

Community + Pediatrics = A Better Way

By Sande Snead

Your son is diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Or you have a teenage daughter with cystic fibrosis and your family moves cross-country to a new community. How do you find the medical and support services that you need? Where do you begin?

In Virginia, the answer is Medical Home Plus, Inc. (www.medicalhomeplus.org) founded by Dr. Colleen Kraft '86MD'89HS and part of her vision of "community pediatrics."

In the beginning, like many hard-working pediatricians, Kraft was content to see children in her office each day, and then go home to spend time with her own family. As she learned more about life with children, however, her perspective changed, starting with some relatively simple day-to-day observations.

"I began to pay attention to the determinants of health and illness in my patients as well as my own children. As I interacted with my children's child care center, I wondered about the transmission of illness and the relationship to hand washing. I wondered how medications were being given, and how staff may have been trained to do this. And, I began to see the importance of pediatricians being involved in the community — in child care and in schools," said Kraft, the Walter E. Bundy Professor and Chair of the Division of Community Pediatrics at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Kraft's children, who are now 16, 18, and 20 years old, attended the Medical College of Virginia Child Development Center, which she found to be a wonderful facility.

"This center adopted the most up-to-date policies with regard to infection control, and had specific trainings for their staff," Kraft said. "Things were different at our church nursery.

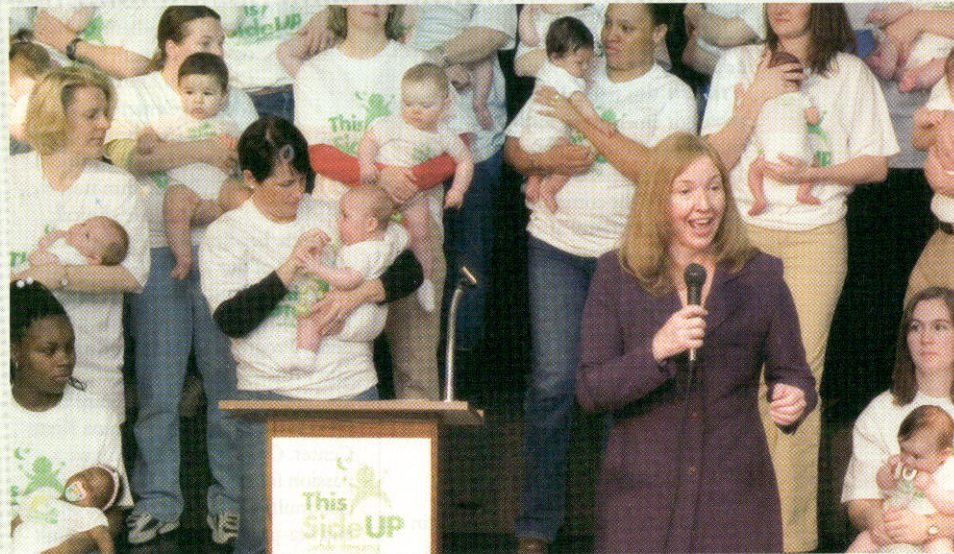
One year, we had three 6-month-old babies who required hospitalization for an infection called RSV (respiratory syncytial virus). "Their mothers were homemakers, and the babies did not attend child care. The one commonality was the church nursery. Upon examination of the nursery, we discovered that there was no sink in the room for washing hands."

Kraft practices pediatrics with Pediatric and Adolescent Health Partners, P.C. When her children were still very young, Kraft found herself gravitating towards families with special healthcare needs, including those with chronic healthcare issues, history of prematurity, and developmental delays.

"The questions parents had were very basic, but I couldn't answer them," Kraft said. "They asked, 'How can I get my child enrolled to receive social security and Medicaid benefits?' 'How can I get a break from the 24-hour care needs of my child with autism?' 'Where can I find diapers big enough for a child the size of an adult?' I knew there were parents who had navigated these issues before. We recruited parent volunteers to put together a database of community resources and to serve as resource coordinators. The program evolved to become the non-profit organization called Medical Home Plus."

Kraft founded Medical Home Plus, Inc. in 2002 with initial funding from the American Academy of Pediatrics. She is medical director of this family resource center that connects families to community resources.

"Medical Home Plus also has a focus on early childhood and promotion of pro-social behaviors," Kraft said. "We have implemented a program called AP's Pals [developed by Wingspan, LLC] that teaches children how to make positive choices and to brainstorm non-violent solutions to conflicts. Through funding from the Virginia Tobacco Settlement Foundation, we have been able to bring this program to more than 300 child care, Head Start, and kindergarten classes in the Greater Richmond area."



Kraft is president of the Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. She also serves as Medical Director of the Greater Richmond Association for Retarded Citizens. "Both of these positions allow me to expand my role as a community pediatrician."

Through her VCU connection as the Bundy professor, Kraft cares for patients at VCU's Hayes E. Willis Center of South Richmond.

"If more physicians were willing to go outside their doors, they would be surprised by the support and the willingness of the community to go to bat for them," Kraft said. "The community wants our guidance and expertise, and they will help you move things along."

The impact Kraft has had using this approach is evident from the testimonials about Medical Home Plus. As expressed by the mother of a child with special needs: "This was the first time in 15 years I didn't struggle to find information to help my daughter."

Sande Snead is a Public Affairs Officer for the Virginia Department of Transportation and a Chesterfield County-based freelance writer.