





Dr. Kathleen Geagan, MAHHC pediatrician, with the Bania family. She examines Kaleigh while father Craig and sister Kenzie look on. Photo by Tom McNeill.

Empowering families to make healthy choices

# The Vermont Family Based Approach at Mt. Ascutney Hospital

**T**he Pediatrics Department of Mt. Ascutney Hospital and its Ottauquechee Health Center has embarked on a program focusing not only on the well-being of children but also on the emotional and physical health of the entire family.

Dr. James Hudziak of the Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families at the University of Vermont created the Vermont Family Based Approach (VFBA) as a unique evidence-based method to improve health and well-being by focusing on the family as the unit of health.

Exploring ways to better strengthen families and guide good choices starting at an early age, and with support from John and Laurie Chester of Woodstock and the Canaday Family Charitable Trust, Mt. Ascutney began working with UVM last August. Courtney



**Above:** Courtney McKaig, MAHHC Family Wellness Coach, with Corinna Brown and her children. Photo by Lynn Bohannon.



**Right:** Dr. Mary Bender, MAHHC pediatrician, with Steven Sheldon and his son Martin. Photo by Tom McNeill.

Improve health and well-being by focusing on the family as the unit of health.

Courtney works with the family and not just the child. “It’s important for them to recognize that time invested in their own well-being is an investment in their child. . . .”

McKaig, a behavior specialist embedded with the Pediatric Department in both the Windsor and Woodstock locations, was trained as a Family Wellness Coach. She partnered with other members of the community, including an early education coordinator, a school nurse, school principal, the community care coordinator at Mt. Ascutney, the lead RN in Pediatrics, and a mental health counselor. “I had a team of people who are involved with families in the community join and learn about the approach so we could work collaboratively,” Courtney says.

### Identifying Strengths and Challenges

At the 15-month well child pediatric check-up, families are introduced to the program. Then, at the 18-month well child checkup, “That’s when we add a visit with a Family Wellness Coach to begin discussing the wellness domains and an assessment to determine how the family is functioning,” Courtney says. The coach helps identify the family’s strengths and challenges and helps them establish wellness goals. Then a plan is developed based on each family’s unique situation.

As a coach, Courtney works with the

family and not just the child. “It’s important for them to recognize that time invested in their own well-being is an investment in their child. Then I listen and hear from them where their family is at and their concerns, and I try to tease out strengths and capitalize on what’s going well. From that I can offer suggestions on where they might go. You can see in their bodies there’s a sense of relief. ‘We can do this.’ Everyone’s schedule is different, so you meet them where they’re at and determine what works for them.”

Regular visits are scheduled every six months, at 24 months, 30 months, and 36 months, addressing the parent–child interaction and “building fluency in parents to attend to the positive social behavior they see in their children,” Courtney says.

### Simple, Reasonable, and Achievable

“The beauty of what Courtney does is she makes it simple, achievable, and then she links it to the science and lets them know they are doing something important,” says Jill Lord, RN and Director of Community Health at Mt. Ascutney. “They don’t go away with a complicated plan they won’t follow. It’s a reasonable plan that comes from them after they explain their lives and what their struggles and goals are. It’s powerful.”

The Vermont Family Based Approach identified eight domains—exercise, nutrition, reading, sleep, mindfulness/stress management, music, parenting, and community involvement—for their impact on wellness. Courtney says, “What’s great about the model is it allows you to hone in on achievable small steps that are known to improve wellness, which is what the eight health domains of this model can do.”

Courtney encourages reading together, for example, as a family activity rather than making the kids read on their own all the time. Parents are often so concerned about ensuring that their children read well that it can become a chore. Reading together can be a fun, bonding experience, she says. “It’s a brain builder and a relationship enhancer. It also encourages community involvement,” she adds, “such as a trip to the library.”

According to Dr. Hudziak, who founded the Vermont Based Family Approach, all health is tied to emotional behavioral health. “You need to have your own emotional behavioral health in check in order to address some of the physical health issues,” Courtney says. “The beauty of this model is that we know that physical exercise can improve mood,

“The approach allows for discussions around just being. . . . This offers an opportunity to encourage families to be together and be a family and have gratitude for each other’s presence. That is empowering for families.”

**According to Dr. Hudziak, who founded the Vermont Based Family Approach, all health is tied to emotional behavioral health.**

**4 million** children have a serious mental disorder

**21%** (1 in 5 children) have a disorder that causes at least minimal impairment

**50%** of all lifetime mental disorders start by the age of 14

**50%** of teens with mental illness drop out of high school

Suicide is the **3rd** leading cause of death in youth

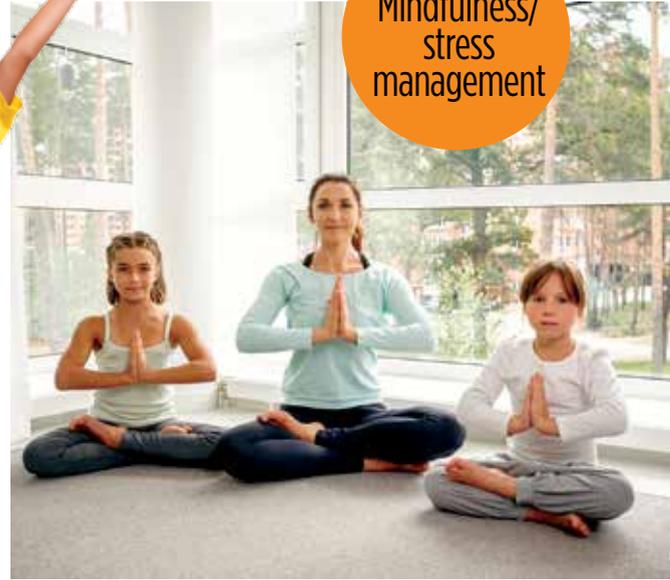
Statistics taken from The Vermont Family Based Approach YouTube video.

The Vermont Family Based Approach identified the following 8 modules for their impact on wellness.

1  
Exercise



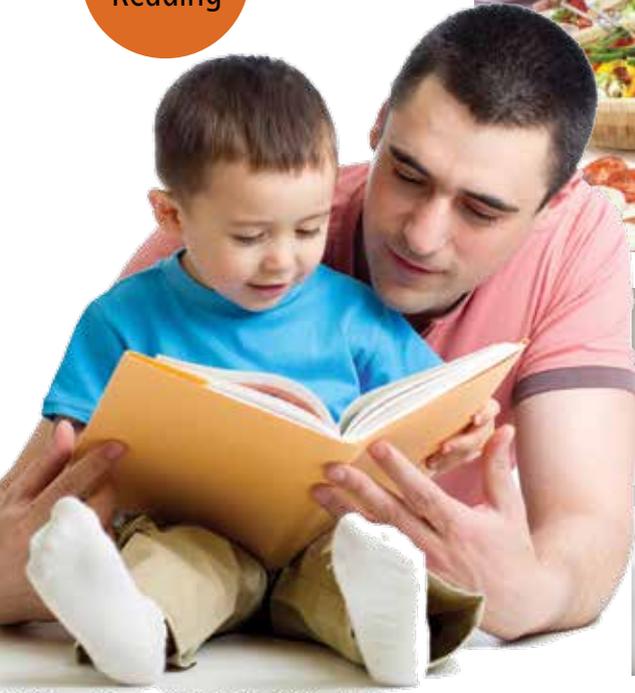
5  
Mindfulness/  
stress  
management



2  
Nutrition



3  
Reading



4  
Sleep



7  
Parenting





**6**  
Music



**8**  
Community  
involvement



and it can improve attention. If children with ADHD are struggling, for example, we know that vigorous exercise can help improve their cognitive flexibility, their attention, and their mood. These domains are tied to improvements in emotional and behavioral health.” In terms of parent management, goals might include establishing consistent, predictable routines, providing positive attention, and understanding that it’s the behavior at issue and not the child.

**A Powerful Beginning**

Jill says she hears from families who express relief and gratitude “for being understood and for receiving concrete, practical help that can actually make a big difference in their life. It’s attainable. We’ve yearned to be able to support that most critical unit in our lives—our families—instead of complaining about the dismal struggles of families. Having a practical, positive way to impact and support families is so wonderful and natural. It’s logical, and it’s a powerful beginning for what can happen. We feel privileged to be able to provide this positive, useful, practical, and powerful approach.”

Courtney says, “The approach allows for discussions around just being. So often I find families are trying to push their children to achieve, and there’s so much pressure in society to constantly teach your child something that, sometimes, just being and acknowledging and appreciating your child gets overlooked. This offers an opportunity to encourage families to be together and be a family and have gratitude for each other’s presence. That is empowering for families.” ❖

Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center  
289 County Road  
Windsor, VT  
(802) 674-6711  
www.mtascutneyhospital.org



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