

frozen PIZZA

and other cultural misunderstandings

Am I doing enough to make sure my kids know where they come from?
asks *Erica Lyons*.

“I am English,” I heard my then six-year-old son proclaim to his friend. “English?” I asked him. “Why would you say English?”

“It’s really the only language I can speak well,” he stated simply.

He is an astute and introspective child, an early reader and keen observer of details. Yet, when I explained to him that he is American, he stared at me blankly.

How would he know?

Raising three children in Hong Kong, my American husband and I have been very conscious from the start to give them a Jewish identity. We knew if we didn’t focus on it, their Judaism would get lost. So, we send them to a Jewish day school, take them to synagogue every week, follow Jewish dietary laws, celebrate Jewish holidays and travel to Israel often.

When our son proclaimed his “Englishness”, we realised that we had somehow neglected to transmit an

American identity. Being American is central to both of our identities, yet we never thought about the need to actively pass this on or how to do so.

For me, growing up in the US, I was fed stories of my grandparents’ family’s escape from religious persecution in Russia and their arrival in America. I grew up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance every morning in school, celebrating Thanksgiving, attending Memorial Day parades and marking the highlight of summer with the Fourth of July. My mother taught American constitutional history and family holidays were spent in places like Washington, DC, Williamsburg and Philadelphia.

No one ever sat me down and told me I was American. No one had to.

But, for our kids, having lived in Hong Kong essentially their entire lives, they were never immersed in American culture in the way we were. We realised that we had to make a concerted effort to reinforce their “Americanness”.

So, on our summer visits to the US, we now carve out time to go to places like Washington, DC, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, as well as national parks like Bryce and Zion and Yellowstone. With family on

both coasts and our new “American discovery curriculum,” we bounce back and forth from place to place. It may not be home, but now it is at least part of their identity.

History lessons

But we quickly realised that the infusion of history lessons and the growing collection of books on Americana still can’t cure them of being Hong Kong expats first, and Americans second.

With their very distinctive, most definitely “Hong Kong expat” accents, they don’t *sound* American. While I am able to overlook the fact that they all refer to the garbage can as the rubbish bin, when it came to calling an eraser a rubber, I needed to put my foot down for the sake of any potential chance they ever will have to fit in socially when they return to the US for university.

They also miss many seemingly obvious pop cultural references. For example, on our most recent trip to the US, I left my children with my parents in their suburban New Jersey home while I ran errands. When I returned, I heard that cultures had clashed resoundingly. “These kids are most definitely not normal,” my



father exclaimed. "It's like they speak another language."

My kids came running into the room. "We didn't have any lunch. Everything in this house is so weird." "First," my nine-year-old exclaimed, "Grandpa asked us if we wanted frozen pizza. How disgusting! I told him that we only eat it cooked." My seven-year-old then chimed in: "He tried to make us cheese that was in a box and kept in the cupboard." Yes, my American children have never had mac and cheese.

In America, they are culinary tourists, ready and willing to try Dunkin' Donuts, real New York pizza and Peppermint Patties. But food like powdered cheese in a box is simply too foreign to them.

Third culture kids

I wondered if this is unique to our family. In speaking to other expats, I found that we are far from alone. This is especially true of other expats who come from a strong minority culture within their own home country. A good friend of mine, Bina, is an Indian American. She speaks of a similar struggle between her very American identity and her traditional Indian family values and traditions. Immersed in the Indian expat community, her children, too, came late to understanding their American roots.

Living in Expatland, "third culture kid" is a term often thrown about. Lesley Lewis, founder of Culture3Counsel, is able to shed some light on this topic, explaining the importance of having roots and being grounded in tradition in order

to create personal identity. In addition to being a psychologist who has been working with third culture kids for 30 years, she is also an expat mum. She knows how important it is for children to have a sense of home; in fact, it is essential in establishing and understanding personal identity. A failure to do so "creates a restlessness and rootlessness that is unsettling."

In reflecting on the expat experience, being overseas has actually allowed my husband and me to gain perspective. Stepping outside

“
He tried to make
us cheese that was
in a box and kept
in the cupboard.”

of America is a reminder of what America actually is. It is a patchwork of experience and culture. There is certainly room for my children in that.

Perhaps this is actually what I love best about America. Although my grandparents' generation often felt compelled to change their names, lose their accents, toss out their old-world superstitions and adapt their eating habits, America never actually asked them to do that. In many ways, Hong Kong has become an opportunity for us to reconnect with what's most important to us. Moving inherently involves sorting and prioritising. We were able to sort through all the stuff we had accumulated and choose what

to keep. For my children, we have re-grounded their identity to better reflect who we are and who we want them to be.

They are by no means rootless or ungrounded, but rather have a different understanding of home. They are never going to have the same consciousness as kids growing up in suburban Anytown, USA. Their accents and life experiences will always set them apart. I imagine that their sense of nostalgia as adults will be triggered by the mingling of odours of dried fish and tea, colourful Chinese New Year celebrations and the buzz of Cantonese.

"Normal" to my kids includes puréed fresh mango ice pops, dried seaweed, cold sweet sago coconut shakes, traditional Shabbat dinners and Saturday mornings in synagogue. Normal to my kids is alternating summer holidays between Israel and America and spending winter holidays in Thailand. Normal is live-in household help and Sundays at a club. Normal is growing up with a small Jewish town life in a city of over seven million Chinese inside a country of one billion.

Part of being American is allowing space for the celebration of unique backgrounds and identities. Being different isn't just OK, it is great. And, living outside of America helped us to really appreciate this most important value.

While the question, "Where do you come from?" might never be an easy one for my children to answer, they know who they are, they know what's important and they know where they are going. 🇨🇦

