



Home schooling right prescription for Vancouver MD

Deborah Jones

What is a doctor to do when her own child is foundering? Five years ago, the eldest of Dr. Ruth Elwood Martin's 4 children declared that she would no longer attend school. The family had done all of the conventionally correct child-rearing things: reading, spending quality time, studying parenting books. Yet Rebecca, then 12, had been desperately unhappy at school for years. She had no friends and found school painfully noisy, her teacher angry, her classmates rowdy. In class she was withdrawn, yet at home she was confident and happy.

For several unhappy years Martin assumed it was her daughter who had a problem that needed fixing and she felt frustrated that this had happened to a child of 2 professionals. At the time Martin juggled a busy family practice with her own family, a nanny and a house in a comfortable Vancouver neighbourhood. She simply expected the same school-performance standards from her children that she and her husband, a lawyer, had achieved.

When Rebecca made her stand, they were forced to consider alternatives. Martin contacted home-schooling networks, read a stack of books on the subject, and "discovered a whole new world I didn't know existed." She began home schooling.

First Rebecca stayed home, and then her younger brother, Daniel, joined her. Finally the 2 youngest boys, Thomas and Benjamin, became home schoolers. "I never dreamed I'd be home schooling, never in a million years," says Martin, who, like her husband, was educated in traditional British schools.

At first Martin and her husband approached home schooling in conventional ways, such as registering 1 child in an alternative school and another in an Internet-based distance-education program. Over time, they learned to allow the children to follow their passions in a less-structured environment.

The family joined other home-schooling families for field trips each Friday and for sports such as recreational hockey. Every event in life, including the breeding of their Labrador dog Misty and the birth of her puppies, provided myriad learning experiences. "I felt that if I got them writing and if they kept up their math skills, other things would fall into place," says Martin.

Juggling home schooling with her career as a physician is a challenge, she admits. But coincidentally, at the same time as Rebecca's rebellion, Martin was questioning some of the assumptions made in standard medical practice and re-evaluating her own role as a parent. "I found it harder as the kids got older to leave them. I had cut down, but I was still working 40 to 50 hours a week."

In 1993 she joined a research organization, the Ambulatory Sentinel Practice Network, and continues to pursue her research interests part time. To reduce her working hours, she transferred her private practice patients to the Department of Family Practice at BC Women's Hospital, where she still works part time, and began working 2 sessions a week at local prisons. "The change gave me space in life, more time for self," she says.

At home with her children, Martin views herself less as a teacher than a facilitator of learning, and she has learned to respect her children's independence and creativity. Rebecca went to school at home for 2 years and then began Grade 9 at a private Vancouver high school, where she is now in Grade 11. Her brothers, ages 10, 12 and 15, are still being educated at home.

At times Martin and her husband question their wisdom in pursuing home schooling, despite studies that show home-schooled children perform well in standard tests.

Now Martin, who was initially worried about how her medical colleagues would react, is ready to go public. People have odd notions about home schooling, she says, citing an author's summary of public opinion surrounding home schoolers: they were either left-wing libertarian eccentrics or right-wing religious zealots. Yet home schooling has become mainstream in North America; the number of students has risen from an estimated 300 000 in 1990 to 1.5 million today.

Martin urges physicians not only to consider home schooling for their own children, if it is warranted, but also to be prepared to encounter home-schooling families as patients.

"Home schooling is a valid option — it's not kinky. Rebecca was miserable for years and I really didn't listen to her. I kept thinking she had a problem. And having an unhappy kid in school is so much work. Happy children doing home schooling is so much easier." ?



Happy at home: Thomas (left), Benjamin, Ruth, Daniel and Misty