

Families are the building blocks of a healthy, thriving community.

Well Baby Center helps cement family relationships for families living in Venice and Mar Vista.

By Barbara A. Mastej

In these times of escalating property values, rampant development, and focus on commodity rather than community, it's rare to find someone who is so committed to helping both the "have" and "have not" families living in Venice.

Blending her keen sense of entrepreneurship with her expertise in infant-parent mental health, Deborah Groening, MA, LMFT and Psy.D. candidate, founded Well Baby Center in 2009 to provide parenting support services and counseling for young children (prenatal to 5 years old) and their families living in Venice and Mar Vista. While there are many boutique businesses on the Westside that cater to small children and their parents, many of these may be out of reach for low-income residents. WBC welcomes families of all economic status. Unlike the typical "mommy & me" model, WBC is staffed by mental health professionals.

Groening's model for Well Baby Center was inspired by her own experiential and intellectual journey. As a mother, she knew the immense stresses and challenges of raising small children firsthand. She saw that motherhood could also bring turbulence in a woman's relationship with her partner, herself, and with her own mother. Concurrently, Groening was

pursuing a degree in psychology with a direct emphasis on the family dynamic at Antioch University. “The subject of infant-family mental health became my passion, so I decided to start a parenting and counseling center that would advance accessibility of preventative services for mothers and mothers-to-be,” she said. “ I set out to help women receive social and psychological support during one of the most vulnerable times of their lives.” A woman of boundless energy, Groening continues to broaden her studies in infant-parent and perinatal mental health, and endeavors to keep abreast of innovative clinical thinking and theory. She is about to supplement her Masters in Clinical Psychology with a Doctorate in Marriage-Family Therapy from Ryokan College. She stresses the importance of evolving to both better herself and the center she founded.

Groening moved to Venice over 30 years ago, long before the onslaught of gentrification. She was drawn to the area by its unique mix of people of all races, creeds, and economic strata. Taking this to heart, she envisioned Well Baby Center as a place where every family could afford essential services by offering them at low fees on a sliding scale.

“The transition to parenthood is rarely simple and can bring one or more struggles for new or expanding families. The professional staff at Well Baby Center leads groups and classes or private sessions that blanket a wide range of issues. These include post partum depression, loneliness, anxiety, social isolation, breast feeding and weaning, separation, divorce, or blended families, marital conflict and sexual intimacy, concerns about children’s social-emotional development, or dealing with tantrums. Our goal is to equip parents with tools to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed, show them

ways to strengthen bonds with their children while lovingly enforcing limits, and help couples find ways to work together using a common parenting language and positive methods of child rearing.”

WBC’s programs are based on a multi-disciplinary, family systems approach. Counseling and relationship support services include: infant-parent psychotherapy, Mindful Parenting Groups, family therapy, couples counseling, child therapy, parenting consultations, Mindful Pregnancy and Newborn Parenting Groups, Becoming Social — a social skills school readiness group, and finally, Loving Discipline — a mindfulness-based parenting group. WBC is also able to help individuals that have been court-ordered to take parenting classes. It is also a training center for infant-parent mental health specialists.

Asked if she felt WBC was making a positive difference, Groening recalled one specific case during the early days of the center that reassured her that, yes, it truly does. “A single mother with a small child and a newborn came into the center looking for help. She was working as a secretary while in the process of separating from her husband. She was — naturally — beyond stressed. After joining a weekly Mindful Parenting Group, she told me the group helped her realize she wasn’t alone and now had a safe haven in which she could speak openly about all she was going through. Talking to other moms with similar issues helped relieve her anxiety. Once she gained consistent professional and social support, she began to feel that her life was manageable again. Eventually her co-parent came to some of the parent-child groups as well, so they benefited from having a common

parenting language. And in the bigger picture there is now one more mother who is happier and that reflects within the community.”

In January 2016, Well Baby celebrated its 8th year — having provided more than 5,000 children and families with mental health and preventative services. It continues to expand its collaborative network of public and private organizations; has trained 62 infant-parent specialists, and has successfully garnered the respect and authorization as a full-service organization. WBC continues to empower hundreds of new parents with invaluable tools, training, experiences and support.

There’s a playful side to Well Baby Center, too! The center has a 1,250 sq. ft. shaded play yard — available for low cost birthday parties and drop-in play groups. It is equipped with a natural wood climbing structure and slide, a wooden play house, a ball pool, sand toys, a balance beam, and child-sized picnic tables. Children and parents come to meet and play on Thursdays from 12:30 to 4:00 pm — and it’s free to the community! This is a great opportunity for local parents to meet one another while their kids make new friends. There are also yoga classes for young toddlers and their moms, holiday parties, and music classes in which the little ones are encouraged to use drums and other instruments to make their happy noise.

Although Groening will be stepping down as the center’s Executive Director, she will continue on as a Senior Child and Family Psychotherapist and a Mindful Parenting Group Leader. She says her vision has been realized, but emphasizes that there is much more that can be done. “I’d love to partner with other entrepreneurial philanthropists who would like to open

Well Baby Centers all over town — frankly, I don't see why there aren't Well Baby Centers in every neighborhood!"