

SECRET CONFESSIONS OF A MED SCHOOL MOM

I didn't head straight to medical school after graduating from college. I did, however, head straight into parenting. My first daughter was born five months after I graduated from college. Four more daughters eventually joined her, and I stayed home to raise them.

When my oldest daughter was 12, I decided I wanted to go to med school. At the time, I had never heard of the MCAT, and I didn't know the difference between a rotation and a residency. I didn't know how to apply, or how much it would cost. I just knew that I wanted to be a doctor.

Jumping into medical school after 14 years of play dates and birthday parties was a bit of a culture shock for everyone involved. Here are some of the trade-offs I have learned to embrace:

Sometimes we eat dinner at bedtime. As my husband and I navigate our busy schedules, we also have to feed five little girls who expect dinner every day—even during exam weeks. More times than I should probably admit, I have called out, "Girls, dinner is ready! Get your pajamas on and come to the table!" I used to be pretty strict about dinner time, but as I've watched dinner creep later and later, sometimes peaking in the 8 o'clock hour, I've noticed the world hasn't ended. The kids are still healthy, happy and loved, even when they eat in their pajamas.

Everything revolves around my school schedule. In medical school, our courses are arranged in "blocks," meaning that we spend several weeks intensely focused on topic followed by a major exam. If a project needs to be done at home, it usually has to be scheduled between exams. I planted a garden after Foundations, shopped for Christmas after Nervous System, and built a fence after Cardiovascular. My rotation in the Rural Health Professions Program even doubled as our summer vacation.

We dissected Timothy. Timothy the hamster lived a comfortable, happy life and died a natural death. I don't know when I started thinking that dissecting the cutest member of the family was a reasonable thing to do, but I blame it on too many hours in the cadaver lab. It was a smelly, disgusting business, but three out of five children and one out of two adults made it through the ravages of a cancerous hamster abdomen to see the beauty of a tiny, pristine heart and lungs hiding behind a perfect little diaphragm. It was amazing—and completely worth earning our new identity as the creepy family that kept a dead hamster in the fridge for two days.

Lemonade stands are my secret weapon. I'm pretty sure the devil himself designed all of my exams to coincide with my daughters'

school breaks. Having five kids at home while studying for an exam is about as easy as it sounds. But I've discovered that poster board and markers can occupy them for days selling treats to the neighbors with minimal parental involvement. It works so well, it's our new school break-exam tradition.

It's lonely... and it's not. There aren't many of us med school mommies. It can be hard not having someone to vent with who truly understands what it's like. On the other hand, I always have a cheering squad. It's comforting to have a whole crew of people care when I come home, make dinner for me, and want me to be the last person they see before falling asleep.

It gets better. The first year was tough. It really was. But as time passes, I find I spend a lot more time living normal life than I did a year ago. I think this may be a clever combination of better efficiency and lower standards. In addition to just surviving the next 2 ¾ years, my hope is that my kids will learn independence, sacrifice and ambition. I want them to see how our family works together to accomplish difficult things and to understand that they can, too. And if none of that happens, at least they'll be really good at making lemonade.