

The Chronicle Herald

At-home learning pushes many Nova Scotia parents to the breaking point

[Jen Taplin](#) · Posted: 1 hour ago | Updated: 31 minutes ago | 11 Min Read



Clay VanderHeide, 8, doing at-home learning on the family farm in the Annapolis Valley. - Contributed

Children's tears of frustration, untouched homework assignments, and the endless video calls that make up at-home learning are pushing many parents in Nova Scotia to the edge.

"Have you ever been at your lowest and had a hard time getting out of bed, or doing normal everyday tasks? This is where my children are. How can they continue this way for the next month?" said Nicole Matthews, a Bedford mother of six children, five of whom are school age.

"Mentally, I am struggling, I'm trying to navigate between five different schedules of children of all ages and learning needs."



Nicole Matthews' daughter Londyn, 8, hard at work homeschooling in their home in Bedford. - Contributed

With a third wave of record-breaking COVID cases this spring, schools across the province moved to at-home learning April 29. Schools are staying closed for the rest of the school year, and for many, that means one more month of homeschooling.

Matthews, whose husband works outside of the home full time, said two of her six children need extra help with their schoolwork.

In an email, she said school is important, but so is the mental health of parents and their kids.

“I don't know how much longer we can continue with this,” she wrote. “Signed, an extremely tired, emotionally-drained mom.”

Sacrifice

A day for Amy VanderHeide usually begins with tears and frustration. Sometimes her six-year-old lies down on the floor and cries when it's time to start class. She owns a farm with her husband in the Annapolis Valley and right now is the busiest time of year, but she's not out working in the fields. She's with her three sons.

“I’ve taken a full step back from farming since schools closed compared to last year where we ditched school and focused on the farm. This year, it didn’t feel like we had the freedom to make those decisions.”



The VanderHeide family: Amy and James with their kids Warren, Clay and Jackson. - Contributed

She said she feels the pressure because her kids would be marked absent or get insufficient grades.

VanderHeide also sits on several boards that she’s had to abandon to focus on her kids’ schooling.

“It’s not healthy for us because this is not what I want to be doing right now. The pressure I feel from giving up everything, my kids feel that.”

And women seem to be the ones bearing the brunt of the homeschooling pressure.

“There’s not any discussion, it just happened that way. We hear a lot from women, how their lives are affected by it, we don’t hear a lot from men, even though we know they’re out there and there are dads being challenged by this.”

Without her help, VanderHeide said her husband has had to work longer hours. She said he’s home long enough to shove food in his mouth, then he’s gone again.

Looking after the kids all day and homeschooling are taking a toll, she said, and she’s burning out.

“Last week, I hit the biggest wall I’ve hit through this (pandemic) and I just cried for hours because I don’t have time. It’s falling on the shoulders of women and they’re giving up more and more.”

Survival mode

Roxanne MacLean, a mom of three from Halifax Regional Municipality, said the kids fighting, the isolation and the working from home are making things really difficult. Sometimes she has to try really hard not to yell when one of the kids is unmuted on their video calls.

“I’m juggling so many things and feel like I’m not doing anything well, and feel so much guilt. It’s almost survival mode,” she wrote in an email.



Roxanne MacLean and her daughter Addy, working on school work in their HRM home. - Contributed

Her oldest child has a learning disability and “hates school,” and her youngest, who is in primary, can’t navigate the technology. She works full time from home and their dad works out of province.

“I would love for the school year to be finished at the end of the month or early June. This is so hard, and the only reassuring thing is knowing that I’m not the only one feeling this way” she wrote. “Thank goodness my employer is flexible.”



Logan MacLean, a Grade 5 student, learning from his home in HRM. His mother Roxanne MacLean said working and homeschooling is a difficult juggle and she feels she's constantly falling behind. - contributed

Falling behind

Katie Reardon and her husband are both essential workers and need to work out of their home on a daily basis. To manage care of their seven-year-old daughter, a relative comes in every day.

“It’s not just the work week and the home school, it’s everything else that comes along with running a household that we just can’t keep up with. It’s always feeling behind,” Reardon said in a phone interview.

“As a mom, you just want to do everything but during a pandemic, you just can’t. That’s a mental battle. I tear up just talking about it, it’s so hard.”

She's noticed a behaviour change in her daughter since she can't interact with her friends. Meanwhile, her homework is piling up.

"It's nice knowing there's an end in sight, but going into June next week, we don't know if there's going to be camps open. It puts you in the same position, scrambling for child care," Reardon said in a phone interview.

"It's definitely one of the most challenging things as a parent and a working mother that I've ever gone through."

The boss

Isaac Saney's daughter Ashah is not yet school age, but because of the lockdown, juggling work and a toddler at the same time has become a daily routine for the professor who teaches at Dalhousie and Saint Mary's University. In fact, she's often the star of his video conference classes, that is, if she's not pushing the laptop closed because she wants her dad's attention.

"She's the centre of my life and she is my boss," he said.



Isaac Saney and his daughter Ashah, 2. - Contributed

While it's great to spend more time with his daughter, he said it makes concentrating on writing his book and academic articles near impossible. He said he can't get "in the zone" when his daughter is around because he has to keep an eye out for dangers.

"And I want her to know that when she's with me, she's my focus."

Why not schools?

Pictou mom Katelyn Shepherd says it's a good day if she can get her nine-year-old son to cooperate on the video chat, let alone complete any classwork. Her 11-year-old daughter usually has one-on-one help at school but at home, she isn't grasping the work and gets frustrated with Shepherd when she tries to help.

Their father is an essential worker and out of the house all day, leaving Shepherd alone with five kids.

She said it's hard to justify school closures when there are so few cases in Pictou County.

"My hope is that for the elementary students at least, that they will end the year sooner than later as they haven't the credits to worry about versus the high school students who may have exams or tests they need to do in order to get the credits they need to graduate," Shepherd wrote.

"Sincerely, a tired mama."

Care less, do less

Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, and some colleagues recently published a study linking mandatory homeschooling to anxiety and depression. He also suggests many parents are using cannabis and alcohol to cope.

He said in his observations, mandatory homeschooling is "exquisitely painful," leaving parents with the feeling they've failed their children.

"We have COVID-19 tunnel vision. We count COVID cases, we count COVID-related deaths and at the same time, we discount the social and emotional well-being of our population, our children and our parents."



Simon Sherry, psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University. - Nebal Snan

PODCAST: Sheldon MacLeod talks to psychologist Simon Sherry, who says mandatory homeschooling is doing more harm than good

Sherry said they studied participants across Canada in the first wave who were involved in mandatory homeschooling. They found the more parents were involved, the more distressed they become.

“Research would suggest women are disproportionately involved in and burdened by mandatory homeschooling,” he said. “There are dads across Nova Scotia who are helping, but it’s a call to arms if we’re going to persist in this failed policy that fathers can step it up, man up and contribute in greater depth.”

Even the most capable and well-resourced people are getting overwhelmed, he said. Parents are not trained to be teachers, Sherry said, putting parents in a near impossible position.

It’s just not worth it, he said. Students are accomplishing very little academically and would be better served playing and relaxing at home. Learning loss is a concern, he said, but mandatory homeschooling is not the solution.

“What I would advise, and this comes from a professor who greatly values education, when it comes to homeschooling, parents should care less and do less.”

Huge learning gaps

Halifax psychologist Lindsay Bates said she has never seen this much need for mental health and learning help in over 20 years working in the field. Bates, who does assessments for learning and developmental concerns, is booked up until 2022.

“This shutdown has been relatively better than last year which was super unpredictable ... but last year’s shutdown led to pretty significant gaps in terms of many children’s learning, and in particular the kids who have the most struggles.”

She said she’s heard from several schools who have said it’s very difficult to apply the extra resources kids need with remote learning.

“We’re very fearful as professionals who assess these kids routinely what it’s going to look like next year.”

Also a parent who is working from home, Bates said her advice is for parents to get outside as much as they can.

“Parents are feeling heavy right now, absolutely.”