

SPRINGING BACK TO NATURE: NATURAL PARENTING IN A PLASTIC WORLD

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Instead of purchasing what's new and trendy, more and more parents are springing back to nature by using natural and organic products for their families. Especially after the massive recall involving toys with lead-containing paint, an ongoing controversy over whether plastic bottles containing the chemical Bisphenol A pose a health risk, and seemingly endless E. coli scares, many parents see natural and organic products as better and safer alternatives for their children and themselves.

NATURAL AND ORGANIC BECOMING MAINSTREAM

Retailers are taking notice of the increase in demand for simple products with few manmade chemicals and are making more of these eco-friendly alternatives available. Roy Beard, owner of Roy's Natural Market in Dallas, says when he opened his store 40 years ago, his was the only shop in town that carried Dannon yogurt. Since then, consumer demand has grown tremendously for more natural products - from organic dairy goods to gluten-free foods.

"What's out on the market has exploded. It's become mainstream," he says, explaining that while some customers are concerned about the use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers in food production, others choose organic foods because they believe they taste better and help small farms.

Brad Stuffelbeam, president of the Texas Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, says that since problems like obesity and childhood diabetes have led consumers to desire

healthier foods, organic food has become the largest-growing segment of the food and agricultural industry. He says this is a trend big corporations no longer can ignore. "This industry has grown over 20 percent every year with a major increase over the last five years. It has moved beyond just an interest for organic food, spreading to the landscape, clothing, cosmetic, and pet food industries as well."

Teena Massingill, manager of corporate public affairs for Safeway, the parent company of Randall's and

Tom Thumb, says the company noticed many of their consumers were shopping for conventional items at their store and then making another trip to a specialty store for organic items. To make shopping more convenient for their customers, in early 2006 the company introduced its store brand, *O Organics*, alongside conventional food items. The company now offers about 300 *O Organics* products, including baby food and produce, in addition to name brand organic products.





BACK TO BASICS BABY

Erin Sheppard, owner of Austin Baby Store, explains that products made of non-synthetic and organic ingredients and materials are becoming more popular as many parents are becoming concerned that the chemicals used in products - from plastics that many toys and cups are made of to detergents and diapers - may not be safe. "It is good parenting and consumerism to be watchful," she says.

Some parents want an alternative to the chemical reaction that occurs next to babies' skin in conventional disposable diapers. Sheppard carries disposable Tushies diapers, made with a blend of non-chlorine bleached wood pulp and cotton, rather than the absorbent gel found in other disposable diapers. She also sells cloth diapering products for those who wish to avoid throwing away disposables.

Many of her customers also prefer not to use products such as conventional diaper rash creams, which

contain commonly used chemicals like petrolatum. "The FDA says it's okay, but it's petroleum," says Sheppard. "It's oil that you're putting on your baby's skin. Do you really want that in the first months or years of life, while molding physical development?"

Some parents and educators believe it is also important for children to feel the textures of natural materials. "If a baby follows what the commercialized world suggests they should, it would only be plastic," Sheppard says, explaining differing sensory experiences give children a bigger picture of the world.

SAVVY SHOPPER

One of the most common barriers to transitioning to organic and natural products is cost. While these products can cost more, consumers who make the switch may save money in other areas. Stufflebeam says consumers can offset the cost of organic

and local food with long-term savings in preventative health care.

Sheppard says many products, like biodegradable, coconut-based Charlie's Soap, are cost effective because they are concentrated. Not only is less packaging used, consumers do not have to use much to get the job done. Store brands also may make organic food more affordable. Massingill says there is a noticeable cost difference between *O* Organics products and the organic brands available at specialty stores. Cost-conscious consumers also can go big - buying in bulk at warehouse stores - or small - visiting local farmers' markets.

Consumers' best bet when choosing products is to do their homework. Comparing products in the store makes it easier to evaluate ingredients, but reading labels can be confusing. There is no official definition for "natural," and while the USDA does not claim that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventional food, if a product bears the USDA Organic label, generally at least 95 percent of its ingredients must be organically produced.

"The greatest accountability for food integrity is knowing who your farmer is and where your food comes from," Stufflebeam says, explaining that consumers can ask local farmers how their food is produced.

Beard says some people are resistant toward what they perceive as "health" products so he suggests switching a few things at a time, starting with products the family already consumes, and learning as much as possible about the benefits of a natural and organic lifestyle. "Stores like mine have a lot of books, which are a big help. Education is a big thing when changing your lifestyle." ★