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More parents joining holistic-parenting groups

By **Kathy Lauer-Williams**

The Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.)

(MCT)

ALLENTOWN, Pa. - Olivia Sullivan, 3, plucks an organic raspberry out of a container and pops the plump fruit in her mouth, while Sam Owens, not quite 2 and wearing footy pajamas covered with blue puppy dogs, winsomely pulls a thin yellow blanket over his blond curls.



Stacks of brochures on vegetarianism and print copies of Hip Mama, an irreverent e-zine for cutting-edge moms, sit on a table nearby.

In a circle of chairs surrounding a pile of toys, a group of mothers - and a few fathers - listens intently as Kim Schaffer of Clothesline Organics discusses fair trade in clothing manufacturing and the use of organic cotton, hemp, and bamboo fibers in clothes.

Once a month, parents interested in what are called "holistic" parenting lifestyles - back-to-natural things from organic foods to cloth diapering - meet in the room in the basement of the Bethlehem (Pa.) Area

Melanie Bennett helps her daughter Madelyn, 2 1/2, carry her stuffed bear in a sling in Palmer Township, Pennsylvania, on Feb. 1. Melanie Bennett and Sarah Ongiri have started a Holistic Moms group, which meets once a week. (Betty E. Cauler/Allentown Morning Call/MCT)

...resident of the American Holistic Health Association, says the concept of holism has been around for centuries, but fell out of favor in Western societies during the first half of the 20th century, when advances in diagnosing disease and using medication as treatments created a dramatic shift in the concept of health.

Although the word holistic entered the dictionary in 1926, it didn't start to regain popularity as a lifestyle concept until the 1970s, says Walter. "People began talking about the mind-body connection and how everything is inter-related," she says.

The growing popularity of biofeedback and self-hypnosis spoke to a growing awareness of how the mind could affect the body physically, and Walter contends holistic concepts have slowly become mainstream.

"Although people may not be thinking something is holistic, the concept behind many of the lifestyle choices today are based on the philosophy of mind-body connection," she says. Since forming just over a year ago in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, Holistic Moms Network has attracted a devoted following and meetings have drawn as many as 40 people curious about natural living, attachment parenting, and alternative medicine.

They are part of a burgeoning national group with 90 chapters in 30 states and Canada.

Like most other local members, Palmer Township mom Melanie Bennett says she realized when her daughter Madelyn was 8 months old that she was the only mother she knew who was still nursing.

Also an advocate of attachment parenting - a concept that includes baby wearing, in which the mother wears the baby in a sling, and co-sleeping, in which a baby sleeps in the parent's bed, as well as extended breastfeeding - Bennett made her own baby food and wanted to hook up with other mothers with similar interests.

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, resident and registered nurse Sarah Ongiri says after her daughter Olivia was born, she, too, was searching for other mothers interested in alternative parenting. She became involved with La Leche League, the national breastfeeding support group, but says she was interested in more than just breastfeeding.

"I wanted to explore other things," Ongiri says. "It's all about finding your tribe."

After hearing about the national Holistic Moms Network, Ongiri and Bennett decided to start a local chapter of the group. An initial open house in 2005 attracted 40 people.

"We had a great turnout," says Ongiri, who also has a 10-year-old son and is pregnant with her third child. "There were a ton of kids."

The two friends became co-leaders of the group and started holding meetings at the library.

"I didn't know how holistic I am," says Bennett. "I've always been an advocate of sustainable food but I never thought about it in terms of parenting. I have learned so much from this group."

Meeting topics have ranged from midwives to yoga to natural toy choices.

Ongiri says the topic that drew the largest response was education choices. The group hosted a panel of representatives from public school; Montessori School, which advocates individually paced learning and practical life skills; Waldorf School, which promotes a holistic view of education encompassing spiritual values; and homeschooling.

"We don't always agree with everything, but we try to be supportive of everything," Ongiri says. "We're all on our own journey."

The national holistic parenting group was founded in 2003 by northern New Jersey mom Nancy Massotto. It grew out of a small support group for parents interested in natural living and positive parenting.

"We all had been parenting differently, from home birth to extended breastfeeding, and were being roundly criticized and judged by family and friends," Massotto says. "I felt really alienated."

Massotto, who has a 5-year-old and a 7-month-old, both of whom were born at home, says she felt she also was being judged for the home births and for co-sleeping with her baby. She says she even got looks when she wore her newborn in a sling at the mall.

"It was so nice to be in a place where I feel normal," she says. "It was so empowering to have a place where I wouldn't be judged and criticized." She says the support group was a huge success, drawing up to 70 people. After a year, Massotto wanted to expand it into a national organization.

"I knew there had to be holistic parents everywhere who needed support," she says. "I've seen mothers break down and cry because they've finally discovered other co-sleeping, baby-wearing mothers."

The Holistic Moms Network was incorporated as a nonprofit group in October 2003, and now has 90 chapters in 30 states and Canada.

"It just exploded," Massotto says. "It speaks to a very real need and very important trend."

Massotto says she gradually shifted to a holistic lifestyle.

"Twenty years ago my idea of breakfast was a diet Coke and a cigarette," she says.

By the time she was pregnant with her first child, she had quit smoking, become a vegetarian, and wanted to impart a natural lifestyle to her children. Holistic Moms Network, she says, is about information and choices.

"We're not here to advocate a certain set of choices," she says. "We just want people to be aware of alternatives. It's very personal choices and you have to choose what's right for you. People are doing various degrees of these things. There's no competition on how holistic you are."

But she believes the holistic movement is slowly becoming more mainstream.

"If Wal-Mart is carrying organics, you know people are doing things differently," she says.

At the Bethlehem chapter's January meeting, newcomer Victoria Morton of Allentown, who is pregnant with her first child, says she and husband were thrilled to find the group. She says the couple is interested in organic foods, alternative medicine, and cloth diapering.

"It's a lifestyle we've chosen for ourselves and we want to raise our kids that way," says Kell Morton. "Here we can connect with other people who feel the same way."

By the end of the meeting, several moms have pushed their chairs back to sit on the floor for easier breastfeeding and changing of diapers.

The group has expanded into a community with play dates, a knitting circle, movie nights, and regularly scheduled mom's-nights-out at places ranging from dessert at Vegan Treats to dinner and belly dancing at Aladdin Middle Eastern Restaurant.

"There are people from all levels of holistic," says Molly Watson of Bethlehem, mom to 6-month-old Charlotte and 2-year-old

Amelia. "It's a nice community of like-minded people. It helps me be a better mom."

She praised the group for making children welcome as well.

"I wouldn't be able to come if I couldn't bring them," she says.

INSERT LINK TO THIS:

What is Holistic Parenting?

A movement to parent naturally and raise children with a whole-person view addressing body, mind and spirit.

Interests include:

- ◆ Alternative health: Herbal and natural therapies, homeopathy, naturopathy, and chiropractic care, as well as preventive and less-invasive medical care.
- ◆ Attachment parenting: Philosophy that promotes bonding between parent and child through baby-wearing, family bed, and breastfeeding.
- ◆ Breastfeeding: Early exclusive breastfeeding, extended breastfeeding, and discouraging the use of bottles.
- ◆ Natural childbirth: Childbirth with no anesthesia or other medical intervention, often at home and with the help of midwives.
- ◆ Positive parenting: Gentle alternatives to disciplining children.
- ◆ Organic food: Food that is grown and packaged without pesticides, herbicides, dyes, preservatives, or other chemicals.
- ◆ Healthy living: Healthful exercise and therapies, such as yoga, massage, and meditation.
- ◆ Vaccination: Debate on the benefits, risks, and possible side effects of childhood immunizations.
- ◆ Education: Alternatives to public education ranging from home schooling to organized schools, such as Montessori or Waldorf.

- ◆ Environment: Issues of anti-consumerism and sustainable resources, includes organic clothing, toys, and cloth diapering.
- ◆ Commercialism: Limiting television and other media influences to children.

RESOURCES

Web sites

Lehigh Valley Chapter of Holistic Moms Network -
home.homewebs.com/hmnlehighvalleypa/
Holistic Moms Network (national) -- www.holisticmoms.org
American Holistic Health Association - ahha.org/
Mothering natural family living - www.mothering.com
Attachment parenting - www.askdrsears.com, www.attachmentparenting.org
Breastfeeding, La Leche League - www.lalecheleague.org.
Natural parenting - www.naturalfamilyonline.com
Natural toys - www.turtlesdreams.com
Buying cloth diapers - www.thebabymarketplace.com

Books

"The Attachment Parenting Book," "The Discipline Book," and "The Baby Sleep Book," all by William and Martha Sears - Dr. Sears, a pediatrician and father of eight, is a leading proponent of attachment parenting.
"The Hip Mama Survival Guide," by Ariel Gore - An irreverent look at parenting by a liberal single mom.
"Having a Baby Naturally," and "Natural Family Living" by Peggy O'Mara - O'Mara is the editor of "Mothering Magazine," a guide to alternative parenting.
"Whole Foods for the Whole Family," by Roberta Bishop Johnson - Natural foods cookbook published by La Leche League International.
"The Breastfeeding Answer Book," by Nancy Mohrbacher and Julie Stock - Information on breastfeeding published by La Leche League International.

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