

Local resident creates home-based learning program 'The Pod Squad'

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A Shelburne mom is bridging the gap between the in-class experience of school and online learning with a new program called The Pod Squad.

The Pod Squad, is a program that brings together six students that are in distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, into an in-class space, and allows them to work through their schooling. The program was started by Shelburne resident Tonja Orr, after she decided to keep her daughter Alibeth, who was entering Grade 2, at home for distance learning this school year.

Creating the program originally for her daughter, Orr said she quickly noticed that it could be something that benefits other families in the community. From there she developed The Pod Squad.

'I quickly realized that it was definitely lacking in the social aspect that children really need and while I was watching her participate in distance learning, I also realized that the teacher and children needs support at home,' said Orr.

Converting part of her home, Orr has made a main classroom, which is equipped with six desks spaced apart, a library, a craft room, and an outdoor space for the children to have recess. While the program looks to provide the support for online learning, Orr said it also provides the social aspect that children might be missing being away from school.

Touching on her own daughter's experience being an only children, doing school via distance learning, Orr said, she hasn't been able to be 'the playmate she needs' and that other children are going through the same experiences.

'I really think that is something that the children are missing and I really want to be able to provide that to them, especially the only children in our community,' said Orr.

Talking about the program, Orr's daughter Alibeth said, 'I think that would be really nice because I can have some kids to play with every day.'

Prior to starting The Pod Squad, Orr owned and operated a home-based daycare for three years. She has also worked within the elementary school system for the last three years doing emergency supply teaching, EA, ECE, and lunch room supervision.

'Getting to work in a classroom environment has really showed me how the teachers operate with their children, how they're spoke to, what's expected of them in the classroom,' said Orr. 'Those are tools that I really bring into my pod program.'

With the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Orr said they are using protocols that include consistent cleaning of surfaces as well as temperature checks at home and at the front door.

The Pod Squad has limited spacing with a maximum of six students and costs \$249 per week. To contact Orr or learn more about the program go to www.thepodsquad.ca or call 647-969-0957.