

MANY PARENTS OPT FOR NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

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mount.

"I have multiple children attending multiple schools this year and am worried about the potential loss of school days due to someone's runny nose," said the Georgetown resident. "Distance learning allows me to ensure the kids are in a positive learning environment that isn't focused around sanitization and pandemic measures."

The busy mother heads up a Georgetown distance learning group on Facebook, which aims to connect local residents who feel this education model is the best for their family.

"The goal is to get to know other distance learning families and be able to provide support to one another through sharing information, encouragement and problem solving," she said. "It also provides a practical communication method to allow distance learning families to plan appropriate social interactions for their kids."

Burlington's Hayden Gilmour is all set to begin her grade 7 year at home and says she's looking forward to meeting new people in her online class. Her parents secured second-hand office desks to transform the basement into the perfect learning space for her and her siblings, who are in high school and will



Youngsters check out what resides in the pond at The Branches Experiential Learning Community.

Graham Paine/Torstar

also be doing their work at home some of the time.

"The biggest part of the decision (to distance learn) was the consistency of education this year," explained mom Kate Gilmour, noting now Hayden won't face missing school for 14 days due to class quarantines, her own potential symptoms, etc.

Meanwhile, Laura and

Victor Sprenger are taking the classroom into the woods through their new outdoor education programs.

Their rural Milton property, known as The Branches Experiential Learning Community, will host classes once a week for those eight to 12 years old who are home-schooled. The youngsters, grouped in small co-

horts of 12 to 14, will learn about everything from basic survival skills to ecosystems, animal interaction to maple syrup making, outdoor recreation and more.

"Our heart is to bring people together in the community within an outdoor context, and outdoor education programs will do that for school-aged kids," said Laura, who's also a

"Nature is a powerful teacher."
- Laura Sprenger

certified teacher and homeschooling mother of three, while Victor is a veterinarian.

"It takes a teacher with an interest or willingness to get outdoors for students to experience this type of integrated and hands-on learning, although I think we will see a resurgence of it this year, and that is thrilling. Nature is a powerful teacher."

In Oakville, parents are also looking for alternatives to the traditional school system, with some even working to create their own small cohorts that would learn together in a community setting, like Maria Sweeney.

The mother of two is working to form a small group of kids who would be in a bubble of sorts alongside her almost five-year-old daughter, and is looking at Duran Place for Kids' kindergarten program as an option for the children.

"We want her to have the social interactions she would be getting from school, but in the way we feel the most comfortable," she said, noting that distance learning through the school board would be challenging for her family as

they also have a busy one-year-old at home.

To meet the needs of parents who aren't comfortable sending their kindergartners to school just yet, Duran Place has created a curriculum-based half-day program that will be taught in groups of eight.

The small class size is very appealing to Peter and Aneta Zerek, who plan to send their four-year-old son Filip to the local activity centre this fall after a positive experience at Duran Place's summer program.

"We like the fact we can support a local business while also giving him (Filip) some social interaction and playtime with other kids because he's an only child," said Aneta, noting that Duran Place's continued efforts to run safe events throughout the pandemic has made her comfortable with her son attending. "It's not just a building with a teacher - it's more than that."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With parents being given the choice to send their children to school or keep them home during the pandemic, we wanted to find out how local families are handling this difficult decision. We discovered that thousands of Halton families are opting for alternatives to the traditional classroom.

ATTENDING A TOWN FACILITY? DON'T FORGET TO COMPLETE THE COVID-19 SCREENING.

Visitors are required to answer a short series of screening questions prior to entry of any Town facility. Attendance is logged for 30 days in the event that contact tracing is required by Halton Public Health.

Save time and complete the screening in advance by visiting haltonhills.ca/simpletrack. Verification is required upon entrance, visit haltonhills.ca/covid-19 for full details.

