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A Look Into The Anxiety-Inducing, Deeply Regulated World Of A Kid's Pandemic Spelling Bee

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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Watching children inch their way through a spelling bee is an anxiety-inducing affair. If the child doing the spelling is your own, it's almost unbearable.

One Saturday in June, I was treated to such an experience. Our 10-year-old daughter Sonia took part in a province-wide spelling bee (<https://gramen.org/concours-depellation/>). This year, for the first time, the competition was held online (last year it was cancelled altogether), which made the whole process even more tense than usual.

The Rules

The instructions were clear: eyes must be looking straight into the camera with nary a glance to the side where words might be hiding on sticky notes or on dictionary pages.

Spellers must say the word once, spell it clearly, and then say it again — no hesitations or do-overs. Failure to wear the bee-issued T-shirt would result in disqualification.

The event kicked off at 8:30 a.m. sharp.

Sonia would spell from her school-issued laptop in her bedroom and the rest of us would watch along downstairs. My daughter seemed to relish the unambiguous structure of the competition and she was determined to win.

“Are you nervous?” I asked her before her first word.

“A little,” she said.

“I’m nervous,” I said.

“Just breathe, Papa,” she said, closing her bedroom door in my face.

For dad Joseph Wilson, there is never a dull moment in his house. Presenting his daughter's three personas: Maria, Big Boy And Le Petit Béb . (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/joseph-wilson-three-personalities>)

A Family Event

Downstairs at the family computer the rest of us watched as the announcer randomly chose a number out of a hat that corresponded to a word on an age-appropriate list. Number 128.

“Chronometer,” he said.

“What?” I thought. “How is that an age-appropriate word?” I wasn’t even sure what a chronometer was. (I am now. I Googled it

(<https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/chronom%a8tre/15852>.)

“Context:” he continued, “the physical education teacher gave the signal to start the race and started her chronometer.”

Did I mention the entire thing was in French?

“C – H – R – O – N – O – M – E *accent grave* – T – R – E” said Sonia without hesitation, even remembering to articulate the direction of the accent over the first E (accent grave =  ). My skills in French are adequate

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/toronto-francophone-family-anglophone-city>), but not nearly enough to know if that was correct or not. I looked at my wife and she nodded.

We waited a beat to make sure Sonia had time to re-mute her microphone, then we all cheered and ran upstairs. She was cool as ever; I was a wreck.

Over the next few hours (yes, hours), she spelled the words *rappporter*, *emballage*, *m canicien* and *heureusement*.

I may have had several glasses of wine.

And then came *assommer*, which my daughter spelled with only one M. I looked at my wife and she shook her head. We went upstairs to break the news to Sonia.

“I think it has two Ms,” said my wife. We watched for a reaction.

“Oh,” she said, looking dejected. After a moment of reflection, she looked up with renewed focus and said, “I’m going for second place.”

Jennifer Cox has witnessed something she finds worrying: her son's phone and video chat etiquette. He doesn't have any.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/phone-tablet-etiquette-kids>)

A Child's Ambitions

We were proud of the speed at which she accepted the bad news and adjusted her expectations.

In matters of reading and writing, Sonia has always performed well.

She won the Dictée PGL (<http://dictee.fondationpgl.ca/audio/dictee/select/1>) competition at her school last year and I think she’s on her eighth time through the *Harry Potter* series. One of the things my wife and I secretly hoped she would get out of the spelling competition was a crash course on how to lose graciously (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/euro-2020-toronto-dad-daughters-june-2021>). After all, the other spelling bee competitors were also winners at their own respective schools.

After that she nailed the word *passagers* (clarifying, before jumping into the letters, that it was the plural form) which netted her second place. She was beaming and the rest of the family were cheering. I spilled some wine.

Most importantly, Sonia cheered heartily for the first-place winner during the awards ceremony.

She knew how hard it was to spell perfectly on command. (The winning word from the first-place speller? *Essuie-tout*

(<https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/essuie-tout/31129>).

I asked her if she wanted to do it again next year. “Sure. I had fun,” she said. “I like spelling bees.”

“Really?” I said. I was not convinced such a yearly regimen was good for my blood pressure.

But spelling was something she had come upon entirely on her own. She liked the structure, she performed well and even lost graciously to a better speller.

Sounds like a perfect way to spend a relaxing Saturday in June.

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