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COMMUNITY IMPACT

January 27, 2023 | [Lauren Woods](#) - Schools of Medicine and Dental
Medicine

UConn Health Southington Teams with Main Street Community Foundation to Pilot Free Parent Group Sessions to Improve Mental Health of Parents and Children During COVID-19 Pandemic

The new Child and Family Development Program at UConn Health Southington is already helping Southington parents cope and to learn parenting skills to assist them and their children experiencing



elevated stress levels and mental health needs during COVID-19.



The new program's co-director Dr. David FitzGerald speaking at the UConn Health Southington event on Jan. 26 to celebrate The Child and Family Development Program's successful launch (UConn Health Photo by Lauren Woods).





The new program at UConn Health Southington has a lending library and resources for parents and families.

arenting is never easy, but it has become even more challenging during the never-ending COVID-19 pandemic.

“Parenting is hard! It got a lot harder with COVID-19 struggles which have taken a mental health toll on both parents and children,” says [David P. FitzGerald, Ph.D.](#), assistant professor and Director of the [Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Outpatient Clinic at UConn Health](#).

FitzGerald reports a steep rise of depression and anxiety among families during the ongoing pandemic and during COVID has received a tripling in parent calls seeking therapy appointments for their kids at UConn Health’s Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Outpatient Clinic due to increased stress levels.

But pandemic or not, parents and children can at times experience elevated feelings of stress, anger, sadness, and anxiety. But even more so during a pandemic with such added stressors as home schooling and quarantine mandates says UConn Health experts.



Given the uptick in demands for child psychiatry appointments during COVID-19, and not enough provider capacity to meet these higher demands, UConn Health experts wanted to work to increase access by offering parent group counseling sessions.

Thanks to a generous \$150,000 grant by the [Bradley H. Barnes and Leila U. Barnes Memorial Trust at the Main Street Community Foundation](#) a new innovative parenting group pilot program has launched as [The Child & Family Development Program at UConn Health Southington](#).



Victoria Triano, chairwoman of the Southington Town Council, speaking on Jan. 26 at UConn Health Southington.

“Parents have great intentions to be advocates and teachers for their children. Having increased support and educational resources is critical for parents to stay on a productive path,” FitzGerald stresses.

On the evening of January 26 UConn Health Southington and the Main Street Community Foundation gathered together with local Southington officials and clinicians to celebrate the successful launch of the new, free parent group pilot program.



Victoria Triano, chairwoman of the Southington Town Council, spoke at the celebratory event calling the new Child and Family Development Program “a gem” for the Southington Community.

The new pilot program offers several different parent groups, including those that help parents manage child behavior problems, groups that improve parent-child emotion connections, and support groups for parents of children/teens with neurodevelopmental disorders, especially Autistic Spectrum Disorders. The free parenting group program also offers free educational resources to help parents cope with behavioral issues during this pandemic’s elevated time of stress impacting mental health of parents and children alike.

“Parent training in child behavior strategy that is group-based is effective. Research shows that if you work with parents, you may be able to help them better manage their behavior and marry together their more effective behavior with improving their kids’ behavior,” says FitzGerald.

“Working closely with parents could really improve the social-emotional development of their children,” says the new program’s co-director [Carolyn Greene, Ph.D.](#), associate professor of psychiatry and clinical psychologist at UConn Health’s Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Outpatient Clinic whose research also focuses on emotion regulation and emotion socialization parenting behaviors





Dr. David FitzGerald of UConn Health speaking on Jan. 26 at UConn Health Southington about the new pilot program and its team of experts.

The new program also offers parents referral to clinical services at UConn Health should they or their children be in need.

The UConn Health Southington-based pilot program is leveraging in-depth training certifications co-directors FitzGerald and Greene received from *Tuning in to Kids* and *Tuning in to Teens* programs and their online platform resources of materials, videos, and handouts developed by Australia's University of Melbourne. These programs teach emotionally-intelligent parenting and assist parents in better understanding social-emotional development of their children. Plus, UConn Health Southington educational resources include a lending library for children, adolescents, and families.

“Parents can indeed learn to understand their children’s emotions better and in turn interact with their kids better daily and to also protect their social-emotional development as they grow,” says FitzGerald. “Parents, as children’s first teachers, can serve as emotional coaches to help their children and move them toward their own problem solving.”



According to FitzGerald and Greene parenting success is all about collaboration. Together, parent and child can work to identify their negative emotion, verbalize it, accept it, and figure out what to do together to help the child learn to problem solve. Also, parents should always steer clear of emotion avoidance or emotion dismissing. Plus, always instill positivity whenever possible to help guide children's future reactions.



Mary Ellen Hobson, Chair, Bradley H. Barnes and Leila U. Barnes Memorial Trust Advisory Committee is also a former longtime employee of UConn Health.

The pilot program started this fall at UConn Health Southington and is already having a positive impact upon Southington parents.

“Parents in our groups are really feeling better. Parents are learning together and from each other,” FitzGerald happily shared. “They are seeing that they are not alone in their child behavior struggles and that other parents have their same issues.”

There has been a lot of parent enthusiasm. One pleased parent shared with UConn Health that the parent group was “sent from heaven.”



“We are teaching parents on how to better collaborate with their child to be more effective,” says FitzGerald. “And parenting takes practice. We want to empower parents to feel confident, competent, and comfortable parenting.”

“Parenting is so important for a kid’s identity- and all the kids within a family,” stresses FitzGerald. “We need to ensure an

adaptive path is taken and everyone in the family stays on trajectory. If we can identify a problematic behavior, we can work to regulate that behavior, and help kids have few conflicts at home, school, and with other kids.”



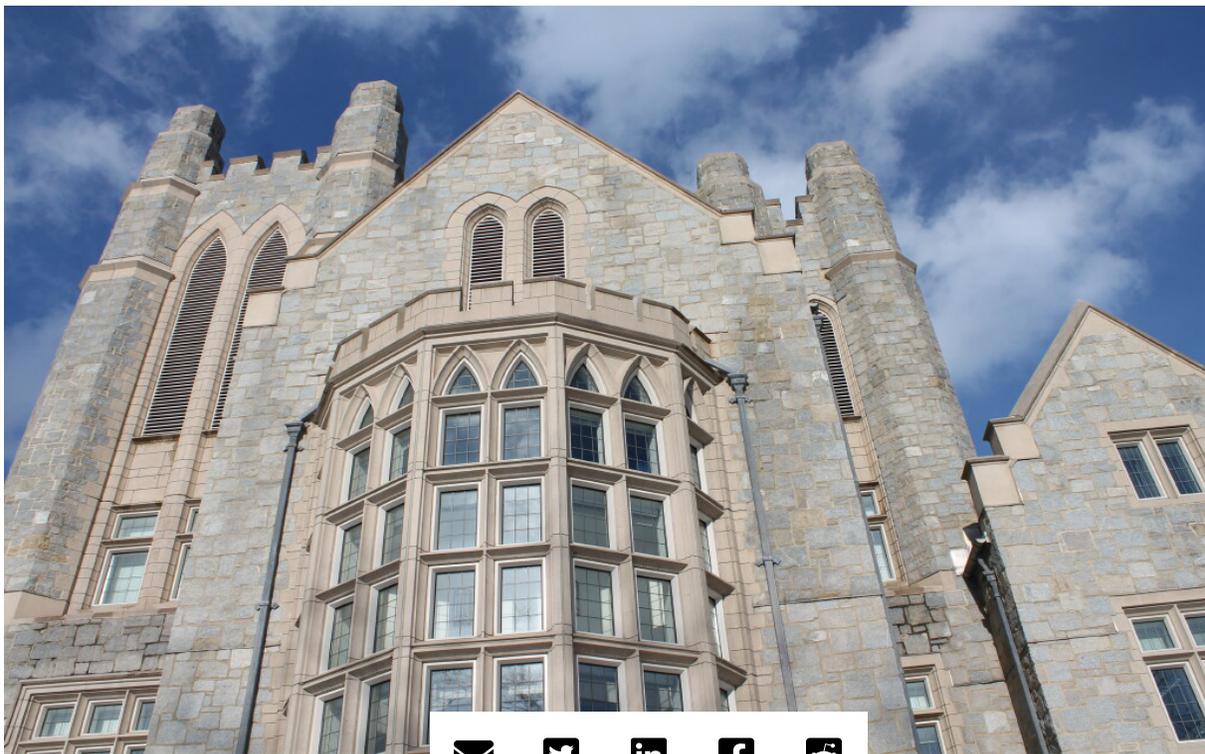
Susan Sadecki, President & CEO of the Main Street Community Foundation, speaking at the special program’s celebration.

Next, the pilot program looks forward to further growing and expanding its resource library of tools for Southington parents and children and expanding their partnership with Southington Public Schools to offer greater opportunities for school personnel training and a resource repository for school professionals.



The UConn Health Southington-based [Child & Family Development Program](#) is in the pilot phase. Southington parents with children ages 5-17 are eligible for the program. Interested Southington parents can call (860) 523-3783 for admission to the parenting groups. Parent groups meet at 1115 West St, Southington, CT.

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