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Parenting, naturally

The Holistic Moms Network is growing like a healthy, happy child. Here are some members' views on everything from diapers to discipline.

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Obstetrician or midwife?

Cloth or disposable diapers?

To spank or not to spank?

Nancy Massotto wanted to be the best parent possible. But what, she wondered, did that mean?

Her search for answers led the New Jersey woman to found the Holistic Moms Network.

The group brings together mothers who are interested in natural living and "positive" parenting, and, it focuses on the rights of parents to choose approaches outside the mainstream.

Since its launch in 2002, the Holistic Moms Network has become a national, nonprofit organization with 125 chapters across the country, including two in the Sacramento area.

"This is not a novel concept, but we are definitely seeing a revival of sorts," says Massotto. "When Wal-Mart starts selling organic products, you know that holistic living is hot."

Holistic moms brag about "parenting to a different beat," and some of their philosophies – on vaccinations, for example – are controversial. But their approaches run the gamut and they strive to be nonjudgmental of others, says Massotto.

We spoke with Massotto and two Sacramento-area holistic moms about their stances on

some age-old parenting dilemmas.

Wendi Bennett of Folsom and husband Dan are parents of Lilly, 4; and Conner, 2.

Nancy Massotto of New Jersey and husband Mike are parents of Michael, 7; and Dominic, 18 months.

Kim Loutzenhiser of Orangevale and husband Mark are parents of Kira, 6.

Childbirth

Massotto: I think natural childbirth empowers women in a strong way. Both of my children were born at home. I felt it was the best and most comfortable place to bring them into the world.

Bennett: I planned to deliver my daughter at home naturally, but we had complications and I ended up getting a Caesarean section. My son was born at home in a tub. It was awesome. Afterward, we all crawled into bed and slept for quite a while.

Loutzenhiser: My intention with Kira was to have a natural childbirth at the hospital without any medical intervention. I labored with her for three days, most of it at home with a midwife. By the third day, I needed the support so I went to the hospital. I would have a different plan if I had another child. I would have a midwife to be with me at the hospital, or hire a doula.

Breast-feeding

Massotto: It's absolutely one of the healthiest things you can do for your children. I breast-fed my first child until age 3, and my second is 20 months old and still nursing. They stop when they are ready to stop.

Bennett: I breast-fed Lilly until she was 17 months, and then I stopped. My son didn't want to nurse any more after 18 months. I was pretty relieved. I wouldn't want to be nursing a 3-year-old.

Loutzenhiser: My intention with my daughter was to breast-feed as long as that was working for both of us. But she was born with a highly unusual suck. We tried everything that the lactation consultants suggested. Finally, after eight weeks, she totally gave up at the breast. But I continued to pump for her.

Vaccinations

Massotto: Parents everywhere should have the option to choose what they would like to do. People should not blindly trust in the medical establishment that vaccinating is always the right thing to do. We have not vaccinated my older son, who has severe allergies. We haven't decided what to do about the younger one.

Bennett: We researched all of the vaccinations they give to babies, and we decided we didn't want or need them. When Lilly went to preschool, we signed a waiver saying we were opposed to vaccinating. If there was some kind of an outbreak, the school would send her

home. The idea of these tiny little people getting injected with all kinds of things just didn't make sense to us.

Loutzenhiser: I didn't realize when Kira was a baby that it was a choice not to vaccinate. Kira got her first vaccination on the day she was born, and I didn't even realize that was happening. We continue with boosters, but I spread them out so she isn't getting too much vaccine at one time.

Medical care

Massotto: Some of us are lucky to have holistic pediatricians who are a little more hesitant to prescribe medication whenever a child has a fever. I prefer trying natural remedies before giving a child antibiotics right away.

Bennett: My son has never seen a regular doctor, and Lilly has only seen one twice. They've had fevers, but unless it gets pretty high, I'm not that worried. I use echinacea, cranberry, garlic, belladonna, other homeopathic things. It gives them relief while the fever runs its course. If something happened that I really couldn't handle, I would call for help.

Loutzenhiser: My daughter has never had a high fever. She has never had antibiotics; we never had a need. If she has ear pain, I use a natural means of helping with that, like using a humidifier, making sure she is hydrated and that her body is warm. We use doctors for diagnostic purposes and consider their recommendations, but we handle most things ourselves.

Diet

Massotto: I make some of my own baby food, but not all of it. I buy from companies that I really like that make organic baby food. I try to stay away from processed foods.

Bennett: I buy anything organic or whole-grain and within my budget. I try to keep my kids away from trans fats and refined sugar. While they're growing, I want to give them a good foundation. Easter is coming up, but the Easter bunny won't bring candy. He might bring a toy.

Loutzenhiser: I try to buy organic whenever possible, and I am also concerned about buying locally. But Kira goes to a school where she does eat some processed food and sugar. She plays on a soccer team in the fall, and they give out Otter Pops on hot days. At 6, it's important for her to make some of those choices on her own. The best thing I can do is be a role model for her.

Toys

Massotto: A lot of us are worried about all the recalls, and what our kids are playing with and putting in their mouths. I certainly have plastic toys, but I try to look for toys made from natural products, like wood and cotton, and I choose toys that are educational and not so commercial. The important thing is to encourage imaginative play.

Bennett: This is not as big an issue for me as it is for others. We don't buy new toys on a regular basis, just birthdays and Christmas. I like creative toys like crayons and painting

easels. Overall, for me, this is fairly low on the list of concerns.

Loutzenhiser: A lot of the negative information I have now about plastics, I didn't have when Kira was younger. If we had another child, I would be more aggressive about finding out what the toys are made of. We do try to keep commercialism at a minimum. We request no presents when we have birthday parties. We feel she already has a lot of stuff.

Sleeping

Massotto: Many, many people share sleep with their kids. I've always "co-slept" with my children. It's a nurturing, bonding thing. It makes them feel safe and secure.

Bennett: From Day 1, they slept in our bed. I held them close and they never went far. Something seems wrong with the idea of having a baby inside you for nine months, then putting them in another room after they're born. As long as everyone else in the bed is comfortable, I have no problem with it. Lilly still sleeps with me.

Loutzenhiser: We didn't start "co-sleeping" until Kira was 4 1/2. Partly because of her nursing issues, it made more sense to have her in her own space. Some nights she sleeps with us and some nights she doesn't. It's her choice and we're very comfortable with it.

Diapers

Massotto: I don't think that one is necessarily superior to the other. Most environmentalists say cloth is better, but I've done both. If I get tired of washing diapers I buy environmentally friendly ones like the ones made by Seventh Generation.

Bennett: I love the idea of cloth diapers. But I tried them for a couple of days and it's just so much work on top of all your other mom duties. So yes, I use disposable. It's not the greenest part of my life, but it's what I'm doing right now.

Loutzenhiser: We used cloth until Kira was about 5 months old, then switched. It turned out I was using old-fashioned cloth-diapering methods that made it a real struggle for me.

Discipline

Massotto: We stand very strongly for positive discipline, and that for the most part means no spanking. We all raise our voices at kids and get frustrated, but I do not spank. I look for better ways to get the message across.

Bennett: I have swatted Lilly before, but not Conner because I've changed my views on it. I don't do timeouts, either. To me, that's fighting with my child. I don't want to feel like I'm winning something. I'd rather try to work with them and talk to them, try to understand their feelings and solve the issue.

Loutzenhiser: We never spank. That will never, ever happen in our house. Our house is a place of peace. I try my best to respect Kira and her space and her body as much as I would any other human being. I don't view tantrums in a negative way. Usually if I allow her to get those feelings out, 30 seconds later, it's fine.

Schooling

Massotto: In the network we have plenty of home-schoolers, plenty of Waldorf and Montessori kids, and lots of public schoolers. It's a very personal choice. My older son is in Montessori.

Bennett: Lilly goes to Bright Beginnings. It's less structured than a standard preschool, and the kids have a lot of choices. Home schooling is a great idea, but I wouldn't want to be the teacher. I'm not sure that would be the best thing for her.

Loutzenhiser: It was a heavily researched decision for us. Kira goes to a public school. She's in kindergarten; it's an open-enrollment school and they teach the standard curriculum. There's lots of parental involvement.

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For more about the Holistic Moms Network, call (877) 465-6667 or go to www.holisticmoms.org.

To find out about local meetings, contact Kim Loutzenhiser with the American River chapter at AmericanRiverHMN@yahoo.com; or Austen Sandifer with the Cosumnes River chapter at austens@mac.com.

Call The Bee's Cynthia Hubert, (916) 321-1082.