



Best Place for

# Raising Healthy Kids

Burlington, Vermont

This New England city offers great schools, excellent pediatric care, loads of culture and limitless options for healthy outdoor fun all year long

**WATER CREATURES** *Lake Champlain is a 435-square-mile natural resource that local kids can't get enough of.*



Downtown Burlington

BY SARAH TUFF

**S**OUTH BURLINGTON HIGH SCHOOL HAS FINISHED FOR THE DAY, AND ALL Courtney Banach, 18, can think about is sugar. But not the stuff that typically overloads after-school snacks. As the late-afternoon light begins to fade in northern Vermont, Banach is at Shelburne Farms to study the science of making maple syrup, which involves examining the sugar content of sap through an instrument called a refractometer. Tubs of Vermont maple kettle corn are on hand for snacking and inspiration.

Banach is one of a handful of high schoolers participating in the 1,400-acre nonprofit's long-term mentoring Aspiring Naturalist Teen Program, which supports "healthy transitions toward adulthood." The high-school senior didn't need much convincing to join; she began attending a summer camp here at Shelburne Farms when she was 10 and "never left," she jokes. "Shelburne Farms has taught me responsibility, teamwork, self-awareness, motivation, determination and hard work. It's helped me to become a health-

ier person over the years. If I hadn't gotten started with the farm, I would probably still be sitting on the couch watching reruns." Just seven miles south on Route 7 from downtown Burlington (population: 42,000), the farm—a National Historic Landmark—is alive with Brown Swiss dairy cows, miniature Sicilian donkeys and Polish crested hens. Along with glittering Lake Champlain and the surrounding Green Mountains, it's one of the area's most popular attractions to families foraging for a healthy, kid-friendly environment.

Such environments are not hard to come by in the greater Burlington area, which prides itself on doing right by its youngest citizens. Both the region and the state offer unusual advantages to young families. Ver-

mont ranks No. 1 in the nation for public high-school graduation rates and third for young-adult volunteerism. According to 2011 data from the National Survey of Children's Health, a multifaceted measure of childhood wellness and healthy habits, Vermont's obesity rate among children ages 10 to 17 is 11.3%, the seventh lowest in the nation; it has more children's doctors per capita than any state but Massachusetts. The national survey reports that 90.2% of Vermont's children are in excellent or very good health, compared with a national average of 84.2%. And Vermonters are champions at frequent exercise and fresh produce consumption.

Yes, life is sweet. "Burlington is an ideal place to



*CLOSE TO NATURE* Participants in Shelburne Farms' Aspiring Naturalist Teen Program make a fire to boil down sap for syrup.



raise a family,” says Elzy Wick, a mom of three boys and contributor to the city’s FindandGoSeek.net, a compendium of kid-friendly resources. “We swim and paddleboard on the lake in the summer, snowshoe out our back door in the winter and hike any number of trails in the mountains. We also have access to so much locally grown food from farms, and programs for kids interested in arts, sports, dance and music abound.”

Anchored by cobblestoned, boutique-lined Church Street, with hills stretching up toward the University of Vermont and rolling down toward Lake Champlain, Burlington is the birthplace of the band Phish, Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and plenty of other Birkenstock-clad, laid-back stereotypes. But in the schools, the pace is decidedly fast-forward—in class and during extracurricular activities. At Burlington High School, students can play any of 15 sports, participate in any of 17 formal clubs (there’s even a Dental Exploration Club), then end the day

rowing longboats from the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum through one of five sports clubs. It doesn’t take much math to understand how Vermont’s high-school obesity rate is just 9.9%, compared with the national average of 13% for adolescents. Even a quiet spot like the public library does its bit to nurture a love of exercise. At the South Burlington Community Library, kids ages 5 to 10 file in for “Adventures to Fitness.”

And while the cost of living may be prohibitive in the tony Hill Section, where houses go for more than \$500,000, officials have worked hard to equalize opportunities for fitness, fun and learning. Public magnet schools like the Integrated Arts Academy, where students paint, dance and play music, and the Sustainability Academy, where they learn to build bikes and create handicapped-accessible playgrounds, cater to Burlington’s neediest neighborhoods around the Old North End, where 95% of kids qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch. As Mayor Miro Weinberger said in his 2013 State of the City address, Burlington aims to be “a city where all children can thrive whether they start life in the Old North End, the Hill Section or a distant land.”

#### The Great Outdoors

Center a compass on Burlington, and within a 35-mile radius you find a wide array of family-friendly outdoor

**ON THE GO** Winter and summer, Burlington offers lots of temptations to be outside: hiking on Camel’s Hump; boating at the Community Sailing Center; skiing lessons for kids as young as 3 at Cochran’s; racing with Ready, Set, Run!



**ON THE WATERFRONT** A 7.5-mile bike path follows Lake Champlain’s shoreline.

experiences, whether that’s hiking to wildflowers on Mt. Philo, collecting autumn leaves near Smugglers’ Notch Resort or making s’mores at a lakeside campsite on Burton Island, part of Vermont’s state park system. At the Catamount Outdoor Family Center just northeast of downtown, a labyrinth of cross-country skiing trails turns into a mountain-biking mecca in the summer, replete with girls’ clinics run by Olympic cycling stars. Around town, kids can attend circus camp, wilderness survival camp or multisport camp. Residents of other cities may brag about the clean-Chevy and Container Store-organized state of their garages; people in Burlington take pride in the disarray of canoes, paddleboards and backpacks.

The birthplace of the snowboard (developed by Jake Burton Carpenter of Burlington’s Burton Snowboards), the city is within an hour’s drive of seven alpine ski areas. One of them, Cochran’s, is a nonprofit dedicated to teaching kids the value of winter sports. Buy a full-day lift ticket and a grilled cheese for your tot at Cochran’s, and you’ll still get change from \$20. From November through April, just about any flat surface around Burlington—including Lake Champlain—becomes a natural skating rink, while anything with an incline turns into a glee-filled snow-day sledding hill. It’s no surprise that a 2014 Gallup poll found that Vermonters are unsurpassed for their devotion to frequent exercise.

Burlington’s revitalized Parks and Recreation department, which oversees 18 city parks, offers 137 programs, most of which serve kids from kindergarten through 12th grade. The epicenter of the action is Waterfront



## Around the World

Gothenburg, Sweden

Burlington—along with other U.S. cities like Austin, Boulder and Salt Lake City—offers a fabulous range of resources for kids. But parents in these places might still find much to envy in family-friendly northern Europe. Take Sweden, where laws guarantee 480 days of paid parental leave, free day care, free education through college and free health care. Gothenburg, Sweden's second-largest city, is especially welcoming, and so safe that kids routinely ride their bikes to school. Most of its dozen museums have regular children's classes, and the city is home to the national children's theater, Scandinavia's biggest science museum and its largest amusement park.



**FAMILY-FRIENDLY** Gothenburg has a children's theater, lots of museums and safe places to bike.

Park, now part of a multimillion-dollar improvement project. Instead of a private yacht club, there's the Lake Champlain Community Sailing Center. Some of the most prime lakefront real estate sees not McMansions but public beaches and a 7.5-mile bike path that follows the pretty shoreline.

The health of Burlington's children and its outdoor resources are intertwined, as evidenced by the sustainability-focused preschool programs at ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center (ECHO stands for Ecology, Culture, History and Opportunity) and the youth-engagement internships at Local Motion, a "people-powered" advocacy group based near the aquarium. Upstairs from those offices, RunVermont organizes the Vermont City Marathon and the relatively new Ready, Set, Run! programs, which encourage fitness in area schools.

Healthy indoor activities also abound. Witness the vinyasa yoga classes at Champlain Valley Union High School, part of a once-industrial city's move toward less

machinery and more mindfulness. The Miller Community and Recreation Center in the Old North End hosts Young Yogis and Itty Bitty Yoga; the South End Studio on revamped Pine Street caters cobra and cat poses toward 13- to 15-year-olds, among other age groups. At nearby Evolution Yoga, 4-year-old Sophie Freeborn joyously practices her "elephant" pose during a session of EvoKids' Dr. Seuss class. Says her mom, Sarah, "It's really good for Sophie to have this basis for physical activity in her life that comes from a place of self-care, self-acceptance and respect for her body."

### Learning to Love Healthy Food

One fish, two fish? Not at the sushi class at Healthy Living in South Burlington, a natural-foods market where, one Tuesday afternoon, eight kids ages 6 to 10 are learning how to make "fruishi." It's certainly Seussian in creativity, though, with thin melon slices serving as ginger slices over sliced strawberries, kiwis and pineapples

atop coconut-flaked, lime-zested sticky rice. "When kids know where their food is coming from, they're more excited to eat and cook with it," says Laura Wright, the coordinator for Healthy Living's Learning Center, which began offering children's classes in 2009.

And loads of Vermont kids know where their food comes from thanks to the locavore movement that took root here long before it became a nationwide trend. As one local-food advocacy group reports, the Green Mountain State topped the "locavore index" in 2014, with 98 farmers' markets, 143 community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs and 12 "food hubs," which offer facilities for small and midsize producers. Students at Burlington's Champlain Elementary School learn next door at the factory of Lake Champlain Chocolates, whose new

South End Kitchen has kids' classes in yes, sweet stuff, but also healthier fare, teaching the art of craft food.

One of the most happening spots for the pint-size set, along with pints of plump berries all summer long, is the city's Intervale Center, a 350-acre patchwork of bottomland farms and gardens along the Winooski River. A radish toss from downtown Burlington, it's both urban and rural, progressive and traditional in its mission to "strengthen community food systems." And that begins with kids. On July and August evenings, families gather to picnic on fresh-picked produce and dishes prepared by Slow Food Vermont while listening to West African or honkytonk music. "We love being able to show our kids that people garden and grow their own food," says Cathy Resmer, the co-publisher of Kids VT magazine, a

**COMMUNITY FOOD** Right, children gain an understanding of where their food comes from by making their own at Healthy Living Market and Café; below, on summer evenings at the Intervale Center, people gather to partake of local food and local music.



Vermont's high school obesity rate is just **9.9%**, compared with the national average of **21%** for adolescents.





For a small New England city, Burlington is **surprisingly diverse.**

Sign-up forms for baseball at one middle school are available in Burmese, French, Nepali, Somali and Vietnamese, as well as English.

Michigan transplant and mom of two kids, 8 and 5. "It's increasingly unusual to have that relationship."

**Culture for Kids**

When Resmer and her partner, Anne-Elise Johnson, aren't taking the family camping in one of the state parks near Burlington, they're dipping into the plays, hands-on activities exhibits and traveling performances that frequent the Flynn Theater, the University of Vermont's Fleming Museum and the sprawling Shelburne Museum. "We spend a lot of time looking at public art," says Resmer. "We have so many more cultural opportu-



nities and experiences available to us than we should, given the size of our population."

For a small New England city, Burlington is also surprisingly diverse. Your seventh grader wants to play baseball at Edmunds Middle School on Main Street? You'll find the sign-up forms not only in English but

**CREATIVE SPIRITS** *Opposite, the Integrated Arts Academy, where the entire fourth grade plays the violin; the mayor and his family in their finery at the Mardi Gras parade. Above, art education at Burlington City Arts' summer camp.*

also in Burmese, French, Nepali, Somali and Vietnamese. Ask Mayor Weinberger, the father of Li Lin and Ada, about his favorite family event in Burlington, and he'll cite the Sara Holbrook Community Center's Festival of Cultures, where Li Lin was once enchanted by a Riverdance-type performance. "She is now, as an 8-year-old," says Weinberger, "a Jewish-Chinese Irish dancer!"

One of the myriad free exhibits around Burlington is in the lobby of City Hall, where Indonesian shadow puppets and turkeys traced by local students welcome visitors to the mayor's office. Elected in 2012, Weinberger helped Burlington City Arts reach some 7,500 kids through art-education programs in his first year in office. Self-expression rules here, and now also thrives in a "maker space" of 3-D printers and data-visualizing workstations available to entrepreneurs and kids participating in summer programs in Memorial Auditorium just up Main Street.

Weinberger boasts that despite its size, Burlington has the cultural amenities of a "real" city. And indeed,

on a winter's day, when the mayor himself is marching in a raucous Mardi Gras parade wearing golden shoes and a king's crown while toting his infant daughter in a Bitybean carrier, it's easy to see this place as a fantasy land (albeit one with a long, frigid winter).

But Burlington also has some big-city problems — No. 1 being the statewide opiate-abuse epidemic that made national headlines in January, when Gov. Peter Shumlin decided to devote his entire State of the State address to the subject. Vermont has seen a more than 770% increase in treatment for addiction to heroin and prescription opiates since 2000. Just as Burlington was a natural stop on the old trading routes between Quebec and the Hudson River, so it's become part of the heroin-trafficking corridor between New York City, Chicago and beyond. "We're talking about it and actively trying to address it," says Weinberger. "Because of our scale in Vermont, we're able to get our arms around the problem and make progress. When we say that Burlington's a safe place to raise your kids where there is low crime, it's because when it comes to threats, we can muster a response."

Burlington certainly has powerful resources for confronting addiction among its young people and other public-health challenges. The Vermont Children's Hospital at Fletcher Allen medical center ranks among the

best in the country, according to *U.S. News & World Report*. Meanwhile, Vermont's vast network of pediatricians, along with high per capita public-health funding, low rates of infant mortality and teen pregnancy and other measures, has earned the state top marks from the United Health Foundation. While the opiate problem awaits a solution, Vermont appears to be succeeding with another epidemic: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. According to the CDC, the prevalence of ADHD is rising nationally, but not in Vermont, where rates slid from 9.9% in 2007 to 9.3% in 2011. A multifaceted, state-wide ADHD initiative may help to explain the trend.

Then there are the boundless opportunities to burn off steam with vigorous exercise and outdoor pursuits. Parents take pride in places such as Shelburne Farms, where preschoolers can tromp through the forest with the Adventures program, 10-year-olds can gather hay as a "Farmer for the Day" and teens like Courtney Banach can have their entire adolescence shaped by exploring the natural world. When Shelburne Farms educator Mar-

garet Burke helped create the Aspiring Naturalist Teen Program in 2011, she was inspired in part by Stephen Kellert, a Yale professor emeritus of social ecology who has written about how nature shapes the health of children. "One of our hopes was that we could create a space where freedom, exploration, learning and play on the land could remain cool and present," she says.

It's a hope shared by parents all over Burlington, who tap into this ethos as faithfully as they tap into maple trees each spring. "We've invested in cultivating a strong, multi-age community of people passionate about being outdoors," says Burke. "We strive to hold curiosity, inquiry, awareness, and enthusiasm as central. And we really hope that this program will be a piece in the mosaic of experiences with which they step into healthy adulthood."

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TAP THAT SAP  
What Vermonters  
worthy of the name  
can go without  
learning how to tap  
a maple tree?



GLEAMING NEW The ECHO center  
is a sign of the changed waterfront.

A WATERFRONT REVIVAL

## Lake Champlain

Once a lumber port, then a polluted Superfund site, Burlington's lakefront today is an aquatic playground

A quirky clue to the early history of Lake Champlain lies just a few miles east of the Burlington waterfront. Here, visible from Interstate 89, two 13-foot-tall granite whale tails appear to be diving into the ground—a reminder that as little as 10,000 years ago, whales frolicked in the Champlain Sea, which was then fed by salty waters of the Atlantic. Today the lake is a freshwater playground that spans 435 square miles, most of them sparkling blue. Aimee Marti, of South Burlington, frequently sails here with her kids. "It's so quiet most of the time," she says, "there aren't a lot of boats out there, and we benefit from that."

The Burlington waterfront wasn't always a gateway to aquatic fun. In the mid-1800s, the city was the third-largest lumber port in the world, and rail beds, slaughterhouses and industrial plants lined the lakefront. When the lumber industry waned, it left behind a cesspool of chemicals, pesticides and other pollutants along the shoreline. So much coal-tar sludge leached into the groundwater off Pine Street that it qualified for federal assistance as a Superfund

site. By the 1970s, environmental initiatives including the National Environmental Policy Act were spurring cleanup along Lake Champlain, but it wasn't until 1982 that serious work began, thanks to the efforts of the Main Street Landing Company, which worked with city officials to develop a mixed-use area of parks, commercial space and a bike path that connects to other trails along the waterfront.

Today, the gleaming ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center, the Community Boat House, stately townhouses and necklace of green spaces and beaches along Champlain are a far cry from the sooty scene of last century. To address a couple of remaining eyesores and further improve the area, the city of Burlington is investing nearly \$45 million in projects along the waterfront, including a new building for the Lake Champlain Community Sailing Center, an upgraded harbor marina and more accessible park space. Plans are going forward to turn the old Moran power plant into the "New Moran," which will house a performance space, local-food purveyors and arts projects.

"It's a pretty ambitious plan," says Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger. "But our mission is to give kids of all background the opportunity to experience the lake." Those kids won't see any whales, but with a little imagination they might spot another creature frolicking in Lake Champlain: America's own version of the Loch Ness monster, the legendary lake monster known as Champ. —By Sarah Tuff