

 parents

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



Our Family's Struggles As A French-First Family In An English-First City

BY JOSEPH WILSON

PHOTO © BLONDSTEVE/123RF

There are almost 60,000 Francophones in Toronto, many of them fervent France supporters, but they are spread out all over the city. When France won the World Cup last month, there was no explicitly French neighbourhood in which to hold an impromptu street party. This is true for many of the hundreds of thousands of Canadian Francophones who live outside of Quebec.

My wife and I only speak French to our children (actually, my wife sometimes speaks Italian to our youngest but that's another story). Our eldest is seven and is only now learning English, absorbing it through osmosis by walking around the city and meeting English-speaking children at the park or through friends.

Relevant Reading: Helping Your French Immersion Student When You Don't Speak French (<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/helping-your-french-immersion-student-when-you-dont-speak-french>)

Our five-year-old is also starting to say English things she hears on the playground but doesn't always know what they mean. A couple of years ago she would sing songs like Happy Birthday *en Anglais* by putting on a weird accent: "*Bawna feyta a twa*," she would sing in a low voice with a twang, kind of like a country singer. She was convinced it was English. These days she says English phrases like "no big deal" and "this is how we do" that she learned from Katy Perry songs, but really doesn't know what they mean.

My wife's worst fear is that the kids will grow up speaking a jumble of both, a dialect sometimes charitably called "*Français*." "*Est-ce que tu l'as drop?*" says my daughter as I drop a piece of toast to the floor. My wife cringes. When our two-year-old says "look!" (ok, "yook!") my wife pretends not to understand until she finally says, "*regarde!*" (Although it sounds more like *egar!*)

These days she says English phrases like 'no big deal' and 'this is how we do' that she learned from Katy Perry songs, but really doesn't know what they mean.

I

grew up speaking English and only learned French later, so my kids make fun of my French all the time. They learn so fast. My sluggish adult brain can't keep up. This is especially evident when I'm trying to admonish them for misbehaving. It's hard to express anger when I can't find the right word.

"Next time you do that you must... be more ... gooder!" I'll say in French.

Instead of feeling my wrath they start to titter.

"Stop! This is unacceptable. You give me lack of respect!"

More tittering.

"The girls, it is not time for making the silly ... it is time for the beds ... prepare yourselves!"

Then I usually give up.

Relevant Reading: In a Multilingual Family, Which Language Should We Speak at Home? (<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/what-language-should-we-speak-at-home>)

But watching me struggle with French gives them perspective when they get frustrated learning English. “It takes practice,” I remind them. “And slowly, you’ll get better.” Amongst their friends they slowly put together words in English and figure out the weird rules of the language.

In addition to the obtuse grammar, the Englishness of Canada can be a source of frustration for Francophones. To remind federal institutions of their obligation to serve patrons in French, my wife often insists on French service.

They feel like Canadians and sing the National anthem (in French), but they are also members of what feels like an exclusive club.

Once, while waiting in customs at Pearson International airport, we were met with eye rolls and put into the “special needs” line.

On the TTC people often ask us where we’re from or how long we’re visiting Toronto. Or, when they hear the French, they ask “Oh, is that France French or Quebec French?” When my wife explains she grew up Franco-Ontarian, she is usually met with a puzzled look. Some people double-down and say “yes, but where are you from originally?” which is a line of questioning that is exasperatingly familiar to visible minorities who might have been born in Kamloops or Moncton.

Despite this, my kids feel like part of a community here in Toronto. They feel like Canadians and sing the national anthem (in French), but they are also members of what feels like an exclusive club. They sing the official Franco-Ontarian song (*Mon Beau Drapeau*), can draw the Franco-Ontarian flag from memory and at least once a year join up with the other schools in their district to celebrate their unique cultural position as “Francophonie” outside of Quebec. Similar rituals unfold across Canada in all the traditionally Anglophone provinces. There are Franco-Manitobans, Franco-Albertans and, with a name that just rolls off the tongue, the Fransaskois.

Relevant Reading: What to Know Before Enrolling Your Child in French Immersion (<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/what-you-need-to-know-before-enrolling-your-child-in-french-immersion>)

In lieu of geographic anchors, the community hubs for these communities are often schools. My own kids go to one of Toronto’s public French schools (not to be confused with French immersion schools which are run by English school boards). In the morning, the Dundas streetcar at Trinity-Bellwoods park often feels like a commuter

train from a French *banlieu* because of all the French being spoken. French newspapers like *L'Express* are often distributed to parents through their kids' backpacks.

Despite the challenges of navigating an Anglophone city as Francophones, I know my kids will be thankful one day that they can speak two languages fluently. I have been working on it for ten years and I still haven't come close. But at least I can share the journey of learning a new language with my kids, one awkward sentence at a time.

You Might Also Like



What To Know Before Enrolling Your Child In French Immersion

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/what-you-need-to-know-before-enrolling-your-child-in-french-immersion>)



In A Multilingual Family, Which Language Should We Speak At...

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/what-language-should-we-speak-at-home>)
