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ALERT FEATURED

At no cost to new parents, nurses bring expertise and support households with newborns in Racine County

Rachel Kubik
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CALEDONIA — Like many new parents, Jennie and Kevin MacPhail admitted they sometimes have no idea what they're doing.

Their now 3-month-old daughter Elly was projectile vomiting and they didn't know how to help her. Jennie was worried her child, who's also had issues with nursing, spitting up and burping, may be dying.

"It was really traumatic," Jennie said of Elly's first few months. "She was underweight and starving."

That's when the couple received help through Racine County Public Health Division's **Family Connects** program. Family Connects is a nurse home-visiting program for parents of newborns in Racine County. Its mission is to enhance family and child well-being.

"You guys have literally saved me," Jennie told her nurse, Katie Whitaker, and shadowing nurse Katie Wendorf on Friday afternoon during the family's fourth visit at their home on Rio Vista Road. "It is so helpful."



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Katie Whitaker, R.N., left, takes notes as mother Jennie MacPhail provides updates on her 3-month-old daughter Elly on Friday afternoon during an at-home

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Family Connects program visit.

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About the program

Participation in Family Connects is voluntary and open to all county families who have just welcomed a newborn. The program is funded through grants. There is no cost to families.

Family Connects typically provides 1 to 3 nurse home visits to any family with a newborn who is at least 3 weeks old. Nurses offer guidance, answer questions about newborn care and connect parents with community resources.

Whitaker, who works for the county full-time as an at-home visit nurse, said the most common structure is to do one initial home visit with a family that will last an hour, and then one follow-up. She typically addresses concerns with babies' weights or the umbilical cord healing process.

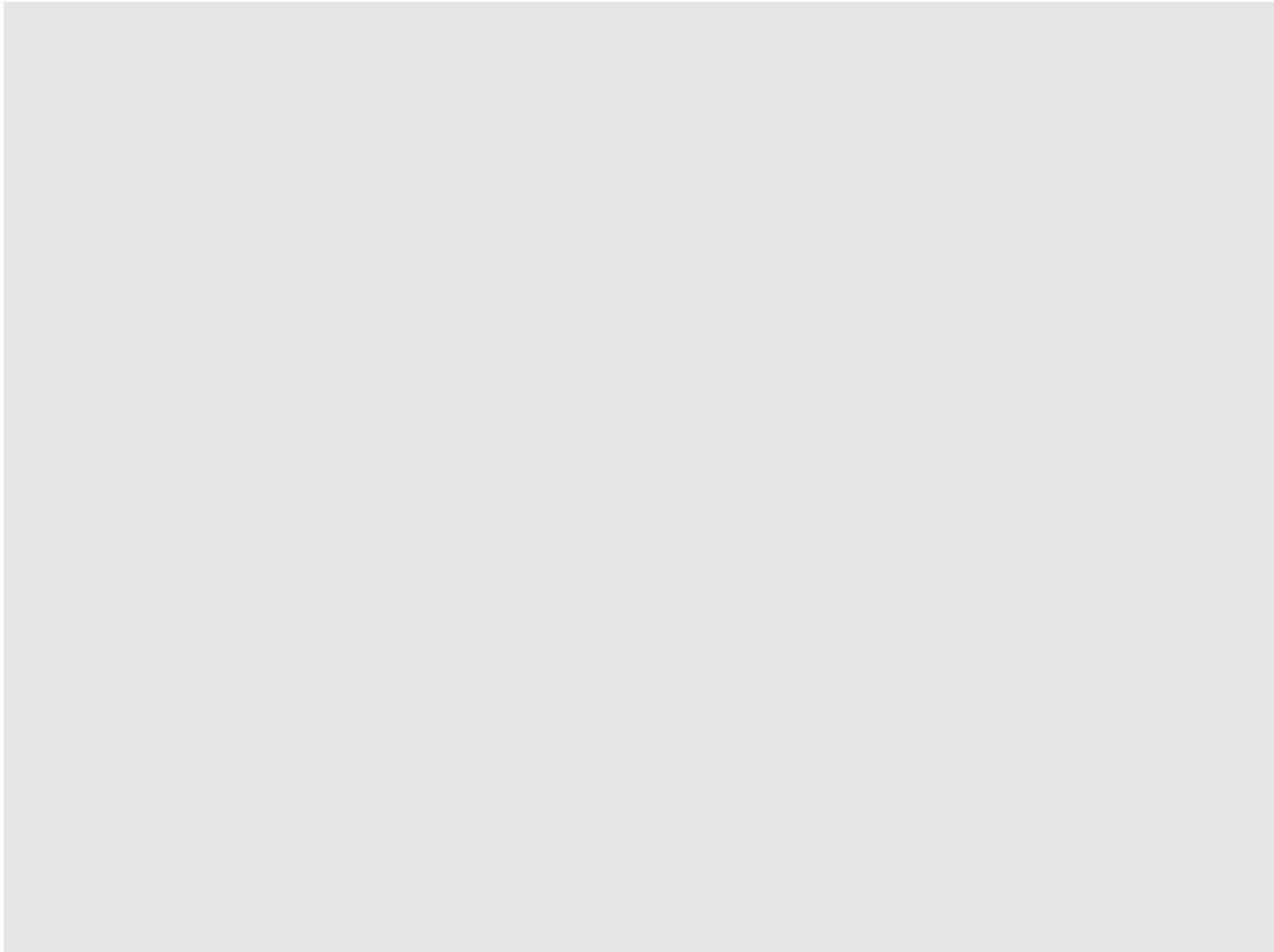
Whitaker said the program's focused on both mother and child health. She said it doesn't matter if the parent or couple are first-timers or if they're on their fifth child, because each birth is different.

She often assures parents their baby is doing fine or addresses problems with eating, nursing, burping, vomiting or pooping.

She will refer parents to their pediatrician for more serious issues. If parents request further help past the program's maximum of 4 home visits, she'll refer them to a long-term care program.

'It's super reassuring'

Jennie, Kevin and Elly began seeing Whitaker when Elly was 3 weeks old. Jennie said she found out about the Family Connects program because her insurance provider suggested the program to help navigate the first few stages of her new daughter's life.



Katie Whitaker, R.N., left, shares a laugh with mother Jennie MacPhail as she holds her three-month-old daughter Elly inside their Caledonia home along Rio Vista Road on Friday afternoon during an at-home Family Connects program visit.

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"It's super reassuring knowing we're doing everything right," Jennie said. "Parenting is not one size fits all."

Jennie said she appreciated that Whitaker not only checked in on Elly but also made sure Jennie was OK, too. Jennie said she had many emotional nights where she was worried about her child, and post-pregnancy "you lose a sense of self." She feels like all she ever does is feed or care for her baby: "I feel like a walking taco truck."

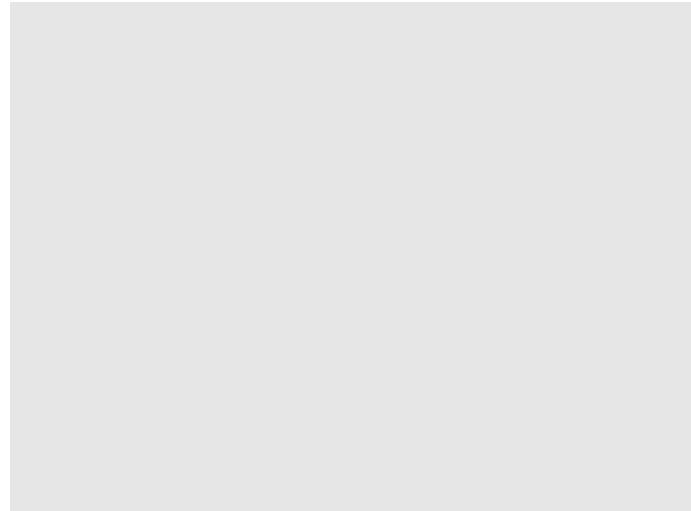
Kevin said the accessibility of the program makes things easy. If he were to call a doctor's office, the next appointment might not be available for several weeks or a month. Whitaker will respond to a text message or call during business hours and will schedule a visit if needed within the next few days.

"We need doctors and nurses to help us along the way," Kevin said. "It's comforting knowing we can call and get a visit if something does come up."

They couple has learned a lot on their own, but Whitaker has taught them a lot, too.

Jennie said she's learned to almost never sit down with babies; walk around with them instead. Secondly, if you become aware of your baby pooping, it's best to wait. There may be another one looming. And lastly, baby socks will never fit.

"There's no word how to describe being a parent," Jennie said, proudly. "It hasn't been created."



New mother Jennie MacPhail holds her sleeping 3-month-old, Elly MacPhail, inside their Caledonia home during an at-home Family Connects program visit.

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