

A photograph of a colorful wooden toy block with a house-like shape and a string-and-button toy. The toy is made of wood and has various colors like red, blue, yellow, and green. It has a house-like shape on top with a red roof and a yellow archway. Below it, there are several holes with strings and buttons. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a playroom, with a large stuffed animal visible.

# HEART OF

# Venice

## The Well Baby Center

Photos by Erika Fisher

**Deborah Groening** founded the Well Baby Center in 2009 to provide parenting support services and counseling for young children (prenatal to 5 years old) and their families in the Mar Vista community.

Groening, MA, LMFT and PsyD Candidate, who serves as the WBC Executive Director and senior child and family psychotherapist, realized that motherhood could also bring turbulence in a woman's relationship with her partner, herself, and even with her own mother.

After studying infant-family mental health during her post-graduate years and working as a family therapist, she set out to help women going through one of the most vulnerable times of their lives.

"I made a commitment to advance the accessibility and practice of preventative services for mothers and mothers-to-be," she said.

Based on a multi-disciplinary approach that includes psychoanalytic theory, developmental psychology, and infant brain science, the center offers low fee primary services like Mindful Parenting Groups, developmental assessments, and family counseling, to support the often challenging transition of becoming a family. The center also has an internship training program and is a community wellness center.

Groening recalled a life-changing story about a highly stressed out and overwhelmed new mother who found help at WBC. The woman, who worked as a waitress and was in the process of separating from her husband, "comes to the center for help and she begins receiving two times per week in-depth counseling. She joins a weekly mindful parenting group where she realizes that she isn't alone and where she can speak openly about all that she is going through."



Groening continued, "She gains consistent professional and social support and soon begins to feel that her life is manageable again. This is very good news for her toddler and newborn. Her co-parent eventually agrees to come to some of the parent-child groups as well, in order to learn a common parenting language."

In January 2014, Well Baby celebrated its fifth year serving the Mar Vista community -- having supplied mental health and preventative services to more than 2,000 children and families. It continues



to expand its collaborative network of public and private organizations; has trained 12 infant-parent specialists, and has successfully garnered the respect and authorization as a full service organization. WBC continues to empower hundreds of working class parents to have the kind of parent-child relationship they wish to cultivate and enhance.

Through its walk-in storefront center in Mar Vista, Well Baby Center strives to support families from the very beginning, offering an interactive and dynamic space to provide relationship support to new families.

Well Baby's 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 and Becoming Social, a social skills school readiness group, and finally Loving Discipline -- a mindfulness-based parenting group.

Well Baby Center's mission is to provide the tools and experiences, community support, and local resources to enable families to grow and flourish.

Groening says her vision has been realized, but there is more that can be done.

"I would like to expand services to the special needs population and be able to provide services in Spanish," she said. "Beyond these immediate goals, I'd love to partner with other entrepreneurial philanthropists who would like to open other Well Baby Centers... Frankly, I don't see why there aren't Well Baby Centers in every neighborhood!"

