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Navigating My Daughter's Three Personas — Maria, Big Boy And Le Petit Bébé

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There was a time, when our first daughter was three, when my wife and I thought our overzealous parenting had messed up our child for good.

Many parents feel this way, especially the first time around, but we had a specific reason to think our daughter was developing a fractured personality.

My wife grew up speaking French and Italian, and I grew up speaking English.

So we thought, with the energy and optimism of first-time parents, that we would teach her all three.

Want to teach your kids something, but there's no time for three languages? Check out Curio

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/curio.ca-a-teacher-resource-is-now-free-for-families-to-use>) for some fun resources!

My wife's family spoke to our daughter in Italian, and my wife spoke to her in French, which I could at least understand a little bit. English was the language of the outside world, the strange code uttered by people on the bus and at the grocery store. It was also the language that my side of the family spoke. At the age of three, she didn't even realize they were different languages, just that Grandma spoke one way, Nonna another and her cousins in Montreal yet another.

Children are experts at developing their own personalized strategies for dealing with the challenges of the world. For Sonia, the solution to dealing with this great jumble of words and accents was to compartmentalize. She created three personas, each of whom spoke differently.

"Her English persona was named Big Boy and when we were outside the house she insisted we call her that."

Her Italian-speaking persona, called Maria (naturally), had a fierce maternal streak and responded well to a Neapolitan nursery rhyme (which makes things even more confusing because the Neapolitan dialect is basically a fourth language in this baffling experiment).

Her English persona was named Big Boy and when we were outside the house she insisted we call her that. Once my wife forgot and she threw a tantrum on the sidewalk.

"I am Big Boy!" she screamed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"OK," my wife shrugged. "If you say so. Let's go Big Boy."

Le petit bébé was her name when speaking French, maybe because it was the language her mother spoke to her from the time of her birth. Her name as written on her birth certificate, the one we used when she wasn't in character, was Sonia. (Except it's not. To make things even more confusing, I use a fake name when I write about her. I need a spreadsheet to keep track.)

Once we were at an airport in Europe and the border guard asked Sonia her name, in English, to confirm that her passport was legitimate. My wife and I froze.

"Big Boy," she answered softly.

The guard flicked his eyes over to us.

"Tell him your real name, Sonia," I whispered.

"Big Boy," she insisted.

We laughed a bit, and started to explain, but the guard just shrugged and let us

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through. Maybe issues of split personalities in toddlers is more common on a continent with so many languages.

Once Sonia got really mad at me because she wanted to be Maria and I wasn't speaking Italian.

"But I don't know how to speak Italian," I pleaded.

"Just speak like Nonna," she insisted, angrily.

"But I don't know how."

She looked at me like I was an idiot and stomped off.

These are the struggles of a French-first family in an English-first city.

Read about them here

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/toronto-francophone-family-anglophone-city>).

Once, my wife and I lay in bed listening to her mumble and talk, still half-asleep, in the middle of a dream. She addressed different family members who were making appearances in her dream in different languages, flipping between French and Italian – literally – unconsciously.

My wife and I now know that role-playing, personas and imaginary friends are all healthy strategies for kids to use to make sense of the world and for them to practice communication that mediates social relations. Sonia is now a happy, healthy, trilingual nine-year-old who can seamlessly "code-switch" between the three languages depending on context.

Big Boy hasn't been seen in many years, even though Sonia often switches to English with my friends and family; and *le petit bébé* has made an appearance in the form of one younger sister, then two. My wife and I smile when we hear her trying to explain to her siblings that they are actually speaking a mix of three different languages.

They don't believe her. It sounds way too complicated.

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