

A group of diverse children, including a boy with glasses and a girl with glasses, are looking at a comic book together. The image is a close-up, showing their faces and the comic book they are holding. The background is dark and out of focus.

being seen

CHILDREN'S MEDIA REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

‘Being Seen’ as a whole is a research project aimed at improving authentic representation on Canadian screens by consulting with Black, People of Colour, 2SLGBTQIA+ and People with Disabilities and developing Directives for the industry based on their insights. This Children’s Media companion report looks specifically at the insights of children and youth, their parents, and creators and producers of children’s media who also belong to the target communities.

Younger children (age 6 to 9) are not very aware of representation in the media that they consume and that may be in part due to the curation that their parents often do, ensuring that their children primarily have access to content that has positive representation. The limitations of the virtual format also impacted the ability to use different techniques to reach this age group. However, even at this younger age group there is the beginning of awareness and, with some children, sophisticated understanding of representation.

Kids 10 to 13 are starting to recognize missing representation and stereotypes but tend to take a wider view of representation, looking for environments that mirror the diversity of their communities and classrooms rather than their specific identity. Parent curation is still a factor at this age, even if it is sometimes limited to making suggestions rather than limiting access. Parents of this age group often discussed their wish list of what they hoped that their children had access to.

Teenagers 14 to 17 had a lot to say about the representation of the content that they watch but also the content that they watched as kids. They are very aware of the current limitations in authentic representation and want to watch entertainment that better reflects the world that they live in.

The children’s media producers from underrepresented communities see the gaps in representation and want opportunities to create the content that kids and parents want to see.

Finally, though the preschool age group was not consulted due to the limitations of the research format, parents of preschoolers and creators of content for preschoolers strongly expressed the need for more authentic content for this age group, both because of the potential that it has to influence child development and also because of the reputation that Canadian creators and producers of preschool content have in the global market and the potential to therefore be leaders in the market.

Directives for Children’s Creators and Producers and for Broadcasters/Digital Platforms/Streaming Services, Funders, Distributors of Children’s Content were developed from the insights provided. Stakeholders will have guidance to create, commission and assess more authentic and representative children’s content so that Canadian children can see themselves in Canadian screen media and can imagine all that they can be.

INTRODUCTION

“ In a lot of settings I’m uncomfortable because it’s a lot of white people and I’m the only one like me there. Watching a show with a cast that was all people of colour was like being surrounded by people who I haven’t met but I was really, really comfortable with, like I’ve known for a long time. (Age 14) ”

The ‘**Being Seen**’ research project was initiated in response to the growing demand for a restructuring of the Canadian screen-based media sector to provide equitable access for Canadians of all backgrounds and identities to create content, and to allow all Canadians to see themselves reflected on our screens. While poor or missing representation has an impact on all audiences, the impact on children’s development can have long-lasting repercussions on who they grow up to be as adults and their sense of belonging in Canadian society.

The Shaw Rocket Fund believes that change starts with kids and requested that the project expand to include a specific look at children’s media to identify to what extent children are concerned with authentic representation in the media that they enjoy, and to compare it with the thoughts of their parents, and the creators and producers of Canadian children’s media.

The question posed by the research is to what extent representation and authenticity is important to kids, and not just parents and creators. Representation in children’s media, and the world that they live in, is a complex issue and this topic is just one of many that should be explored to provide creators, producers, broadcasters and funders with the tools that they need to improve authentic representation in children’s media. As mentioned below, this project raised numerous questions that can hopefully be addressed through future research.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This guide, together with the Core Themes Report [www.beingseen.ca] and its companion reports, will help content creators, funders, broadcasters, streaming services, digital platforms and distributors to create authentic and representative children’s film, television and interactive digital media. It is intended that the Children’s Media Report will be read together with the other reports or at a minimum their Directives, but that those with a specific interest in children’s media will be able to dive deeper into these issues.

The Research Team (see Appendix A of the Core Themes Report) conducted focus groups for parents (either with the target identities or parents of children with the target identities) and children’s media creators from the target demographics of Black, People of Colour, 2SLGBTQIA+ and People with Disabilities, and engaged [OneFish TwoFish Consulting](#) to conduct virtual focus groups for children 6 to 9, 10 to 13 and 14 to 17, in English

and in French and across the country, in the target demographics. The Research Team also captured relevant insights from industry and community focus groups and one-on-one interviews when the issues of authenticity and representation in children's media arose.

Focus groups were shorter than with adults. As a result, topics for discussion were limited to:

- Shows where they saw themselves represented
- Shows with stereotypes or missing representation
- What they would like to see in their media
- Authentic casting
- Telling a story from a community that is not your own

Please see [Appendix A](#) of this Children's Media Report for more detail on the demographics of those who participated in the consultation. For more information on the Research Background of the project, Methodology of the consultations and the Research Team, please consult the Core Themes Report.

Multiracial Identity

As noted in the Core Themes Report, there was substantial participation in the consultations from those with multiracial identities, and the same was true for both children and parents. Children and families who identify as multiracial do not see themselves represented on Canadian screens and that made it difficult for some to engage with the questions at all. Representation for them is their family and their community, or social media.

“ My son is mixed race and it's really difficult to find that in media. He's 11 and he's found You-Tubers who are mixed race and part Asian. It's not something that I told him to do or I forced it on him but it's cool that he's finding these. ”

Note that family demographics were not tracked, but often volunteered by participants with many parents volunteering that they did not share the same race as their spouse, and therefore did not fully share the racial identity of their child or children. The latest statistics from Statistics Canada on multiracial unions states that 7% of all unions are multiracial. However, as that statistic is from 2016, and has been on the rise steadily since first being measured as 2.6% in 1991, it is now likely higher. It is also likely underestimating the exact number because its methodology is flawed, tracking different ethnicities sometimes by region (e.g. South Asia) and others by country (e.g. China).

Multiracial individuals are also not categorized consistently by Statistics Canada, and sometimes are included as visible minorities and sometimes not, depending on the ethnic mix. However multiracial families and children are measured, the size of the demographic is noteworthy, and as reflected in some of the quotes in this report, they do not feel seen.

AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION



The above Word Cloud displays titles of shows and games that the kids across the participant pool identified as containing positive representation or where they could see themselves. Note that it is a small number of titles because in some cases kids never saw themselves (particularly if they were multiracial or people with disabilities), and they could not think of titles, or the representation cited were sports figures (e.g. P.K. Subban) or YouTube influencers. Some of the younger kids said that they only watched shows that were 'cool' like *My Little Pony* or *Numberblocks*.

“ I like the *Aladdin* movie. They were wearing Indian outfits like what I wear sometimes. (Age 9) ”

“ When I was in second grade I'd watch *Daniel Tiger's Neighbourhood* and there was a character named Christie, and she had cerebral palsy, and she had leg braces like me and I thought it was so cool to see a character with a disability in the show. (Age 13) ”

“ There’s a video game franchise called *Life is Strange* and the third game came out and the main character is Asian American. That made me feel really nice because she grew up being Asian and looking different from everyone. The game doesn’t really involve ethnicity, but seeing and playing as someone who looks like me and dresses like I do. It was really nice. It felt good. (Age 17) ”

“ I really like Shuri in *Black Panther*. In a lot of movies the Black person is the best friend, the side character. So to see her be one of the main characters and one of the smartest people, in not just the movie, but the entire Marvel Universe, it feels good. (Age 14) ”

The following Word Cloud represents the examples of authentic representation in children’s media shared by the adults—both parents and children’s media creators and producers. It covers a range of ages, formats and also time frames.



Children 6 to 9

Few children ages 6 to 9 were aware of the issues of authentic representation. Some could not understand the questions, even with assistance from a parent present. In one case, a parent pushed back against the question being asked and it appeared that in homeschooling her child, she was protecting them from any negative influences such as stereotypes. However, some children demonstrated the beginning of understanding of stereotypes and representation.

“ Barbie made it seem like any person with black hair and brown eyes isn’t a good person. (Age 9) ”

“ In *My Little Pony* kids think that ponies can only be girls but they can be boys too. (Age 7) ”

“ I don’t see my same background or life experience on TV. It just proves that TV shows are not exact representations of the world. I’m ok with that because I watch TV to get away from the real world. (Age 7) ”

“ I want to see more stories of people from different cultures. People who write stories are not very open minded. I would like characters to have multiple things that they’re good at. (Age 9) ”

There were two notable exceptions in this age group. One was a child with disabilities who had participated in a public awareness campaign with a children’s rehabilitation hospital. The other was a child who identified as nonbinary. This suggests that other forces are at play to promote their self-identification and increase their awareness of representation. It would be useful to explore this in future research.

“ I’ve never seen anyone who has identified as gender fluid and is going through the same things that I am. It needs to be reflected more. I see people on TV who look like my classmates and feel like my classmates, but they never reflect somebody like me. (Age 7) ”

Kids were asked what they thought about authentic casting and they struggled with the concept. It is possible that the question is particularly challenging because a lot of the shows they watch are animated and frequently do not have human characters (e.g., *My Little Pony*). They were also asked about how they felt about someone from outside a community telling stories about that community and they did have thoughts on that, which mirror the different perspectives of the adults.

“ People should have the ability to share what they want, unless it’s unkind. If you don’t know, you should ask someone instead of just guessing. (Age 7) ”

“ They could talk to some people who are from that community and ask for their input. They should talk to a good amount of people from that community so they get an idea of not just one person, because that one person could have a different opinion than another person from the same group. (Age 9) ”

Parent Curation of 6 to 9 Viewing and Younger

Parents who identified as having younger children frequently shared that they look for representative content for their children. They often review content before their children see it or go to YouTube where they can search for specific content (e.g., Nigerian or Filipino children’s shows). There may be selection bias in these results as it is likely that only those parents who are actively engaged in the issues of representation registered to participate in the focus groups, however that still suggests that a segment of parents are actively curating for representation. Also note that often parents of younger children talked about representation in books and toys and clothing at the same time as film, television and games. It would be an interesting subject for further research to compare viewing choices to purchasing decisions.

“ I very much seek out authors, television shows, movies, clothing with pictures that represent my children, and my other friends who are also Black do the same and we share resources.”

Given the high level of engagement of parents of younger kids, it could be that these younger kids are protected from stereotypes and poor or missing representation by their parents’ curation. This would be another interesting topic for further research.

“ For my child, he’s 3 and we don’t really watch TV. He watches YouTube and I can do a keyword search and find him things to watch. I try to expose him to Nigerian cartoons and animations. But it’s hard. ”

“ I have a toddler and he watches things and I’m just realizing that even with YouTube I haven’t been able to find my Black character content. I need a Black person who puts out kids’ content. ”

“ What I find interesting about my kid, who is 6.5 years old, is that he would humour me and consume Queer-specific media at home but he mostly wants to fit in and consume the same media as his peers. For him to be excited or feel seen as a kid of a solo Genderqueer parent, he’d need to be included in *Paw Patrol* or some other mainstream superhero-type show. ”

“ I’ve thought of seeking out media specific to living with a disability so my children understand that their mom is different from other moms, but I just haven’t seen a lot. ”

“ I usually watch content three or four times before I let my kids watch it, just to understand what my kids will not understand and what I will need to explain to them. My kids are 3 and 5 and they ask questions when they watch. I look at the background of the people who were involved and reference other materials that they work on to see if, from the way that they tell a story, it is good enough for me to spend time on. ”

“ It’s very hard to find things that represent us in the media. I’m of Persian descent and anything Middle Eastern is very difficult to find. So I try to cater to outlets that cater to any person of colour because I feel like their values and cultures and the way they think and raise their kids are also very similar to Middle Eastern culture. ”

One parent talked about filling the gap in representation by filming his family so that his children could see themselves on TV.

“ What I do is when I take my kids out, I record them and then we watch that at home and for them it’s something that keeps them comfortable with who they are and they see themselves doing things. Most of the time on TV, they don’t see Black kids doing things so they try to be as white as the kids they see. ”

But not every parent felt the need for curation and instead saw TV as purely an escape from reality.

“ I do not look at anything that has to do with a disability, I’ve never thought of that. If you live with a disability, it’s nice to not have to deal with that. ”

In summary, while parents of kids in this age group often are the ones doing the heavy lifting in terms of finding authentic representation and being aware of poor or missing representation, some kids from 6 to 9 are beginning to gain awareness of the issues and are looking for representation that reflects their identity and the identities of their friends. Most of the shows discussed for this age group were animated, but kids and parents often talked in general terms about what they were looking for regardless of genre.

Children 10 to 13

At this age, the kids were starting to get more thoughtful and had more things to say about representation and seeing themselves on screen. They recognize stereotypes about their own community and others, and they welcome representation of their community and others.

“ I haven’t seen many who are like me and that’s disappointing. I’ve seen shows with like one character with a disability and then we look at the actor and we’ll be disappointed to see that the actor doesn’t have a disability. Why couldn’t you hire a person with a real disability and show that? (Age 13) ”

“ I see Black people being funny, goofy types. They’re portrayed as clowns and that kind of hurts me. (Age 13) ”

“ Many people think all Muslim people are terrorists but that’s actually not true. When Muslim kids see that, it makes them feel bad for their culture and their religion. From being very little kids they’re going to learn from what they’re seeing, more than adults. (Age 12) ”

“ I just don’t see brown characters but I see members of the Black community and it’s inspiring to see people from that community working towards a bright future. (Age 13) ”

Similar to the 6 to 9 year old children, those within the 10 to 13 age group who identified as 2SLGBTQIA+ and/or a Person with a Disability had more thoughtful and detailed responses, again suggesting that there is an aspect of these identities that pushes kids to be more thoughtful about who they are and how they are represented.

“ Technically it is a really good trait to give superhero abilities to characters with disabilities to break a stereotype, but the thing is, it’s become a thing that’s been repeated so much. They’re always extremely athletic. I could name so many different shows where there’s just one person in a wheelchair and that one character is the same repeated character design over and over again. They play wheelchair basketball. You want to see a strong person with a disability in the media, but when a character trait gets overused there’s less diversity in the characters of people with disabilities. We’re not all the same. (Age 13) ”

“ There is so little representation of gender nonconforming characters, but when I do see them they’re stereotyped to be neither masculine or feminine. But there are a lot of gender nonconforming who do like masculine clothes or feminine clothes or both. It doesn’t have to be in the middle. Or sometimes they’re masculine and sometimes they’re feminine. Clothing itself shouldn’t have to have a gender assigned to it. (Age 13) ”

Most of the kids asked for diversity in their shows beyond just characters and beyond representation of their own identity.

“ I love animation, animation is cool. I’d like to see a diverse cast, with different skin tones and characters with disabilities and everyone in one show. You don’t have to have people sectioned off. (Age 13) ”

“ I would like to see disabled or people of colour where it creates a bit of relatability between me and the TV show or movie. But I don't only want those people, I want other people to work with them. (Age 13) ”

At this age, they're starting to understand why representation is important.

“ When a child sees someone who looks like them but who maybe doesn't act the same as them, they will try to become like the character and follow that stereotype. (Age 11) ”

The kids were roughly on either side of the issue of authentic casting. By this age, they understood it better but some were dismissive of it as an issue while others saw the importance.

“ I think any actor should be able to play any role because if an actor plays the role of a king, it doesn't mean that they actually have to be a king or queen in real life. Since they're actors, they should be able to act whatever they want. (Age 12) ”

“ I hate when they cast a person who doesn't actually have a disability. There are so many people with disabilities that would love to be actors and would love to be cast into new shows, and they never get the chance because people who are able-bodied always get their parts. (Age 13) ”

As with the younger age group, the kids' responses to whether someone from outside a community could tell the story of that community were similar to many adults: probably not, unless you do research and outreach.

“ If the whole story is about someone who is not of my skin colour, maybe I shouldn't make it. But if it's a character and they're not the protagonist, it's fine. (Age 11) ”

“ You can tell a story from outside your community because you can ask them about how they live to help you make a show about them. (Age 11) ”

Parent Curation of 10 to 13 Viewing

Parents have less of a role to play in curation as this age group pushes for independence. Some parents instead act in an advisory capacity and encourage content that they think is representative. They still hope for a variety of positive, authentic representations that their child can choose from. Parents want to see, regardless of their identities, that their family is included and not treated as ‘special’.

“ A lot of the time if I say hey, you want to try watching this show, you might like it, she’s ‘no, if you think I’m going to like it, it’s off the table’. It has to come from her and then be discussed and then really encourage the shows that she has expressed an interest in that do include a range of what a family could look like, what kind of different interests different types of people can have. ”

“ I’d like to see anything that deviates from straight, white families, whether it is multiracial families or same-sex families or single-parent families, anything is good. My ‘little’ is usually the only white kid and my older one is part of a minority white group, which is great. They’re talking about race at school and it’s a really rich environment. If the media world just looked more like that, plus Queer, that would be great. ”

“ I’d like to see more Queer family representation, not just mom and dad and the kids. More mixed families, more multi-age families, characters with disabilities and not just the kid in the wheel-chair but differently abled people of all types. It would be so great to see some ASL¹ included in different shows and not be a show about ASL. ”

“ I have an 11 year old and a 13 year old. I make a pretty big effort to seek out television and film that subverts gender and racial stereotypes, particularly when it comes to characters that are the same age as them, because they’re much more interested in teen-led content. So *Never Have I Ever* was really great because it’s a very multiracial cast and it does make an effort to subvert certain stereotypes. ”

¹ American Sign Language.

“ Nothing beats real life experience and that’s why I do like her watching vlogs because you’re seeing real life. Vlogs show a real healthy Black family because cartoons nowadays don’t provide that. ”

“ We need a Black family version of *Ryan’s World*². The Black community needs to show a healthy family home. And with parents being 50/50, not a strong Black woman and the dad not being the most intelligent in the home. ”

“ I have two kids, one 14 and one 8, so I get a lot of questions from their friends. They look at me sometimes like a curiosity. What’s wrong with your hands? If we don’t portray differentness in the media it just leaves me explaining. I don’t mind and they have the best of intentions but it’s a lot sometimes. And that’s the consequences of not normalizing being disabled or different. ”

As mentioned above, kids from 10 to 13 are becoming aware of poor and missing representation. They want better representation of their own identities but expressed a strong interest in better representation of the diverse worlds that they live in. While parents can influence viewing, they are not as in control of viewing choices as they are with younger age groups. Parents talked about encouraging vlogs or home movies to substitute for missing representation in scripted content but they also want their child to see content that reflects the diversity of their community.

Teens 14 to 17

Teens generally either referred to adult shows (e.g., *Master of None* or *New Amsterdam*) or social media (i.e., TikTok, Instagram, YouTube) for their entertainment and social media influencers or media personalities (e.g., Hasan Minhaj and Lilly Singh) for their representation. Parents did not volunteer that they had any influence on the viewing choices of their teens so there is no Parent Curation section for this age group.

“ I love the representation in *New Amsterdam*, it is one of the only shows with real representation in a good way. They had brown characters and they did a good job with how they represented them, and I could connect with them. (Age 15) ”

² [Ryan’s World](#) is a YouTube channel of a Filipino boy and sometimes members of his family, having everyday adventures, reviewing toys, conducting science experiments and more.

“ I like *Master of None*. It’s rare to see a South Asian Muslim. I’m South Asian but not Muslim but having that sort of representation is really cool to see. (Age 17) ”

And of course, there are Marvel movies:

“ I’m seeing a lot more Black people in media lately. Lots in Marvel action movies. (Age 14) ”

Teens often spoke from the perspective of knowing what younger kids needed to see. They were there not so long ago.

“ It’s so important for kids to know that you don’t have to be scared or avoid people or treat them differently. They’re just as human as anybody else. (Age 17) ”

“ Young people can’t recognize what mental disabilities are. They need to incorporate it more so people can understand what mental disabilities are, and so they’re not stigmatized and have one character in the film that’s disabled or call him incompetent or have his name as Dopey. They deserve more respect. (Age 17) ”

“ In *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* there’s an Indian kid and people couldn’t hear him or see him even though he was right there, based on how he was small and annoying and he had an accent. I used to watch it all the time. I thought making fun of accents was a normal thing. I thought my genetics would automatically make me weak and really small and not good at anything but academics. Then I grew up and I’m a pretty athletic person. But when I was five or six years old, I didn’t think I’d be able to do that because of characters like him. (Age 16) ”

“ When I was a kid I used to watch *Wild Kratts* and there’s a character named Koki and she has a stereotypical Black voice, her voice kind of waves up and down. I only found out a few years ago that she’s voiced by a white person. It felt really wrong to watch that through most of my childhood and just figure that out now. (Age 14) ”

One of the parents also mentioned discovering that Koki was voiced by a white woman:

“ She’s a Black character with a voice that you associate with a Black American and she’s always waving her head back and forth. I decided to Google who does the voice. It’s a white woman. That’s the woman who is voicing Koki? Is that why she’s overdoing it, because she doesn’t know that Black people don’t really talk like that? Maybe they thought they could get away with it. My kids were shocked.³ ”

Teens had a lot to say about representation and stereotypes and it mirrored the adults. They see that shows are attempting to add diversity but it often isn’t authentic.

“ There used to be no representation but they’re trying to put people like me on screen now. But where they tend to get it wrong is that it’s like an afterthought, like ‘oh yeah we have a person of colour cast, we did so good’. But do they actually mean to have a person of colour in the cast or was it after they finished the script and they said, ‘Oh we should have someone who is coloured on the show’. (Age 15) ”

“ Only recently have I started to see shows starring Asian Canadian or Asian American people. It makes me feel lonely every time I watch a TV show that is all white people. There are Black people but not a lot of Asians. (Age 17) ”

“ There’s always a brown character with an accent and stereotypes like butter chicken. They’re focusing more on where they come from rather than the character themselves. With Western people they focus on how people react with each other and how they connect with each other and their relationships. (Age 17) ”

“ I think often they put in a Queer person in a show or a movie to say ‘hey look we’ve included this person’, so it’s like a checklist. It’s their defining trait and not adding to the plot. (Age 17) ”

³ After the consultations, in August 2021, “Wild Kratts” announced that they had recast the voice of Koki and she is now being voiced by Black actress Sabryn Rock.

“ I rarely ever see somebody with a disability. It’s frustrating. I really wish that they included more of that so it would make me feel better and for other people too. When I do see it I feel really happy and comforted, like it feels more normal. (Age 14) ”

“ A lot of people in animated shows can’t draw natural Black hair so they just draw straight hair. I’ve never watched animation with a person with natural Black hair. (Age 14) ”

Like the 10 to 13 year old kids, the teens want to see more diversity in the entertainment content that they do watch. Note that the first quote below comes from an Alberta teen, so the reality of living in a diverse environment is not limited to Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

“ I would love to see more representation of People of Colour from all over the globe and not just North America and Europe. That’s the reality of the world we live in right now in Canada. In my classes there are more People of Colour than there are Caucasian people because of Canada’s immigrant population and just how diverse it has been. (Age 17) ”

“ Marginalized communities deserve to see themselves on screen so much more than they are right now. At some point, they’re not going to be the smallest demographic any more, right? People of Colour and marginalized communities make up such a vast amount of our population and to see that they’re still not getting accurate representation is so frustrating to me. We need to get more characters with accurate representation. (Age 15) ”

“ When people on TV have disabilities, it’s usually physical disabilities. If you look at me, you can’t tell that I have spina bifida and that’s a really lonely feeling. When I tell someone that I have a disability or I have spina bifida, I feel like a lot of the time they don’t believe me because I seem so normal. I would love to see someone like me in a movie because it would help so many people, not just those with disabilities but also people with mental health problems too. (Age 14) ”

“ I would like to see more mixed people. I find that people just give you one country and one nationality and ethnic background, but for a lot of people your parents are from different countries and your grandparents are from seven different places. If one character had a background of like four countries and they delve deeper into that and how that developed their character, then you’re exposed to different people and traditions. I think that would fill out a character more and make them interesting. (Age 17) ”

On the subject of authentic casting they were just as split as the younger age group.

“ Representation is super important to push for because we’re all here in this country. When looking at characters such as disabled people or Queer people, they should be played by actual disabled or Queer people. I’m sure you can find people who are really good actors. There’s no reason to have people pretend to be someone who they aren’t, so that it’s more authentic and you can relate to them. (Age 17) ”

“ An actor should be able to portray whatever character they’re given, as long as you match the physical appearance if that’s part of the character. (Age 16) ”

While research and outreach were again seen as key requirements for telling a story from outside your community, some teens were also concerned that research could be flawed because of the easy availability of false information.

“ I know it sounds a little bit harsh but I honestly think that if you don’t have experience with dealing with the community or you are not part of the community that you’re going to write about then just don’t write about it. If you’re not willing to put in the research, you’re going to get it wrong. It doesn’t matter your intention or how passionate you are, you are going to represent them wrong. If you still want to write about it, reach out to the community, talk to people. It’s like me writing an exam. If I don’t know what I’m writing, I’m going to fail. (Age 15) ”

“ Researching might not be the best way because there’s a lot of false information, but if you have friends from that community that’s ok. (Age 14) ”

Parents can no longer curate teen viewing choices. By this age kids have firm opinions about the content they watch and how they would like to see it improved. They understand the impact that poor or missing representation can have on kids and the potential long-term positive impact that authentic representation of a diversity of identities can have on the whole audience.

UNDERREPRESENTED CHILDREN’S MEDIA CREATORS AND PRODUCERS



Children’s Media Creators and Producers shared many of the opinions of creators and producers in the other industry focus groups on topics such as authentic casting, structural changes needed, whose story is it to tell and the lack of complexity of characters and storylines. What is important to share here are the issues that they raised that were specific to children’s media.

What is Missing From Children’s Media?

Children’s Media Creators and Producers had a lot of suggestions for the kinds of content that they would like to see produced and thoughts about the consequences of not having this content.

“ It would be great to start seeing content at a young age of non-binary, LGBTQ, economically diverse, body diverse kids and kids stories, and more female lead characters. ”

“ People in lower income groups. The association with low income is that you're miserable and unhappy, but people from low income communities happen to be happier than most people that I know from wealthy communities. ”

“ With interracial/multiracial/multicultural families, especially in the kids space, I can't think of many on television that don't involve a white parent. With mixed families in general, half white tends to be a default. ”

“ Mixed parents are a rare thing to see. I am mixed. Any time I saw a Black character, both of their parents were Black, and I was like 'but there's other spectrums of colour' and if there is a mixed couple one is usually white. ”

“ It's so important to diversify the neurodivergent representation and different disabilities shown in media, especially because it does have a real-world impact. A lot of doctors and teachers tend to miss the signs of different systems of thought and different people because they think that's only for boys who are white at this young age. So with ADHD and girls they just say you're rude or you have too much energy or bloat or she needs to get into sports. ”

“ We tend to see representation as one thing, to make sure that we have diversity on the screen, but there has to be more diversity in storylines. It would be better if we explored themes from the perspective of these characters. My perspective and story is going to be different from a brown man, and also different from every other person on this call. And we have a perspective that is different from the white characters on screen. Those themes are very rarely leaned into in terms of kids' media. ”

“ I’m so excited that I can turn on the TV and see more LGBTQ2+ and BIPOC characters but I’m still waiting for that moment in the disability community. Canada produces a lot of high-quality, internationally selling, kids content. That makes it especially sad that they can’t model it for international as well as Canadian audiences. ”

“ In most classrooms today there’s at least one or two children with a disability but that’s just not reflected. ”

“ There’s a lack of dads and lots of single parents in the representation of Black families and Black kids. ”

“ I live in Quebec and I grew up here. What is very frustrating with Quebec content is that whenever you see a Black character the setting is usually imaginary and they have no family. In real life settings you would rarely see Black characters. So there’s nothing that you can really relate to. It’s representation, but it’s not representation. ”

“ I call my son a whole wheat boy, a little brown and a little white from my husband. And so his perspective on his identity is going to be from me and other things around him. I would love to see him represented in the stories and I think that I’m not alone. ”

Fantasy Stories and Characters

Content creators and producers are very concerned that fantasy stories and characters for all age groups are too often being used to avoid addressing representation. This is particularly acute in animation.

“ People use non-humanoid characters in cartoons as an opportunity to not have diversity in their shows. I’ve had people say this to me, a brown woman. They will hire diverse people but then don’t represent them on screen and represent any sort of perspective based on that diversity. Not every show is going to be a huge issue-based show but the truth is that there is a difference in how we talk, how we act, why we act certain ways, based on how we’ve been treated, based on our history, where we’re from. With a surreal world we don’t see diversity and people lean on that too much and it’s awful. ”

“ A lot of fantasy genres dehumanize or give agency to dehumanized characters. So if you’re in a fantasy world, you don’t really need to identify where they’re from or their background or language. There’s an erasure of culture and other intersections because there’s a huge chunk of the industry with non-human or non realistic characters. ”

But is culture being erased or are the characters just being coded as from the dominant culture?

“ With sci-fi and speculative fiction it’s still from the writer’s perspective. There’s going to be coding that’s going on with the characters and how they react to things. Or you’ll just go to your default. It’s still maintaining the majority status quo. I don’t think there’s such a thing as neutral or colourblind characters. They all have some baggage that’s implicitly there. It’s useful to flesh out characters to have them be real beings. ”

Even when the animation involves human characters, how the characters are drawn impacts its authenticity. This echoes the quote from the teen regarding the poor representation of Black hair in animation in the section above on inauthentic diversity.

“ The other side of it that I see is a large issue with colourism, where Black characters are whitewashed or light-skinned. I don’t see enough of a darker tone or darker skin within our characters or different shades of brown. Often whoever is creating the animation will be someone who is white so they make the character more white, more to their likeness even if the skin tone is brown. ”

As with the adults in the Core Themes Report, the children’s content creators and producers want to see representation that goes beyond just being there to having authentic characters and storylines. That level of authenticity will only come with increased representation of content creators and gatekeepers.

“ We also have to look at who are the gatekeepers, the broadcasters. In Canada and globally in kids, it’s white, straight women and white, gay men. The biggest kids’ production companies in Canada, they’re owned and run by Caucasian men. These are the companies that are getting the financing to produce the shows that we see on the screen. We’re talking about representation and authenticity but we have to look beyond that to who is financing the shows. We have to go beyond the creative. ”

“ I really like what [another participant] had referred to earlier as salad dressing. That is actually what we see a lot of, the characters don't have these sort of intrinsic characteristics of who they are, where they are from, with soul. It's surface treatment. We have to look at changing in terms of who are the creators at the table to tell those stories. ”

Target Audiences

Parents and children's media creators and producers pointed out the need for authentic content not just for their kids but for kids from the dominant cultures too. This was an aspect of representation that rarely came up in the main consultations, where people primarily discussed the impact of poor or missing representation on themselves. It is likely that adults are considering the impact of representation on the majority of children as a way to further protect their own children.

“ I'm not worried about the consequences of stereotypes on my kid because she gets a lot of positive representation in the home. I'm more concerned that negative and stereotyped representation is reaching kids who don't have Queer people in their lives to look to or who are growing up Queer and don't know any Queer adults. Seeing Queer adults is integral to Queer kids to be alive. If they don't see Queer adults they don't know what they can become and that they have a place in the world. So yes, I want my kid to see their family represented but more than that, I want their peers to see my family represented. ”

“ Our children are going to school with non-BIPOC young people who don't know who we are, so we need to tell them. Young white children need to start understanding that they're not everything. They haven't seen that yet. It's our job to teach them that no you're not the all in all. You're just as important as we are but you're not more important and we're not less important. ”

“ White parents and white consumers of culture need to make more effort to seek out those stories and share them with their kids, because they're the next generation. Too much onus is on BIPOC communities to create the art and promote the art and advocate for each other. ”

Preschool Content

Children under 6 were not consulted as the virtual format of the consultations was not conducive to discussing abstract questions with this age group. However, both parents and content creators discussed the need to improve representation and authenticity in preschool content. In fact, as Canada is often seen as a leader globally in preschool content, it was felt by some that we have a responsibility to be a leader in authentic and representative preschool content.

“ A great deal of preschool content is developed, commissioned, written, and produced in Canada. Preschool is where I perceive the biggest issues of lack of diverse representation and where Canada can have a lot of impact. ”

“ I have noticed more that media directed at 4+, like any of the toy selling brands like *My Little Pony*, lends itself to this ‘bad guys are ugly’ or conventionally unattractive or dark. You see Beastly in *Care Bears*; Beastly is the villain and the way that he’s portrayed, he’s not conventionally as attractive as the *Care Bears*. I think that is a form of othering that spills into racism, sexism, ableism because so often how these characters get identified comes from causally inserting a physical disability or darker skin. ”

“ I think you could start really early on from preschool or sometimes zero to two. We just need to see diversity across the board and not just racial diversity, but every kind. Traditionally— and not just in children’s content—beautiful people, however you want to define that, were the good and people who were ‘ugly’, meaning different, were bad. Who made those definitions? They need to change. ”

“ I definitely look for Black representation first and foremost when I’m looking at what cartoons or shows my two boys are watching. But I also look for diversity as well. It’s gotten better but there’s still a large majority, especially in the infant age, where a lot of the characters are white or there’ll be that one token person of colour. But I definitely seek it out so that they can see themselves on screen. ”

“ All body types as well. Preschool shows never show a variety of body types, especially in animation. ”

“ Preschool content relies on play-based learning and modelling, which is usually based on western lifestyles and narratives. ”

DIRECTIVES



Based on the thoughts shared by kids, parents and Children's Media Creators and Producers, the following Directives were developed to provide guidance in creating and commissioning more authentic and representative children's media. There is a long-term impact, in particular on younger children, of seeing themselves either absent from shows or shown in stereotypical ways. It impacts their hopes and dreams and what they think they can become. Whether characters are accurately portrayed also impacts viewing choices that caregivers make as they curate programming for younger children. Incorporating these Directives will go a long way to both increasing authentic representation and breaking down systemic barriers to inclusion.

Note that some of the Directives are specific to animation content but most apply to both live action and animation.

Directives for Children's Creators and Producers

1. Review the Core Themes Report Directives related to improving the complexity of characters and storylines, telling a story from outside your community, authentic casting and structural changes to increase authenticity. They all apply to creating children's content.
2. Review your content to ensure that the characters and storylines reflect the many diverse and intersecting identities of communities across Canada.
3. Consider the impact of the story, characters, character designs, and voice performance of the content. Might someone in the audience be hurt by a stereotype or missing representation? Are you missing an opportunity to better reflect the communities of your audience?
4. Consider representation even if the content involves non-humanoid characters in either live action or animation. Do not use non-humanoid characters as an excuse to avoid representation or argue that non-visible representation (e.g., voice performer, screenwriter, animator) is representation for the au-

dience. If you do have non-humanoid characters, have you coded them to reflect biases (e.g., ‘ugly’ is evil, ‘beautiful’ is good) or the culture of the creators (e.g., adding brown skin to a character otherwise drawn as white, not drawing a Black character’s natural hair)?

5. Due to historic anti-Black racism, there is a lack of representation of healthy two-parent Black families. If there is a Black family in your content, is it subverting the racist stereotypes or upholding them?
6. Be aware that at least some parents are going to look into who created, performed and voiced the content. When they do, will the knowledge of the team make them more comfortable with the content or more concerned?
7. Consider researching the more diverse and reflective content that kids and parents are going to YouTube to find and how to integrate that into scripted entertainment content.
8. Consider integrating social media influencers, athletes and other media personalities from different underrepresented demographics, particularly for content for the 10 to 13 age group.
9. As parents are searching for specific content on YouTube, consider adding promotional content for your shows that are not on YouTube to a YouTube channel, tagged in terms of representation, to aid in discoverability. This would help parents find your content through a keyword search.

Directives for Broadcasters/Digital Platforms/Streaming Services, Funders, Distributors of Children’s Content

1. Review the Core Themes Report for Directives related to improving the complexity of characters and storylines, telling a story from outside your community, authentic casting and structural changes to increase authenticity. They all apply to creating children’s content.
2. Prioritize content that has authentic representation regardless of the target age, format (i.e., live action or animation), or story (i.e., real life or fantasy).
3. Ensure that you are aware of the demographic that the audience is growing up in, including the diversity of their environment (family, classroom, and community), for the programs you support.
4. Ensure the production team has taken steps to diversify both the onscreen and behind-the-scenes creative teams.
5. Ensure discoverability plans reflect the target audience and where they are searching for content, whether on YouTube or other platforms.
6. Ensure that you are commissioning/programming/supporting content that reflects more equitable representation for all children and their families (not just content for one particular demographic - i.e., Black children’s content for Black children).

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

“ As a kid growing up with no representation it makes you feel like there’s no space for you. It made me feel like there was something wrong, I don’t fit in. ”

The question the consultation sought to answer was whether authentic representation was important to kids or just to the parents and creators of children’s media. It was clear from the consultations that awareness of representation grows as children age, but can even start in the 6 to 9 age group. Parents can play a significant role, however, in ensuring that younger kids are only exposed to positive representation. As they age and become more independent in their viewing choices, so too do they grow in awareness of the representation and authenticity of the content that they watch.

The ‘**Being Seen**’ research can be seen as the first step in exploring the issue of authentic representation in children’s media. Implementation of the Directives will help to improve the authenticity of the content, but more can be done to explore and research children’s attitudes at different ages regarding representation, their influences, and how representation impacts them.

For example, it would be useful in the future to plan in-person consultations, particularly for the younger kids, where other tools, including visual aids, could be used to explore issues of representation. At the time of the consultations (Fall 2021), in-person consultations were not possible. Future research could also include parent/child consultations (i.e., interviewing both sides of the dynamic) and further investigation of each child’s circumstances (e.g., family demographic, family income, community and classroom demographics) to identify influences on their attitudes. Future research into other media choices such as books and toys and clothing would also reflect a broader perspective on parents’ and children’s attitudes to media consumption as was reflected in a number of comments. It is possible that as 2SLGBTQIA+ and Person with Disability children do not generally share the same identity as their parents and caregivers, unlike Black, Indigenous and People of Colour children, the lack of immediate community isolates them and pushes them to become more aware of representation. Further research should explore this hypothesis.

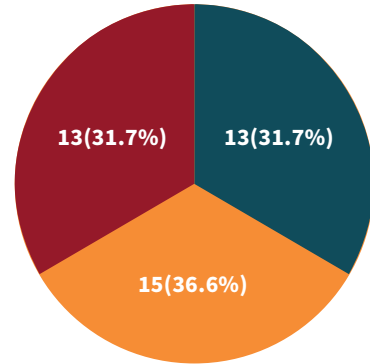
As with the Core Themes Report, it is recommended that Broadcasters, Digital Platforms, Streaming Services, Funders and Distributors collaborate to develop strategies to meet these Directives and provide a common response to Creators and Producers. This will ensure consensus and early, thoughtful incorporation of the Directives, rather than trying to incorporate them prior to a project hitting the market. Consensus will reduce delays during development or production and ensure that the impact on budgets is consistent across stakeholders.

It is expected that these next steps will go a long way to supporting the structural change in children’s media that the Directives are intended to initiate. The BSO intends to work with stakeholders to form a collaborative network to implement these Directives as well as all other **Being Seen** Directives.

APPENDIX A - DEMOGRAPHIC CHARTS

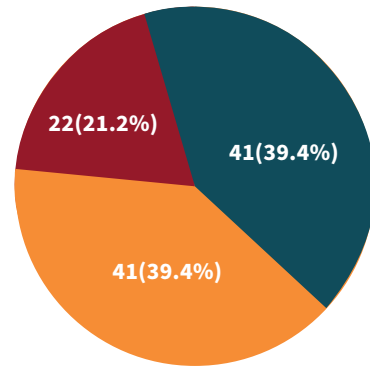
Kids Participants by Age Group

- 6-9 years old
- 10-13 years old
- 14-17 years old



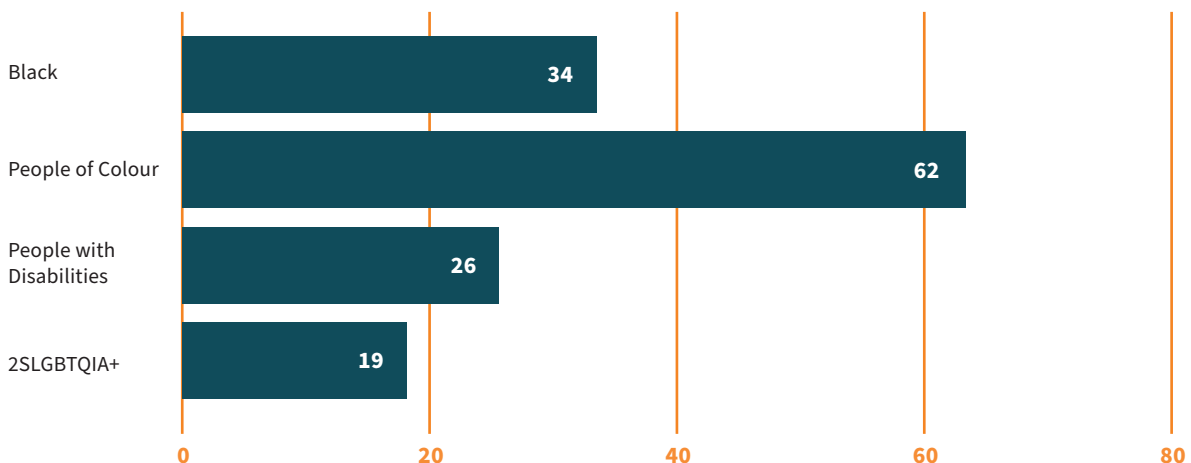
Children's Media Industry & Community Participants

- Parents
- Kids
- Children's Media Producers



Children's Media | Target Demographics:

To account for intersectionality, the total is more than the number of self-identifying participants.





thank you

www.bso-ben.ca
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