Teaming Together to Heal Children

Music, art, and massage therapies are just a few of the alternative modalities that help young children express their thoughts and feelings in a safe, gentle, nonintrusive way.

Conjure up the phrase “cognitive behavioral therapy” and what image comes to mind? Most people picture a person talking privately to a therapist, sharing their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. This approach has been demonstrated to be effective for a range of psychological problems, leading to improvement in functioning and quality of life.

But if you are a six-year-old girl whose ongoing physical abuse began when you were an infant, you may not even have the words or capability to describe your experiences. It is for that reason that Mount Saint Vincent’s team of highly trained therapists use many alternative therapies to treat child victims of trauma. Three of these are music, art, and massage.

**Musical Expression Unleashes the Unspoken**

Nine-year-old Patrick’s behavior was so explosive, no public school could contain him. His home life was filled with chaos and instability. His family experienced homelessness and then a horrible car accident that left the parents unable to financially support their children. The result was a violent, perpetually anxious child who had to be hospitalized numerous times due to stomach ulcers.

Patrick struggled with academics, social situations, and verbal-based therapy, but excelled at manual, kinesthetic tasks. Music therapy afforded him an opportunity to use those manual skills to truly excel at something.

“The first day I met with him, he had his first music therapy session,” recalls Music Therapist Chris Wojdak, LPC, MT-BC. Chris explained to Patrick that he could sing, play instruments, and write songs as they worked together toward Patrick’s treatment goals. “He had an absolute blast,” Chris said. After his session, Patrick went to class and stayed there until the school day was over. It was his first full day in class in more than a year.

One day, Patrick found a broken ukulele in the music room. Even though he had never seen one before, he found a spare string, secured it to the bridge, tightened the bolts on the tuning peg with scissors, and made the instrument playable again. “It was an amazing demonstration of his kinesthetic intelligence,” said Chris.

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A Letter from the Executive Director

In 2008, Mount Saint Vincent adopted a trauma-informed approach to address the needs of children suffering from the effects of chronic abuse, neglect, or mental illness. Today, it forms the foundation for all of our treatment programs, including our two newest: foster care and in-home therapy.

The intensive needs in these programs require us to expand the number of children we serve in these areas. In particular, we will focus on recruiting more foster parents to provide for children in need of safe, secure, and loving homes.

Because of our expertise in trauma-informed care, we also plan to significantly expand our training program. Our goal is to share our knowledge with parents, teachers, and other caregivers, both within our community and beyond. The information and education we provide—now garnering global attention—enables us to impact children and families on a much greater scale.

The plans and goals listed above were determined by Mount Saint Vincent’s current leadership. But they are based on the mission originally established by the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth back in 1883. One of the Sisters in that order, Sister Roberta Furey, passed away in May of 2018. She was my first supervisor here, a dedicated child advocate, and a dear friend. For more than 48 years, she served the children at Mount Saint Vincent.

Sister Roberta touched the lives of countless children. She also impressed upon me the importance of the work being done here, and how Mount Saint Vincent’s mission is larger than any one single person.

As we move forward, we have a rich tradition to uphold. I know it is one that Sister Roberta would wish for us to continue for many years to come.

Gratefully yours,

Kirk Ward, LCSW

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For the first eight years of Jessica Pfeiffer’s career, she focused solely on residential treatment and being a therapist—the clinical side. When budget cuts in 2011 forced layoffs at the treatment center where she worked, she heard about an opening at Mount Saint Vincent’s K–8 school. “I had limited experience working in an educational setting, but decided to take a chance.” Years later, Jessica would say that it was the best decision she ever made.

Jessica is a licensed clinical social worker, licensed school social worker, and a certified animal-assisted therapist. If that isn’t impressive enough, she is returning to school to obtain her Doctorate in Clinical Psychology in School Psychology at the University of Colorado, Denver. Here at Mount Saint Vincent, Jessica is currently the clinical supervisor of educational programs and our trauma training specialist.

Jessica was hired to incorporate the highly relational Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT) into the school. It was a task that had been attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, by several other clinicians. Undeterred, Jessica jumped in with both feet.

For the first six months, she quietly observed, helped out where needed, and gained the trust of the school staff. “When the teachers were in the trenches, I was right in there with them,” Jessica said. She then introduced booster trainings, weekly clinical supervisions, and ultimately revamped the effective education program. By the end of her third year, the entire school staff fully embraced the NMT model.

Jessica’s success in implementing NMT in a school setting placed her in high demand. School district professionals from all over Colorado and then across the country began to rely on her expertise.

A Recognition of Excellence
In May of 2018, Jessica was recognized for her commitment and dedication to educate faculty and students in basic concepts of neurosequential development. The ChildTrauma Academy of Houston, Texas, bestowed the honor, naming Jessica a ChildTrauma Academy Education (NME) Fellow. This distinction puts her in rare company; there are only eight other NME Fellows in the world.

“We’re delighted to bestow this well-deserved honor on Ms. Pfeiffer,” said ChildTrauma Academy founder Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. “Her commitment to help heal childhood victims of trauma, abuse and neglect using the NME model is exemplary.”

Mount Saint Vincent itself was named as an NMT Flagship Site in 2012. Then, in 2014, Executive Director Kirk Ward was named a ChildTrauma Academy Fellow. Now with Jessica’s Fellow status, Mount Saint Vincent is currently the only site in the world to hold both a Flagship Site designation and employ not one, but two Fellows. This distinction further positions Mount Saint Vincent as not just one of the leading child trauma treatment centers in the region, but one of the leading centers in the world.

Jessica believes the true power of NME lies in helping teachers shift their focus and see interactions through a developmentally appropriate, biologically sensitive lens. “Teachers are with their students day in and day out,” she said. “Training teachers is one of the best ways to strengthen a child’s therapeutic web. To me, it’s a no-brainer; it’s a game-changer.”

It is Jessica’s hope that someday schools across the nation will adopt this relational model of teaching. If there’s anyone who can make that happen, our bet is on Jessica.

Newly appointed NME Fellow Jessica Pfeiffer, LCSW, SSW, AASW with Charlie, her certified therapy dog.

In Memoriam
It is with profound sadness that we announce that our beloved friend, Sister Roberta Furey, passed away May 28, 2018, in Denver, Colorado at the age of 82.

She was a Sister of Charity of Leavenworth for almost 65 years—48 of which she served at Mount Saint Vincent. Our love and gratitude for all she has done fill our hearts. Sister Roberta will be greatly missed.
During their weekly hour-long sessions, often using improvisation, Patrick and Chris took turns listening and responding. Using drums and sometimes a guitar, Patrick learned to be attentive and attuned to an adult in a safe, nonthreatening way. Eventually, he began writing songs that expressed how much he missed his family and what he wanted to do in the future. “This was his way of processing deep emotional issues in a way that was less threatening and more fun than traditional psychotherapy,” said Chris.

The day Patrick discharged, Chris tousled Patrick’s hair and gave him one last hug. Then he brought out a going-away gift he had been hiding behind his back. Patrick’s eyes lit up in surprise and delight. It was the ukulele he had repaired so many months ago.

Art Creation Leads to Transformation

Ten-year-old Kaylee had a history of physical abuse and chronic neglect. She had been in and out of numerous placements over the prior three years before finally arriving at Mount Saint Vincent. She was dissociative, threw rocks and sticks, and rarely engaged with others, preferring to play alone in her imaginary world.

During her stay here, Kaylee’s parents had their parental rights terminated. This sent the self-isolating little girl into a tailspin. She became severely depressed and suffered from uncontrollable bouts of crying. Art Therapist Lindsay Ritscher, LPC, helped Kaylee deal with her feelings. In tandem with the court process to terminate parental rights, the often nonverbal Kaylee created a complex, multistage painting that appeared to be a metaphor of what was happening with her family. In the painting, which took hours to complete, objects were smashing into one another, careening wildly, and breaking apart. “It was a terribly sad but beautiful metaphor of what she felt,” Lindsay said. “She processed the loss and pain of losing her parents using art as a symbolic means of communication.”

Kaylee gradually began connecting with her classroom teacher, the animal-assisted therapist, and Lindsay. Strong bonds began to form. That was a turning point for Kaylee.

Today, she’s a star student who participates in class all day. The violent behavior is gone, and she’s happy, smiling, and joking with students and staff. “It’s as if she’s a different child,” Lindsay said.

In large part, Lindsay credits Kaylee’s treatment at Mount Saint Vincent for her transformation. It was that, along with consistency, love, and compassion. “No matter what Kaylee did or what behaviors she exhibited,” Lindsay said, “she was always received with compassion.”

The Healing Power of Touch

According to Massage Therapist Megan Blalock, the key to successful massage therapy is to empower the child by using a permission process and giving them choices. It’s important for the child to know that they are in charge so they feel safe and secure.

Even if a child has a massage session and afterward says he doesn’t want to participate in the program, Megan still considers that a success. “What I have done is made it allowable for him to define his own boundaries—sometimes for what may be the first time in his life,” she states.

Megan is currently working with an eight-year-old boy named Tyler who is hypervigilant. She says he was physically abused and it seems as if he’s constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop. “This child holds a tremendous amount of stress in his body,” Megan said. Because of his past abuse, he is wary of people, especially adults.

After many weeks of massage therapy, and with clear and respectful permissions, Megan has finally earned the child’s trust. “Now, when Tyler comes in for a session, he almost falls asleep on me every single time,” she said.

Our Collective Support

It’s difficult to attribute a child’s successful outcome to any one person or any one therapeutic modality. The truth of the matter is, each child’s success is a group effort that includes therapists, school staff, mental health workers and all the other employees, from kitchen workers to the maintenance crew. We all have a vested interest in nurturing and healing the children in our care.

Our massage therapist may have said it best. “I think of myself as part of a whole,” Megan said. “For all our kids, it’s the combination of support that creates success.”

Massage Therapist Megan Blalock walks with a 10-year-old student from the school to her office in the administration building for a therapy session.
Agency Earns Accreditation and Assessment Accolades

Here at Mount Saint Vincent, we are committed to providing the highest quality of care to the children we serve. But it’s not just lip service. We apply for and succeed in attaining accreditation from highly respected providers. “The processes to attain these credentials are often long and arduous, but the effort is well worth the final result,” said Mount Saint Vincent Executive Director Kirk Ward.

Our K–8 school recently underwent a three-day inspection by a team of four certification officials from AdvancED, a nonprofit organization that conducts rigorous school reviews. The team met with school leadership, board members, representatives from referring school districts, parents and others. After interviewing teachers, educational mental health workers, and students, they conducted observations in the classrooms to ensure the school is meeting expectations.

The school passed the accreditation with flying colors, meeting or exceeding the majority of the required benchmarks. The team leader told the school director, “In our time here, we all recognized that your staff is not just performing a job; it really seems to be more of a calling.”

Similarly, our Early Learning Center for preschool-aged children was awarded four stars by Colorado Shines, the quality rating system for all of Colorado’s licensed early learning programs. As of this writing, deliberations are under way to secure a five-star rating, the highest rating Colorado Shines awards. If successful, we will be one of only four early learning centers in the state to have achieved such a rating.

Our licensed program was assessed by a certified Quality Ratings Assessor in five categories: staff qualifications, family partnerships, administration, learning environment, and child health. The exceptionally high rating is borne out in comments made to the staff. “We feel so fortunate every day that our daughter couldn’t be in better hands than she is with your rock star team,” one parent said. “What an outstanding group.”

Congratulations to the teachers, mental health workers, support staff, and administrators who made these achievements possible. It truly is a testament to their commitment to provide the best quality of care to all the children whose lives are touched by Mount Saint Vincent.

Thank You to Our Volunteers
Thank you to the 1,000-plus volunteers who donate their time to Mount Saint Vincent every year. These wonderful people perform a host of activities, which include working in our K–8 school, playing with the children, beautifying our grounds, assisting at fundraising events, and much more. We thank you all from the bottom of our hearts.

Be Social With Us!
Connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram and join in the conversation.

Thank You to Our Volunteers

Connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram and join in the conversation.

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Help keep children safe and secure. Your call is confidential.
Thank You to Our 2017 Donors!
We Appreciate Your Support.

Our mission at Mount Saint Vincent is to provide clinical treatment and nurturing care for children suffering from the effects of trauma, mental illness, abuse, or neglect. But this important work would not be possible without the incredible generosity of our faithful donors. Through their selfless giving, they help heal young children who are in desperate need of love and support. The 250-plus individuals and organizations listed here donated $1,000 or more in 2017 to help our children.

Our hearts are full of gratitude and we are grateful beyond words. Thank you.

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Mount Saint Vincent’s swimming pool officially opened a few days ago, and the sounds of laughter, splashing, and squeals of delight fill the air. Ahhh, to be a kid in the summertime.

Just Being a Kid
Fun factor aside, there’s another reason we provide the children with swimming lessons: to normalize their childhood experience here. When moving from one home to another, or when coming from an unsafe home environment, our children often miss out on what many consider basic life experiences. Going to a neighborhood pool is a common summertime activity for most children. The feeling here is that our children deserve the same.

It soon became apparent to everyone that Josh desperately wanted to pass the swimming test.

Being able to swim is obviously a valuable life skill. But the pool also offers physical health benefits. Studies show that the hydrostatic pressure from a dense body of water can calm a child’s nervous system. This in turn helps them regulate their emotions. “After a swim session, the children go to bed tired from a fun, positive experience,” Recreation Therapist Rob Johnson, CTRS, said, “not because they’ve been distressed all day.”

One afternoon, as Rob assumed lifeguard duties, he recounted the story of a quiet little boy who absolutely loved being in the water.

An Ambitious Goal
Eight-year-old Josh came to Mount Saint Vincent from a chaotic and abusive home. When he arrived last June, he had never seen a swimming pool, much less been in one. So the twice-weekly swim lessons Josh received from Rob and the other swim instructors represented a special treat for him. It soon became apparent to everyone that Josh desperately wanted to learn to swim. He had an ambitious goal: to pass the swimming test.

The test itself was fairly simple. A child would have to make their way from the 3-foot shallow end 10 yards to the 5-foot deep end without touching the bottom or sides of the pool. Each child was allowed two attempts per swim session to pass the test. Josh made those two attempts every single time.

Practice and Encouragement
At first, Josh thrashed his arms about forwards and backwards, legs flailing. “He was expending tremendous energy but making little forward motion,” Rob said. The staff taught Josh to cup his hands to make spoons and not forks, enabling him to “scoop the soup.” They showed him how to make powerful, strong leg kicks.

Twice each week that summer, Josh took the test. And after he inevitably failed, he practiced. Back and forth across the 3-foot end, over and over, gradually building his strength and endurance.

The Final Attempt
As the season waned, there were just two weeks left. As usual, Josh started out by taking the swim test.

His technique involved a significant amount of splashing, but he started making headway. As he approached the halfway mark, the staff began cheering him on. There were times where Josh’s forward progress nearly came to a standstill, but he kept trying. Finally, as he reached out his hand and grabbed the end of the pool, he whipped his head around to look at Rob. His eyes seemed to say, “Did I do it?”

Rob was jumping up and down, his fists pumping the air. “You did it, Josh!” he shouted. “You did it!” Everyone erupted with wild shouts and applause. Josh looked around in disbelief at his cheering classmates. Then, as the realization of what he had done sunk in, a wide grin spread across his face. He had done it!

For what may have been the first time in his young life, Josh experienced an incredible sense of support and encouragement, accomplishment and pride. It was a moment—an amazing, joyful, awe-filled moment—that he would never forget.

Recreation Therapist Rob Johnson, CTRS, provides instruction as his students practice proper kicking technique.
Upcoming Events

Join us for one or both of the events below that help raise funds for children in need. Call 303-458-7220 or visit MSVhome.org for complete details.

Dining Out for Kids Day is a fun and easy way to help the children receiving treatment at Mount Saint Vincent. Dine out at any participating restaurant, and they will donate up to 50 percent of their sales to Mount Saint Vincent!

Tuesday, September 18, 2018
Various locations throughout the Denver metro area

Don’t miss this opportunity to hear two amazing women: a nationally known speaker and author and a former child trauma survivor.

Together, they’ll share stories that are sure to inspire and delight. Tickets are on sale now.

Wednesday, October 17, 2018
11:30 am to 1:30 pm
PPA Event Center
2105 Decatur Street
Denver, CO 80211

How You Can Help Our Special Children

You can make a difference in the life of a child. Here’s how.

❤️ Make a donation.
While we accept donations of many types, our most urgent need is for cash donations. These funds help pay for therapy, food, clothing, and more. You can donate securely online at MSVhome.org.

❤️ Volunteer your time.
There are many opportunities available, from reading to the kids to helping in a classroom. For information on volunteering, call Caleigh Isaacks at 303-964-1122.

❤️ Give clothing or supplies.
Donations of clothing for children aged 5 to 12 are always appreciated (new only, please). View our wish list at MSVhome.org.

Donate securely online at MSVhome.org