

Holistic Health for Kids

By Renée Sagiv Riebling



What it means, and how you can get started

I first understood the need for a more holistic approach to our kids' health when a friend told me she'd treated her lice-infested 3-year-old with four rounds of pesticides, including one with formaldehyde. The meds finally worked, but the experience left my friend—and me—wondering: at what cost?

What is holistic health?

When people think of "holistic health," or the related term "integrative medicine," they often think of alternative therapies like acupuncture. While those can be part of it, they're not all of it.



"Holistic health is about promoting optimal health for the whole child—mind, body, and spirit—not just treating diseases as they develop," says Dr. Lawrence Rosen, a founding member and chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Complementary and Integrative Medicine (SOCIM), whose primary care practice, the Whole Child Center, is in Oradell. "We prioritize using safe and effective natural therapies, individualizing our approach for each child."

When seeing a patient, pediatricians who practice integrative medicine often ask about diet, sleep habits, temperament, and family situation, as well as any symptoms of illness.

Holistic health also considers the physical environment—both the environment's effect on us, and our effect on the environment.

A matter of degree

When I was a kid, if a doctor recommended a medication, we assumed it was safe. But in the past few years, parents have been warned about over-the-counter cough medicine, changes in acetaminophen dosing, and the overuse of antibiotics. We've read about pesticides on our produce and traditional cleaners harming indoor air quality. No wonder we're looking for natural alternatives. But does using them mean turning your life upside down?

Most people who've been there say it's a matter of degree. Jennifer Cottell, a local mom who's a trustee and legal advisor for the Holistic Moms Network, a nonprofit organization that connects and supports parents interested in holistic living, recommends starting with one aspect of your family's life, be it diet, medicine, or home products. Here are some tips for each category.

Diet

- Offer your kids more fruits, vegetables, and other plant-based fare, and fewer processed foods.
- Go organic when you can. Since organic food is more expensive, replace just a few items—like apples and peaches, which are eaten with their skin. Also explore New Jersey's farmers' markets. Some local farmers avoid synthetic pesticides; don't be afraid to ask.

Home products

- Try one of the many competitively priced natural cleaners on the market. Or make your own. Fill a spray bottle with equal parts water and white vinegar to disinfect kitchen counters; use hydrogen peroxide and baking soda on bathroom surfaces.
- When a piece of furniture needs replacing, research eco-friendly versions, since conventional furniture and bedding can emit dangerous chemicals called volatile organic compounds (VOCs). For example, when your baby is ready to move from a crib to a bed, consider an organic mattress. Cottell also recommends using [Freecycle](#) to find used furniture (though not mattresses, which should never be bought used). Freecycle stuff not only is free, but also emits fewer VOCs, since most of that occurs with new furniture.

Medicine

Both Cottell and Dr. Rosen value conventional modern medicine, but recommend trying natural therapies when possible and appropriate. Check out the Parent Resources tab of the [AAP's SOCIM website](#) and healthychildren.org for ideas—like honey for a cough or chest physical therapy for congestion.

Make sure your decisions are informed by evidence, both when deciding to use an alternative therapy and when deciding against a conventional one.

Because even natural therapies can be harmful, especially if used with other meds, consult your child's pediatrician before giving him any remedy. Which leads us to....

The great pediatrician debate

The healthychildren.org site's search function enables you to find a board-certified pediatrician who self-identifies as integrative (enter "complementary and integrative medicine" as the specialty). Results are sparse in our area, but, Dr. Rosen says, "Surveys of pediatricians continue to demonstrate a keen interest in learning more about natural health practices." So ask your current pediatrician about her knowledge in natural health areas like nutrition or homeopathy; ask about lifestyle changes for your baby's eczema, or if your child's vaccines could be preservative free and spread out over several visits. Your "conventional" pediatrician just might surprise you.

For more info

- The [Environmental Working Group's cosmetics database](#) evaluates the safety of personal care products—including that baby wash you just bought in bulk, and the sunscreen you slathered on your kids all summer.
- [Growing Up Green](#) by Deirdre Imus is full of specific advice.
- [The Holistic Pediatrician](#) by Kathi Kemper, M.D., (Harpercollins, 1996) is a must for holistic-minded parents.
- [The Toxic Sandbox by Libby McDonald](#) (Perigee, 2007) is a look at environmental toxins and the threats to children's health.

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