

Easter Bunny beliefs on trial in case against children's aid April 14, 2017

Are you a bad parent if you refuse to tell your kids that the Easter Bunny is real? Yes, says the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton.

The story of a foster-parenting couple in their thirties who cared for two young girls in Hamilton, is heartbreaking. After completing thorough training, and a "home-study" including numerous interviews and home visits, the couple welcomed two young sisters into their home in December 2015. The sisters were to have been in foster care until they could be reunited with their own parents. A weekly journal was passed back and forth between the foster parents and the biological parents, who made various requests that the foster parents complied with. The foster parents are devout Christians and had informed the society that they do not celebrate Halloween. The society said this was not a problem; someone else could take the girls trick-or-treating if the biological parents requested this.

"From the beginning, it was our delight to have the girls with us. We loved them from the moment that they came to us," states the foster mother in an affidavit filed this week in a court application against the society. The parents regularly took the girls to a park near their home, attended and hosted playmates with other girls of similar age, played educational games and painted with them.

The society's support worker looked well cared for in all respects.

However, she insisted the foster parents teach the girls about the giant imaginary rabbit known as the Easter Bunny, as an important part of Canadian culture. The couple informed her that they intended to hide chocolate eggs and play games at Easter, and would not say anything about the Easter Bunny unless the girls themselves asked questions.

In late February 2016, the society dramatically escalated the issue by informing the foster parents that the girls would be taken away, and their foster home permanently closed, if the foster parents refused to inform the girls proactively that the Easter Bunny was a real entity. This in spite of the fact that the girls' biological parents had not asked the foster parents to celebrate or even mention the Easter Bunny.

Some parents would argue that Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny, etc., are benevolent myths and a healthy part of childhood. Other parents disagree. It's safe to assume that parents on both sides of this issue could call upon studies and research — and real life examples — that support their opinion. But in the context of a desperate shortage of foster parents in Hamilton the question becomes: does it really matter? If good foster parents are ready, willing and able to welcome the most vulnerable children in Canada into secure homes, providing them with affection, attention and proper food and clothing, should their views on the Easter Bunny matter?

The foster parents offered to let the girls stay with another foster family over the Easter period. The society refused. On March 3, 2016, the worker told the foster parents that the girls would be taken away the next morning. The couple requested a transition period for the girls' sake. The society refused. The foster parents asked if they could serve as foster parents for children whose biological families do not celebrate the Easter Bunny cultural practice. The society refused.

The foster mother explains in her affidavit: "We had poured our lives into taking care of the girls. To have them suddenly ripped away from us was deeply painful. ... It was the days after they left that the house felt empty without them."

The couple has little enthusiasm for a court application, but the Hamilton Children's Aid Society needs to be held accountable for its misguided emphasis on a single, minor issue. Hopefully, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice will agree that people can be good foster parents even if they don't believe in the Easter Bunny.

Calgary lawyer John Carpay is president of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms (www.jccf.ca), which represents the foster parents in their court application against the Hamilton Children's Aid Society.