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LITTLE NOAH FONG WAS NOT A HAPPY camper. At the age of eight months, he developed an ear infection and then a cough that often led to vomiting. His pediatrician prescribed one antibiotic after another, but after 10 months, Noah was still sick. Finally the doctor decided to put him on asthma medication, even though Noah didn't have asthma. For the boy's mother, Sharon Fong, that was the last straw. "We'd been stuck in this treatment routine," she recalls, "but suddenly I looked at Noah and thought, this is an awful lot of medication for such a little kid!" Frustrated and concerned, Fong and her husband, James Wistman, decided to leave the conventional medical superhighway and seek an alternative route to health for their child.

With this decision, Fong and Wistman joined a small but growing number of American parents who are traveling beyond mainstream Western medicine in the search for better health care for their kids. According to a 1999 study published in *Pediatrics*, 10–15 percent of children nationwide have received some form of complementary or alternative care, such as chiropractic and herbal medicine. Perhaps not surprisingly, parents who seek out such care are well educated and have often tried alternative treatments themselves, according to a study published in 1998 in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*. Conditions such as asthma, eczema, allergies, bedwetting, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic respiratory infections, nasal congestion and migraine headaches can be successfully treated with complementary care, according to the physicians interviewed for this story.

Holistic therapies for kids are offered in a variety of settings across the nation, ranging from private offices and group practices to major medical centers such as the Beth Israel Hospital Center for Health and Healing in New York City, where Noah's parents found Lawrence Palevsky, M.D., a holistic pediatrician. During Noah's first 60-minute appointment with Palevsky, Fong was impressed that the doctor held the little boy,

respectfully telling him what was going on. "Noah trusted him immediately," she recalls. "It was a welcome change from the usual Manhattan doctor factory where the physicians rarely interact with your baby." Taking time to build rapport helps a holistic physician get to know a child in order to understand "the big picture, not just the physical symptoms," Palevsky says. It's important to explore "body, psyche, emotions, spirit and relationships" because these are all potential factors in illness, concurs Kathi J. Kemper, M.D., director of the Center for Holistic Pediatric Education and Research at Children's Hospital in Boston and author of *The Holistic Pediatrician*. For instance, Kemper has

observed that children who are depressed will often complain of a stomachache. Psychological stress can contribute to pain and to other symptoms, such as diarrhea and rashes. That's why doctors like Kemper and Palevsky say that getting to the bottom of a child's health problem requires looking at the whole child—and the family, too.

At Noah's first appointment, in addition to taking his medical history, Palevsky asked a wide range of questions about the family—their dietary habits, how they like to spend time together and more. He also probed to understand their beliefs about natural treatments. "It's important to learn a family's philosophy about health care," says Harvey





SOMETIMES CHANGING A CHILD'S DIET OR SPENDING MORE QUALITY TIME WITH YOUR LITTLE ONE CAN HELP IMPROVE HER HEALTH.

Karp, M.D., a Los Angeles pediatrician and assistant professor at the UCLA School of Medicine. "If they prefer that I treat their child's mild yeast infection with baking soda and water, rather than use an expensive antifungal medication, I want to know that."

Children themselves communicate a great deal to a pediatrician, if he observes and listens. "Children are open books," Palevsky says. "And they respond a lot quicker to treatment than adults do." When he saw Noah, he quickly ruled out an ear infection. The likely cause of the toddler's coughing and vomiting: allergenic and conges-

tion-stimulating foods as well as antibiotics, which can cause intestinal imbalances and weaknesses. Palevsky took Noah off antibiotics and recommended dietary changes: eliminating dairy, gluten grains and other mucus-stimulating foods; increasing his intake of fresh, unprocessed food; adding congestion-reducing foods like oily fish (mackerel, tuna, bluefish and salmon), as well as beans, herbs and green vegetables. Tofu, a processed food that Noah likes, is now only occasionally on the family's menu. To support their son, Fong and Wistman adopted these changes, too. Now, six months later, Fong reports that Noah is healthy again and has stuck to his diet 75 percent of the time, falling off it only when he has

indulged in birthday-party cupcakes or crackers with juice at day care.

"When children on special diets wish they could eat like their peers, it helps if their parents stay on the diet with them," says Vasant Rechtschaffen, the mother of nine-year-old Eli, a Palevsky patient who suffers from asthma. To avoid prescribing steroids for Eli (the drugs can have negative effects on the bones, eyes, adrenal glands and immune system), Palevsky recommended a diet similar to Noah's. "I try to produce delicious alternatives at home, such as wheat-free, dairy-free chocolate brownies—even if Eli's teenage siblings go exclusively for junk food," says Rechtschaffen. "And it's working!" Although Eli used to tire

CONTINUED ON PAGE 107

Holistic Health for Kids

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 65

quickly and get short of breath during active play, Rechtschaffen reports that "he is now getting stronger and stronger. He's a regular little sportsman."

Holistic pediatricians, like Palevsky, typically integrate holistic treatments into a patient's health regimen, referring a child, when appropriate, to a nutritionist, chiropractor, acupuncturist or other complementary-care provider, as they would traditionally to other medical specialists. At the Beth Israel Center, which is organized as a sort of medical cooperative, staff specialists in those and other disciplines work closely with the M.D.'s. Increasingly, M.D.'s are taking active steps to study and use holistic therapies. But even those who don't practice complementary modalities are often willing to refer to practitioners who do, according to James Gordon, M.D., chairman of the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy. "In our area, there are

HOW TO LOCATE A SKILLED HOLISTIC KIDS' DOC

There is currently no nationwide resource for holistic pediatric practitioners, so locating one in your area takes a little detective work. Try asking other parents for referrals, or your own chiropractor, acupuncturist or other holistic practitioner for referrals to practitioners with pediatric training. Alternatively, your pediatrician may know competent area chiropractors, nurse practitioners or herbal healers, among others, who specialize in children's health care. James Gordon, M.D., director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, D.C., advises parents not to overlook family-practice doctors. And check the following organizations and medical centers for referrals.

■ The American Holistic Medical Association provides a partial list of their members; 18 are pediatricians.

For a copy, send a check or money order for \$10 to: 6728 Old McLean Village Drive, McLean, VA 22101.

■ The American Board of Family Practice has an excellent "find a doctor" page on their Web site (www.familypractice.com).

■ Beth Israel Center for Health and Healing, New York, NY; (646) 935-2220.

■ Children's Hospital Center for Holistic Pediatric Education and Research, Boston, MA; (617) 355-6000.

■ University Medical Center Department of Pediatrics, Tucson, AZ; (520) 626-5170.

■ University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing, St. Paul, MN; (612) 624-9459.

■ UCLA Pediatric Pain Program, Los Angeles, CA; (310) 825-0731.

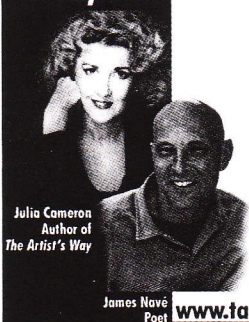
holistic health for kids

A GROWING NUMBER OF AMERICAN FAMILIES ARE TRADING ANTIBIOTICS FOR ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS WHEN THEIR CHILDREN GET SICK. HERE'S A LOOK AT THE STATE OF THE ART OF THIS MEDICINE.

BY MINDY PENNYBACKER

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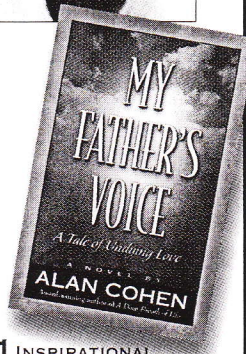
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only one or two pediatricians who integrate complementary and alternative treatments," says Gordon, whose Center for Mind-Body Medicine is located in Washington, D.C. "But there are many more who refer young patients to doctors who do."

An important facet of a holistic doctor's role, whatever his practice, is teaching parents how to provide basic care themselves. "We have to teach a much broader version of health to children of all ages," says Gordon, who hopes that the White House Commission will recommend the creation of health-education programs specially targeted at parents and kids. Palevsky agrees: "In cases of minor childhood illness, we want the parents to feel confident in moving closer to the child, not stepping back and handing the child over to a doctor." He regularly trains parents in "hands-on care"; for instance, kids like Noah and Eli who have upper-respiratory infections may benefit from massage with essential oils. On his new diet, Noah catches fewer colds, but when he does succumb, his parents massage him with olive oil enhanced with a drop or two of essential oils of thyme (a natural expectorant), oregano (a natural antibiotic) and peppermint (a fever reducer).

Treatments like massage also promote a warm interaction between parent and child, says Lori Nafshun, who consulted Harvey Karp for her daughter, Mica, now four, who had a bad case of colic as an infant. Karp, who describes himself as "15 percent doctor, 85 percent grandmother" due to his fondness for simple home remedies such as chicken soup, urged Nafshun to take an infant-massage class. It was, she says, "one of the smartest things I've ever done." Massaging Mica's belly helped relieve her intestinal gas and her colic. Plus the massage was fun. "As soon as I put her on the blanket and rubbed lotion on my hands, she'd start to smile, wiggle and giggle," says Nafshun, who also massaged her next baby, a boy. She believes the massage may have helped

IS HE QUALIFIED?

Once you identify a holistic physician, it's important to check out his or her credentials and approach. At a preliminary interview, see how the pediatrician interacts with your child and how he or she responds. Following are some key questions:

- What is the extent of your holistic training? Where and with whom have you studied?
- Do you refer to or work closely with other holistic practitioners? Do you have an active file of those you recommend?
- What therapies do you like to use? What treatment options might you recommend for, say, a chronic ear or respiratory infection?
- How do you integrate conventional and holistic treatments?

prevent colic in her son.

Whether holistic care calls for tough dietary changes or fun activities like massage, these parents feel it's worthwhile. Says Fong, "Before, when Noah was taking antibiotics, it would take him 10 days to recover from a cold. Now, without antibiotics, he's better after a day or two." These treatments don't come cheap, however. "Our insurance doesn't cover all of it," Fong says. Doctor visits, which can run from \$125 to \$350, are typically covered, but fees to other practitioners often aren't. Visits to a chiropractor (\$50 to \$150), a nutritionist (\$90 and up) and a massage therapist (\$35 to \$100) can add up. Of course, antibiotics can be costly, too—a prescription can set you back up to \$100. But whereas insurance usually requires only a low copayment for prescription drugs, parents must pay out of pocket for holistic services. That is beginning to change. Some insurance companies, like Oxford and United HealthCare, offer at least partial reimbursement for holistic services performed by a designated list of licensed practitioners.

STORIES LIKE FONG'S, NAFSHUN'S AND Rechtshaffen's attest to the efficacy of holistic treatments for kids, but to date there are few formal studies to back up the anecdotal evidence. A holistic special-interest group has been formed by the Ambulatory Pediatric Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics started a task force on complementary medicine last year to educate doctors and the public. These steps should help ensure that studies are done and that more doctors are taught complementary

medicine. Gordon feels that, properly used, most complementary therapies tend to be safer and less toxic than conventional ones. And as Palevsky points out, "many of the pharmaceuticals we use on children are made for adults, and their specific effects on children have never been properly, scientifically studied." He notes that Prilosec, for example, which adults take for acid reflux, was widely prescribed for children without any studies. Then when kids experienced serious side effects, doctors began

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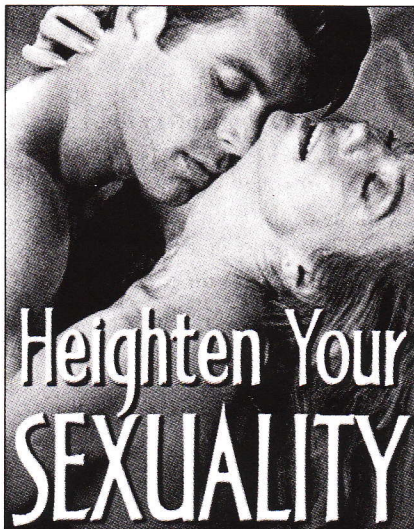
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to use the drug far more cautiously.

Despite the lack of efficacy studies, parents are more and more frequently turning to complementary and holistic care, particularly when their kids are seriously ill. According to the 1999 report in *Pediatrics*, 50–70 percent of kids with arthritis, cancer and cystic fibrosis have received complementary treatments such as herbs and mind-body therapies like hypnosis. And a survey of pediatric cancer patients by the University of British Columbia Children's Hospital between 1989 and 1995 found that 42 percent of 366 respondents used therapies such as guided imagery, therapeutic touch, herbs, vitamins and massage.

"You select those therapies most likely to be beneficial and least likely to cause harm," says Kemper, who works with seriously ill patients at Boston's Children's Hospital and as a consultant to specialists in oncology, cystic fibrosis and severe juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. For example, when a young hospital patient wanted to practice qi gong, a Chinese exercise designed to raise vital energy, Kemper assured oncologists at Children's that it would not be unduly taxing for him. For cancer patients, she'll often recommend acupuncture, which helps quiet the nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy, in addition to antinausea drugs. Simple, inexpensive remedies like ginger can be helpful, too, she says.

Kemper also treats young patients with Reiki, a Japanese healing technique. Last summer she used it on Josh Harding, 18, as he lay unconscious in intensive care, stricken with a rare liver infection. "When Josh finally awoke, he asked for her," says his mother, Karen Harding. "Even under very heavy medication, he had known she was there, and that the Reiki helped." As a psychiatric nurse clinical specialist who recommends nutrition therapy for kids with attention deficit disorder, Harding was already familiar with holistic treatments. But even with her education and skills, she needed Kemper's help in communi-

cating with the hospital medical staff. "Dr. Kemper was our family's only consistent contact in the month Josh was in the hospital," Harding says. The doctor's constant support freed Harding from having to fight for complementary remedies and instead let her focus on her child.

Kemper's interventions often tilt into lifestyle modifications. She encouraged one father to stop smoking as an example to his kids. She has persuaded families not to let a child with insomnia drink Coke in the evening. "Kids mirror their parents, who focus on a healthy lifestyle when they have a baby, but then lapse back into McDonald's under the influence of fast-food advertising," Kemper notes. Pediatricians, Kemper believes, have a larger role to play than just getting kids through the flu season. "They should be talking to families about organic gardening and whether our food supply is safe," she says.

For parents like Sharon Fong, whose child's health hadn't improved under standard care, the good news is that holistic therapies are increasingly being integrated with mainstream medicine. "It's unstoppable," says Karp, pointing out that, in a sense, pediatrics is really returning to its origins. "Throughout time, parents have been the primary caretakers. They had the love, basic knowledge and experience needed," Palevsky says. "But the advent of modern medicine undermined their confidence and supplanted their role." He urges a redefinition of the health-care provider's role. "We want to re-empower parents so that they use doctors as a guide. Children speak what they need. Our job is to teach parents how to listen and understand," he says. When a child falls ill with a customary childhood illness, instead of first reacting with fear, he advises parents to "be with your child, stay with your child. Yes, the remedies are helpful, but the best healing is your connection with your child." Practitioners like Palevsky, Gordon and Karp confirm what parents have always known—the most effective medicine is love. ✦