



Holistic Pediatrics: “The Whole Child” Approach

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The state of children’s health today is not good. While we live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world based on many measures, our children’s health ranks near the bottom of many indicators, including the most recent UNICEF survey documenting the welfare of children. Furthermore, there are great disparities based on socioeconomic, racial and geographic factors. In all children, but especially in these most vulnerable of the vulnerable, environmental factors are contributing to an unprecedented rise in chronic health care conditions. The rates of atopic disorders like food allergies and asthma as well as of neurodevelopmental disorders like autism and ADHD have reached epidemic status. Unfortunately, we have created not a true health care system to address these ills, but a disease-care system that in most cases can effectively treat acute but not chronic disorders. Complex challenges call for complex solutions, and now is the time for us to turn to integrative medicine.

Integrative medicine has been defined as *“the practice of medicine that reaffirms the importance of the relationship between practitioner and patient, focuses on the whole person, is informed by evidence, and makes use of all appropriate therapeutic approaches, healthcare professionals and disciplines to achieve optimal health and healing.”* (<http://www.imconsortium.org/about/home.html>) Integrative pediatrics, a holistic practice that includes an examined integration of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and conventional therapies, is ideally suited for pediatric care. Integrative pediatrics emphasizes a collaborative and individualized approach to working with families and other health care practitioners, including open discussions about CAM therapies, environmental health concerns, nutrition, immunization, and parenting practices. The appeal of integrative pediatrics for pediatric primary care is noticeably growing, both in the U.S. and internationally.

These core values help define an integrative pediatric model I call the **“Whole Child”** approach.

- Children are society’s most valuable resource and must be nurtured within the context of healthy families, communities and environments.
- The optimal functioning of children in all areas of life is essential to society. Improving the care of children will improve the world.
- Children, as well as adults, have inherent self-healing capabilities which can be enhanced and strengthened.
- Awareness of the mind, body and spirit are essential to the full attainment of quality of life.
- The healthcare system should be open to considering all aspects of the attainment of wellness.

It is this last point – the recognition that we should be shifting our system towards wellness - that represents a key paradigm change. Relationships, in this model, are essential. By establishing communication and trust, we are able to work together to

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ensure each child's optimal health. Pediatricians must partner with parents and families and focus on what's right with each child, on prevention and wellness care. These are the reasons I created the Whole Child Center (WCC), a revolutionary pediatric practice (and in fact, a "Whole Family" practice, as you'll read more about below).

Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world." Both in our design and operation, we created the WCC to reflect our belief that the practice of healthcare should help sustain a healthy environment while recognizing that a healthy environment sustains healthy children. The design of the physical space includes materials that are as least-toxic as possible for our patients and our staff. All materials, including surface coverings like paint and flooring as well as furniture like our cabinetry and exam tables, are made of non-toxic alternatives that are formaldehyde- and volatile organic compound-free. We utilize green cleaning alternatives as well as recycling and water filtration in the WCC. We call this approach "green pediatrics." We want the space we work in to reflect the type of care we deliver.

Our office is accessible by public transportation. We feature a virtually paperless office through our use of electronic health records including doctor-patient secure messaging. We believe in the use of technology when it helps us communicate and connect, maintaining an active Facebook and Twitter presence. At the same time, we integrate many time-tested CAM therapies in our Center, including yoga, infant massage, and biofeedback, among others. Our commitment to "high-tech, high-touch" health care now extends to adults as well, as we've launched "Integrative Family Services" with our second anniversary this August. You, too, can now enjoy consultative wellness services like acupuncture, therapeutic massage and reiki at our beautiful, green space. We especially encourage pre-natal consultations to establish a firm foundation for optimal health early on in the process.

The foundation of our practice remains pediatric primary care, from infancy through age 25. Our primary care practice is grounded in the concept of prevention and emphasizes regular well care visits to provide anticipatory guidance for families. We meet with families most frequently in the first months of a child's life in order to assess growth and development but also to establish a relationship so that we can, together, create a foundation for optimal health for each and every child. Parenting, development and nutrition are the core topics we discuss at every visit, which is much longer than the typical pediatric well visit. Furthermore, we discuss at every visit, starting with prenatal consultations and going all through adolescence into young adulthood, the important environmental factors in creating optimal health. Organic foods and mattresses,



nontoxic toys, growing and making your own food, how to avoid air and water pollution – these are just some of the issues we discuss in everyday conversations.

In the scope of daily practice, however, we encounter a variety of common conditions requiring an acute intervention. These acute problems offer us opportunities not simply to treat the presenting problem but to modulate the course of your child's health for the future. During these encounters, we highlight natural remedies when safe and effective, openly discussing the risk-benefit ratios of all possible conventional and CAM therapies. We provide very specific advice about botanical and homeopathic remedies when appropriate.

Vaccines, in particular, are perhaps the most common reasons parents seek our counsel. As with all integrative and holistic approaches, our goal is to help you decide what is the best course of action for your individual child. Perhaps no subject in primary care practice today draws more attention and debate than vaccination.

The immunization issue involves the principles of human rights and the common good (individual rights vs. state/societal rights) and of informed consent (risk-benefit decisions, exemptions and waivers). Integrative practice is in part grounded in the tenets of individualizing care and in supporting a relationship-centered, open approach to child wellness care. But prevention is a key concept, too, and most integrative pediatricians concur that vaccines can and do effectively prevent certain infectious diseases. In fact, it is in part the near-disappearance of vaccine-preventable diseases like polio and measles that have led some parents to conclude that the risks of their children developing these diseases are outweighed by the perceived risks of developing vaccine-related illnesses. How does one reconcile the scientific and ethical principles noted above when there is so much uncertainty? In the "real-world" practice of integrative primary care, we advocate for honest communication, and we discuss risks and benefits while we develop a plan that best serves each individual child.

It is this communication and style of practice that help us partner with parents and truly create a "Whole Child" and family center. While the safe and effective integration of natural and conventional therapies is very important to our mission, at our very core what is most crucial is that we are relationship-centered. The bond created between us and you and your child is the key to attaining optimal health. We look forward to working together with you towards this goal.

Lawrence D. Rosen, MD is a board-certified general pediatrician committed to family-centered, holistic child health care. He is the founder of the Whole Child Center (WCC) in Oradell, NJ. Visit the WCC web site at wholechildcenter.org for more information.



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