

 parents

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/>)



Canada's 'Sometimes Smug Approach To Multiculturalism' Is Hard To Avoid — And Explain To Kids

BY JOSEPH WILSON

PHOTO © NICKBULANOVV/TWENTY20

A few weeks ago my eight-year-old daughter's teacher told her that we live in the most multicultural country in the world.

"Is that true?" she asked.

Considering I'm in the midst of a PhD in sociocultural anthropology, this should be an easy question to answer. But trying to explain culture to an eight-year-old is like trying to nail spaghetti to the wall: it just falls apart.

Praise of multiculturalism is an oft-reported characteristic of Canadian identity.

Canadians generally remain positive about immigration

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/immigration-asylum-border-poll-1.4790098>) and

our home town, Toronto, is often said to be the "most multicultural

(<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/census-visible-minorities-1.4371018>) city in the world.” I knew what the teacher was getting at, but I still couldn’t resist unpacking the statement over dinner one night.

Charline Grant explores her family's experience with Ontario's education system, which unveils some troubling systemic problems.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/racism-in-education-system-2020>)

What Is Culture?

“It’s hard to define what culture is,” I explained to Elizabeth.

It’s a word we use all the time but it is notoriously slippery in meaning. If, for example, we use culture as a shorthand for different languages and foods, then sure, Toronto tops the list. But this definition collapses pretty quickly. Does it mean, for example, that a Japanese person who eats Indian food isn’t culturally Japanese? At home we speak both French and Italian: what “culture” are we?

It also brings up the awkward point that people often label stuff they aren’t familiar with as “culture.” The “international aisle” or “ethnic aisle” at grocery stores has been criticized for falling prey to this kind of logic.

Plus, the number of different languages you hear during the day in Canada really depends on your postal code (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canadas-rural-urban-divide-is-getting-deeper-and-that-hurts-all/>). “We live in Toronto, which is really diverse. But in small towns it’s less so,” I said, reminding her of my sister and her family who live in small-town Ontario. Also, richer neighbourhoods, even in Canadian cities, tend to be less diverse

(<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2018/09/30/toronto-is-segregated-by-race-and-income-and-the-numbers-are-ugly.html>).

My daughter just wanted a simple answer, though.

“Yes,” I said, finally. “Canada is multicultural.”

“But it didn’t used to be,” said our eldest daughter Sonia, now 10, who has been studying Canadian history at school. She reminded us that the early settlers in Canada did not accept Indigenous people as cultural equals and that much effort was spent trying to forcibly assimilate them to white norms

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-national-day-for-truth-and-reconciliation>). Our discussion of language and food was quickly turning into a lesson on white supremacy in Canada.

Elizabeth frowned. This wasn’t the discussion she was hoping it would be.

“They thought they were better than everybody else,” continued Sonia.

“Yeah, but we all kind of think like that sometimes,” said my wife.

Katharine Chan's parents taught her to stay silent, even when she experienced microaggressions. But she wants her children to be vocal.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/anti-asian-racism-canada-talking-to-kids>)

Assigning Value To Forms

Sometimes being proud of one's heritage is hard to distinguish from chauvinism.

Choosing a soccer team to cheer for

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/euro-2020-toronto-dad-daughters-june-2021>), for example, during last year's Euro competition, was hard for Elizabeth, as she felt like any display of patriotism amounted to a criticism of the other team's country. Similarly, our girls hear a number of different French accents at school. It's hard to convince them that one is not inherently better or worse when their French language class at school is explicitly devoted to educating them on standard pronunciation. As it must: we need to have agreed-upon ways of pronouncing words. It's just not hard to include a value judgment at the same time.

I'm proud that my girls are growing up in a country that values diversity. I just want them to think carefully about what that means and not to get complacent about Canada's sometimes smug approach to multiculturalism — especially when the experts can't even agree on what that means.

SHARE



You Might Also Like



Our Kids Love Opera, But Not Because We Force Them To

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/we-dont-force-our-kids-to-love-opera-they-just-do>)



Parenting Is A Dictatorship

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/parenting-democracy-dictatorship>)
