. You could even consider writing them a letter. So encourage your kids to ask questions and give them lots of reassurance and support.

Pearl:

Excellent. I want to ask about one other tech-related resource. Can you tell us a bit about the PTSD Family Coach app and how that might be useful to our listeners?

Shelley:

Yes. One of the many great mobile apps developed by the National Center for PTSD is the PTSD Family Coach. This app provides information and quick tips that are specific to parenting, and tips for children whose parents have PTSD.

Pearl:

For the parenting course, can you say a little bit more about who it's for and what they can expect to learn when they take it?

Shelley:

Sure. So the Parenting for Veterans online self-help course was developed for Veterans and for family members, and for providers as well who want to learn more about Veteran parenting. It's free and it's confidential. And the course focuses on information and tools as well to strengthen parenting skills. So a

Veteran parent with PTSD could use it to identify more effective ways to parent, to help manage stress and to help their children cope with strong emotions. And there's another resource. I also wanted to mention, the Veteran Parenting Toolkit, which is also free and developed by VA. you can just pick the toolkit that matches your kids' age and find useful information on any stage of development. So whether it's limit-setting with your teen or with your toddlers, potty training.

Pearl:

Do you have a take home message for our listeners?

Shelley:

Every day is another opportunity for parents and kids to connect, and work on strengthening their relationships.

Pearl:

Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Fenstermacher.

Shelley:

Thank you so much for having me.

Pearl:

And thank you also to our listeners. Check out the Parenting for Veterans web course at [www.Veterantraining.va.gov](http://www.Veterantraining.va.gov). You can download the PTSD Family Coach app on your smartphone or tablet for free in the app store or play store. You can find other resources in the show notes.

Andrea:

Hello, this is Dr. Andrea Jamison, and I am the executive producer of PTSD Bytes. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.