Exclusive to Central Coast Parent (San Luis Obispo, CA)

PARENTING IN COMMUNITY: RAISING CHILDREN IN A COHOUSING NEIGHBORHOOD"

As a four-year resident of the Nomad Cohousing Community in Boulder, CO, I have found living in a resident-created and managed neighborhood has made my life easier and saved our family money. Our community is located on a one-acre site about two miles from downtown Boulder with 11 households, including 18 adults and seven children. Nomad is one of 52 completed communities in North America, including 12 in California.

COMMUNITY COMMON HOUSE

I love our Common House, a community owned building for meals, meetings and social activities. We just celebrated our daughter Halonah's third birthday in the main community room and she was very clear that the Common House was her first choice, even over her own home. Her comfort with the Common House is not surprising as she has been attending community meals there twice a week since she was two months old and knows my husband Zev and I go to the Common House once a month for business meetings.

For Halonah and my 2-year old, Zipporah, the Common House is an extension of our personal home and an integral part of our life.Both daughters were part of a Moms and Babies group I hosted every Monday morning with Halonah for over two years, and we have had a Friday morning play group in our Common House for toddlers that Halonah was part of for a year and a half. Now that the eight children in our playgroup are attending pre-school, the Moms continue to meet in the Common House twice a month as a Mom's Support Group.

Having a place that's large enough to hold 10 or more people next door to my home, that's free and easily available, has been a great convenience to our family. We have also used the Common House for pre-natal and post partum yoga classes and for holding a series of lectures about vaccines by local health care providers. Currently have music classes for children twice a week, and I love being able to walk over instead of driving to the class. Other members of our 25-person community also make good use of our Common House. Recently, my neighbor Alec held a poetry reading and last year he hosted a 12-month weekly study group; Aiym, our resident accountant/lawyer/ author, has taught seminars in the Common House.

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EASY PLAYDATES FOR THE KIDS

Another aspect of life in cohousing I appreciate as a parent is how easy it is for community children to play together. The physical layout encourages the kids to play outside in one central area so they can be easily seen by the parents. Our homes are on a pedestrian walkway encircling a central grassy courtyard. The kids love to ride their bikes and pull each other in the red wagon around the courtyard, or to play on a large wood play structure the parents jointly purchased. When one child is outside, all the others want to follow. No need for "play dates," telephone calls or scheduling. The kids just get together spontaneously and naturally. The children take turns going over each other's homes – usually after they check with their parents first – and we go on outings together to the nearby park and lake with one parent supervising.

HELP WITH CHILDCARE

Having help with childcare has been another benefit of living in cohousing. My daughters are especially close friends with our neighbor Wendy's two adopted children, a sister and brother from Haiti: Mika age six and Clarens age four. Our kids play together after school almost every day, and on weekends, Wendy and I regularly take turns watching the children to give each other a break. Another neighbor, Stephen, is a single parent of a four-year old girl Leslie. Wendy and I both help watch Leslie so her father gets time off.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

I will admit that I am a safety conscious, perhaps even an over-protective, parent. I feel my children are very safe in our neighborhood. Halohah clearly knows the boundaries of our property and stays within them. At three, she is now old enough to play outside with the other children while I'm in the kitchen doing the dishes. I know she's safe because I can stand at the kitchen sink and see her while still getting a chore done. Usually there's also another adult outside who is reading the newspaper, working in the garden or having a cup of tea and I know my neighbor will keep an eye on the children. However, if a stranger showed up, I can assure you that within a minute an adult would be outside. While we have no fences or gates, we have a high degree of safety and security. When you know all your neighbors and their friends and family, it's impossible for an unfamiliar face to go unnoticed.

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IS COHOUSING FOR YOU?

Is life in cohousing perfect? I believe that cohousing is the closest mainstream living solution for people who want to live in a community setting and have personal privacy. Naturally, there are the usual challenges of living with other people. The difference is that cohousers tend to work them out pretty quickly and not let disagreements fester. I have found differences in parenting styles to be challenging at times and this has also brought me closer to other parents as we openly discuss our values.

The socializing aspect of community suppers is wonderful and the cost of meal is reasonable (usually $5/adult and $2.50 /child). Drawbacks of common meals are how excited our girls are at seeing their friends so much so that it can be hard for them to stay at the table to eat enough of their dinner. Our solution has been to have one adult sitting with the kids at the children's table to make sure their supper gets eaten. Still, the kids love community dinners and they greatly look forward to them every week.

Does this sound like a lifestyle you'd like to try? There's a cohousing neighborhood forming in Central California called Oak Creek Commons. The Group owns a 14-acre wooded site with a flowing creek and hiking trail in Paso Robles. The site plan has been approved by the City; an initial design of the Common House has been developed; and the families have just started designing their individual homes. This is an ideal time to join and be part of the creation of the neighborhood. The Group has free orientation meetings and site tours regularly. For more information, please call 800-489-8715 or visit their website at www.oakcreekcommons.org.

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Neshama Abraham Paiss lives in the Nomad Cohousing Community in Boulder, Colorado, with her husband Zev Paiss and their two daughters, Halonah and Zipporah.