

Rough Transcript
Lunch & Learn Partners in PROMISE Homeschooling Conversation
September 26, 2024

00:00:07

Hello everyone, and welcome. Today we are talking about the Partners in PROMISE homeschooling report. This report comes from our 2022 survey results that were released in March 2023. We realized the homeschooling community is one we had not intentionally reached out to. We are doing it today with two dynamic military spouses I want to introduce you to: Sabrina Dalton and Patricia Bird. I am Crystal Devas-Hany, an Army spouse. Thank you so much for being here. This recording will be attached to the report review that I'll record separately. The three of us are all military family advocates. One of our biggest goals is to bring together dynamic military spouses who are doing incredible things for our community and our kids. Education is our number one priority.

00:01:57

You might be asking why PiP is talking about homeschooling. Homeschooling families were just under 10% of our survey respondents—9.5% indicated they homeschool their children. It was a shock to us that this is a huge part of our population. We took a deep dive into the data to better support military homeschooling families. Sabrina, I want to start with you. Can you give us some background on how you got into homeschooling and what you want to share with military families?

00:02:28

Sure. My name is Sabrina Dalton, and I live in California. I'm a homeschooling mom of a 9-year-old, a 6-year-old, and a 4-year-old. I want to point out that I am the lead author and researcher for a homeschooling guide for military families that Five & Thrive has put together. Crystal, I'm going to need to get some help. That's okay, no problem. How about Trish goes first, and then we'll come back? I guess I'm going now. Tell me about what led to your decision to homeschool.

00:03:42

As Crystal said, I am in the Washington D.C. area. I homeschooled my son for only a year and a half. What led me to that decision is that I felt the school system was and my son at the time. We moved during COVID, and he had his education plan in place. I thought that moving with the plan would be smooth, but when you move from one state to another, it's completely different. We started school, and he just started going backward. It was hard to see him struggling.

00:04:48

The big thing that led to me homeschooling him was that he was in middle school, which is hard enough. They were not following his IEP, so his behavior and mental health went down. He's not a small kid. He is now 5'11 and over 300 pounds. Imagine someone like that getting upset. The school would always get the resource officer involved, and I was afraid for my son. I couldn't imagine my 13-year-old having a record. I made a tough decision because I had no intention of

Rough Transcript
Lunch & Learn Partners in PROMISE Homeschooling Conversation
September 26, 2024

homeschooling my teenager. I did research, contacted people, and talked to everyone I could. I decided to pull him out, and that's how I got to homeschooling.

00:06:11

I want to say that was a courageous decision. One of the things I talk about with families is knowing your lane. Your lane is to be the mom, to parent, to love, and to support. Taking on the role of educator is a huge deal and a huge amount of responsibility and stress, especially because he has different needs than a neurotypical child. What would you say you learned the most about schooling your son at home during that time?

00:06:52

We did a lot of what I don't know, is called unschooling, because he had been in the school system for so long. It was a learning process for me too. I just kind of took a step back and said, "This was a stressful time for both you and me, so we have to get to know each other and figure out how this is going to work for us." I was able to sit back and spend that time with him and figure out how he learns. As a mom, you know how your kid learns, so you're able to sit back and consider that. For homeschooling, you think of a traditional school where we get up at nine o'clock and start math and science, but it was not like that at all.

00:07:29

I asked him what he wanted his homeschooling to look like. He had a lot to say. I asked him what subjects he wanted to do, and I let him lead the learning. I love that. That had to be really empowering for him, especially after the ordeal he went through. It was very empowering. It was not smooth sailing by any means because he was a teenager. We had our challenges, but that allowed him to choose. Because he was still in the school mindset of, "I need to do this and I need to do this," I said, "No, this is your school, and we can figure out what it is and what it looks like." That's how we started and went forward with it.

00:08:40

That's so interesting too because in the public school system, it's called an Individualized Education Plan, but it is not necessarily individualized or always student-centered. What you just described is the ideal, everything that we strive for as parents in a traditional setting. We fight for it. It's supposed to be exactly what you just described, but so often, you can only have it as long as it still fits into the traditional structure.

00:09:14

One of the things I absolutely love about your story, Trish, is that it breaks the mold that if a family decides to homeschool, it's forever. Our idea of homeschooling is sitting at a dining room table, studiously working in a workbook. It doesn't generally look like that, but we still have that assumption. It is wonderful that that isn't how it actually is and that parents get to really decide for themselves.

00:09:47

Rough Transcript
Lunch & Learn Partners in PROMISE Homeschooling Conversation
September 26, 2024

Yes, we only did it for a year and a half. That allowed him to build his confidence because he had lost a lot of self-esteem. He decided he wanted to go back to school, which broke my heart. Although we were struggling to get stuff done, I asked him, "Are you sure you want to go back?" He said he did, so I honored his wishes. I made sure to talk to the school before we made that decision and let them know what had happened and what he had gone through. I needed it to be a positive experience. We were fortunate that the school system we're in now worked with us. They allowed us to come do a tour, and I was impressed. He went back to school and is still in school and happy.

00:10:58

I love that so much. I also want to point out that Trish wrote an article for Partners in PROMISE just a month or so ago. It exists on our website, and we will link it and attach it to our conversation. Sabrina, are you good? I am back. That's the number one hazard of homeschooling: the kids are always around. It's a standard disclaimer I always give. I am happy to hop on a call or a meeting, but my time is not necessarily my own. I appreciate the flexibility. That's a real situation that homeschool families have to manage. It's real life. I love it. I'm all about authenticity.

00:12:13

So, back to Sabrina. You are the lead author and researcher for the homeschooling guide by Five & Thrive last month. I want to talk about your background in homeschooling and what led you to want to do that guide. My husband and I were not homeschooled; we are both products of a solid K-12 public education. Homeschooling was not something I had ever considered. But, we got to an assignment, and I started noticing all these families that were homeschooling. There's something alluring about the interconnectedness in their family that I was curious about and really drawn to.

00:13:30

Through a lot of life events, my daughter was in preschool, and we were homeschooling her. Then we PCSed, and I was very pregnant with our third child. I was not sending her back to preschool because I was about to have a baby, and I didn't want the baby to get sick. I had a lot happening, so I decided to keep homeschooling. When she was coming up to kindergarten, I said, "You know, kindergarten isn't required in most states." I thought it was a "get out of jail free card." We could just try homeschooling this year, and if it was awful, I could take her to the school down the street. We tried it in January 2020. Then COVID hit, and I decided not to send her to school. We were all going to be home and figure it out. It was an enriching experience that aligned with our family values. I liked teaching my kids, and they were thriving.

00:15:43

A couple of years later, we PCSed across the country to California. It was the first time I was digging into homeschool laws and transitioning from Massachusetts to California with specific requirements. It annoyed me that I couldn't find a place where all that information was consolidated for military families. I felt like the people who were supposed to help me were not

Rough Transcript
Lunch & Learn Partners in PROMISE Homeschooling Conversation
September 26, 2024

knowledgeable. I was crowdsourcing help, and it just bothered me. I figured out how to homeschool here, but the annoyance stayed with me.

00:16:17

I was helping other families figure out how to homeschool. I was introduced to Five & Thrive through a presentation they were doing for Space Force spouses. I told them, "You don't have information about homeschooling, but I would love to help you get it. Can we work together?" They said, "Absolutely." That was in March, and by August, we had the Five & Thrive homeschool guide published on their website. The guide aims to be a comprehensive, living document with homeschooling laws, testimonials, frequently asked questions, and resources. We also connect homeschooling families with their installation school liaison officer, which is the official source they should be asking questions to. We also connect families to community partners like the local base library and information on state financial support. Hopefully, it bridges that gap so that families don't have to go at it alone.

00:18:47

It's not a hope that it's bridging the gap; you absolutely did. I want to recognize that a massive project that you did the heavy lifting for with research and authoring was published in a very short amount of time. That's incredible; it usually takes organizations a year to get those things out. I also want to tell our audience how I know you.

00:19:28

I met Trish on LinkedIn through a mutual friend. She's getting into HR, and a friend of ours connected us. I had a conversation with Trish, and by the end of it, I was in tears because as a military special needs mom, it's hard to find people who really understand what this journey is like. I am not a naturally hopeful person, but hearing you talk about your son struck me, and I needed to hear your experience as an autism mom. I am thankful that you've been willing to open yourself up to the PiP audience.

00:20:49

I met Sabrina while doing research for the homeschooling paper. I know nothing about homeschooling other than the data PiP has received. Because of the Five & Thrive guide, they connected us. She literally blew my mind and punched holes straight into my assumptions. I realized I was writing this paper through the prism of traditional education, with the idea that it culminates in a high school diploma. That's false. She helped me to see that homeschooling is not what a lot of people perceive it to be. It looks different for every family, especially for military families.

00:22:06

Yes, you can find homeschooling groups, but how much are they going to relate to the life we live? Public education also works through the assumption that these kids are going to remain in the same state for the duration of their entire K-12 schooling. That's not the case. We as a

Rough Transcript
Lunch & Learn Partners in PROMISE Homeschooling Conversation
September 26, 2024

military community don't really fit in that mold anyway. There are extra members of our population who are trying to work within that system, and the difficulties of that. Homeschooling is truly an alternative way to educate our families that maybe they hadn't considered before. I'm hoping to share that gift you both have given me of just opening my eyes to other possibilities.

00:23:20

Educating kids with special needs and who are neurodiverse is going to look different, but it is possible in so many ways. Sabrina brought up a good resource: some states have financial resources to help parents. That's a huge burden. In this paper, we want to recognize how we can support homeschooling families in our military community and find more information on resources to support them and the learning differences of their kids. I am thankful that you both agreed to join me. What would you tell families considering homeschooling since PiP's focus is military kids in special education?

00:24:34

Trish's story is pretty illuminating. Something that I really latched on to when she was talking was self-directed learning. She went with what her kids were interested in. That's a huge blessing of homeschooling. You can lock into what your kids love or what is around you wherever you're assigned. When we lived in Massachusetts, we lived right outside of Boston. I thought, "What a great opportunity to teach early American history to my kindergartner." We took field trips to see where the Boston Tea Party was and to the museum in Lexington that talks about the shot heard around the world. It made their learning concrete. It was convenient because we lived there.

00:26:28

Now, in California, I live and see the ocean from my house. We do a lot of learning about ocean animals. I'm not a beach person, but my kids are learning about ocean animals constantly because we're tide pooling and at the aquarium. It would be silly not to take advantage of where we're living and make sure their learning is holistic of their environment. That is a great thing about homeschooling. It doesn't have to be forever. I have friends who are tried and true homeschoolers. They love homeschooling, but the best wisdom I got was from one of them. She said, "If we got stationed overseas, and they had the opportunity to go to an international school, I would put them in that school because it's an enriching environment." You can just pull your kid out when you move or when it's not working for you anymore. Even now, my kids and I went from homeschooling full-time to being a part of a public charter school that does hybrid homeschooling. My kids get to spend two days on campus doing project-based learning and three days at home with me. I think I have the best of both worlds.

00:28:36

I would encourage families to think creatively about what exists at every assignment. What feels right for that season of life? That might look like homeschooling for a couple of years, and then they need to be in a traditional school. What Trish said, and what Sabrina illuminated, is that I think about what is the most important thing my seventh-grader is learning right now. When I get

Rough Transcript
Lunch & Learn Partners in PROMISE Homeschooling Conversation
September 26, 2024

reports that he's not doing his work in class, that doesn't tell me anything. I know what's coming because I have been through it with different school districts. How much is this important for his learning?

00:29:47

What are my long-term educational goals for him, and are they being met in public school? You both have really opened my eyes. I am not going to take on homeschooling, but I can look at it from the perspective of ensuring that what happened to Trish's son doesn't happen to him. It helps me advocate for him in a way that is individualized. He feels supported. I can tell when he's had a bad day by how he gets off the bus. He can tell me that he got mad at school. If he's experiencing what your son has experienced, I have to be a little bit more sensitive to those things. If I'm encouraging him to be in a general education environment, but it's not beneficial to him, what is he gaining? Would it be more productive if he went on a field trip? I don't know. You guys have just blown my mind and helped me to think about education in such a different way.

00:31:37

I hope the PiP audience can see that homeschooling is a great and viable option to educate our kids. It's not impossible because we have amazing advocates like both of you who have shared your story and put information out. Thank you so much. Do either of you have any final thoughts?

00:32:17

When I went into homeschooling, I had no idea how long it would be. I was ready to homeschool until he graduated from high school, but he decided he was ready to go back to traditional school, and I was there to support him. It broke my heart a little bit. That's what he wanted, and I'm always there to support their needs. You don't know what they're getting in public school, but you do know your child. You just have to always be there to support their needs and pay attention to that.

00:33:32

I just think that intuition is really important. Even though this is our fifth year of homeschooling, it's still a year-by-year decision. Is this working for us? Does it align with our values and make sense in our season of life? Does it make sense for each of my kids? With three kids, they each have very different needs. It might not work for one or all of them. I think the PiP audience has a "spidey sense" for how the day went. You can sense when something is not working or when it's working well. I appreciate Trish's story because it shows that it doesn't have to be forever. It can be so intimidating that it does, and even I have to remind myself that I can hold loosely to homeschooling. It can bring us joy and be enriching, but one day it might not be, and that's okay.

00:34:41

Rough Transcript
Lunch & Learn Partners in PROMISE Homeschooling Conversation
September 26, 2024

That's not a comment on me or my kids; it just stopped working. It's an amazing gift that you are giving your kids the strength to self-advocate for themselves in any setting. I'm just thrilled that I get to be in the same space as you. Well, thank you, everyone. Thank you to Sabrina and Trish. I hope this has given you some information and some things to think about. Take a look at their links and the homeschooling guide and article. Thank you so much for being with us.