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Think Pronouns Are Difficult? French Doesn't Make It Any Easier

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The teenage daughter of a friend has recently come out as gender-fluid and uses the pronouns they/them/their.

My wife and I explained to our three daughters over dinner why it was important for us to respect their choice.

“It’s like calling somebody the wrong name,” I said. “We need to do our best.”

Still, I make mistakes all the time when I’m speaking at full speed and forget to use the appropriate pronoun. “It’s OK,” their mother told me a few weeks ago, “so do I — and I live with them.”

Paula Schuck explains why it's important for her as a parent to accurately use pronouns around her kids. (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/is-it-easy-to-remember-a-persons-pronouns-no-but-change-isnt-easy>)

Bilingual Kids

My daughters are in an even trickier position because their first language isn't English (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/toronto-francophone-family-anglophone-city>). When they went to translate our advice into French, they quickly ran into a problem.

“Dad, what do we use? There's no they in French ...” asked Sonia, our eldest (10). Of course, in French, the plural third-person pronouns are *ils* and *elles* — there's no gender-neutral term.

As the only Anglophone in the family, I wasn't sure how to respond. So I turned to my wife, who just happens to be a Francophone high school teacher adept at handling requests from students regarding pronouns.

She sighed: “It's tricky.”

She explained that the most common solution was to use *iel* (pronounced yell or, slowly, as e-yell) as a gender-neutral pronoun. It was added to the iconic French dictionary *Le Petit Robert* in 2021.

It takes some practice, but the word works. It's a nice blurring of the standard French *il* and *elle*. But it gets even more difficult because in French, famously, not only are all nouns forced into the male/female binary, but verbs and adjectives often need to be changed to reflect the gender of the subject as well.

Trying It On

Some time after our dinnertime bout of word wrestling, our youngest daughter Maria (5) told her friends at her French school that some people don't identify only as a girl or only as a boy. She asked her friends to address her with *iel* for a while.

“*Je suis iel!*” she said to me after school. It sounded like she thought it was the name of a superhero.

“Why do you want them to call you *iel*?” I asked.

“Cause it's cool,” she said.

All three of our girls look up to our gender-fluid friend immensely. But we tried to explain that we don't use a certain pronoun or name because it's trendy. We use pronouns to best describe who we think we are deep down.

Children as young as Maria are still trying to figure out who they are, though, and enjoy trying on different names, personas and costumes, both to see how it feels and to see what reaction they'll get from others.

She admitted to me later that she soon gave up her *iel* experiment at school. I'm not even sure she knows the difference between a name and a pronoun.

From the CBC Parents archives, Cory Silverberg writes about talking to kids about gender.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/embracing-kiddo-talking-to-kids-about-gender>)

Next Steps

In Sonia's class, however, the teacher has worked *iel* into regular lessons on grammar. When she writes verbs on the board and lists their different forms of conjugation it now includes a line for *iel*.

Our middle daughter's (Elizabeth, 8) teacher wrote in her report card about her curiosity with the term *iel*, which led to a good class discussion about when and where to use it.

This is new cultural and linguistic territory for teachers, parents and children, and we need patience and open lines of communication to figure out new norms.

For kids as young as Maria, it's just another new word to learn, a character like any other they can play make-believe with.

The older kids, however, start to understand the significance of pronoun use as a sign of respect.

We can only hope that adults, whatever language they speak, are as open-minded as ~~SHARE~~ children.



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