



## PRONOUNS - A HELPFUL GUIDE

Pronouns are words we use to refer to someone rather than their name. We use pronouns for ourselves because they are words that feel best for us. Sharing pronouns is a helpful way to communicate how you want to be addressed. It might feel awkward at first to ask someone about their pronouns. With this guide, we hope to make it as easy as 1, 2, 3!

### **1. Share your own pronouns first.**

You can model the words you use (or don't) by saying something like *"I use 'she' and 'her' pronouns"*. After you share yours, you can ask someone *"Can I ask what pronouns you use?"*. When we share this information first, it's a great way to model how to share pronouns with whomever we're speaking to AND also can put less pressure on the other person to share their pronouns if they don't want to.

### **2. Make it an invitation.**

When we invite each person in a group to share their pronouns—even those whose pronouns we think you already know—we do the work of normalizing this process and help make communication and connection easier and hopefully more comfortable for everyone. Keep in mind that some may not want to share their pronouns - whether it is due to feelings of safety, unfamiliarity with you or others, or something else. By asking people directly what their pronouns are, we can avoid making potentially harmful assumptions.

### **3. This is everyone's work.**

Sharing pronouns is not just for trans and nonbinary people. If you are cisgender (not trans or nonbinary) and feel uncomfortable sharing your pronouns, this is a great opportunity to consider why you may feel that way. We want to help you create spaces that are accessible and affirming for everyone, and this is one step in making that a reality.

### **Why should I do this?**

Using the language a person uses for themselves, is a terrific way to affirm and respect others. When we're having conversations with people, not knowing someone's name or pronouns can make the conversation kind of awkward. When we don't have that information, we may rely on assumptions and stereotypes, which may not actually be in alignment with who that person is.



## **How should I do this?**

There are lots of different approaches to this depending on what you do in the world. We encourage people to have conversations and practices that reflect this often. Remember, we can and do use pronouns in every aspect of our lives, not just in our professional lives! Let's check out a few examples of what this could look like:

- Consider purchasing a pronoun pin for yourself and others. This is a great way to share your pronouns and add some flair to your fashion too.
- Add your pronouns to your name tag / ID badge, business card, and email signature. You can even consider adding a link to a resource about pronouns (like this one) where people can click to learn more. This is also helpful so you don't have to rely on guessing what someone's pronouns are based on name and gender stereotypes.
- If you have forms / intakes / registrations that you utilize to collect information about those you work with, consider asking about pronouns on each and every intake. This can be one of the best ways to indicate support to transgender and nonbinary people.
- At the start of each meeting, school year, semester, or first time you are connecting with someone, consider asking everyone to share their pronouns. Introductions are a great time for folks to share this information. If you're a teacher, you could use index cards for students to share important info (like pronouns), and also emergency contact info.

## **Could asking about someone's pronouns offend them?**

Sure, but that's part of the work we are hoping you do to create spaces in your lives that are more affirming for everyone. When someone takes offense to our question of pronouns, this is partially because we don't always value people who don't fit into our boxes of gender as much as we value those who do. Often times, cisgender people who are offended by this question are distressed by the idea that their gender isn't obvious, or doesn't fit into a box. Instead of holding on to that, we can recognize that every person holds value and deserves respect and challenge that underlying belief that people whose gender is outside of society's norms are less valuable.

## **What do I do if I make a mistake?**

Correct yourself and try to move on. If you're having a difficult time, practice can help. Whether it's trying out a new set of pronouns on your pet (don't worry they won't mind), while you're on your way to work, in the shower, or practicing with a friend or colleague for five minutes. We're human - we're not going to get things right every time. Making the effort AND being accountable (which can be apologizing, thanking someone for correcting you, and doing differently the next time) if you make a mistake, is what matters!



### **If I can't get someone's pronouns, should I just avoid using them?**

It's important that we lean in and be open to making mistakes and learning from them. You might find yourself avoiding pronouns, only using someone's name, or even not talking to someone who changed their name/pronoun. Take some time to do the work! It may be awkward at first, but it pays off. We want to support cultures of connectivity right? Otherwise you're not fully engaging with that person and might be missing out.

### **What are some examples of pronouns and how do you use them?**

**He/Him:** "**He** is an artist and painted that **himself**. Those paintings are **his**."

**She/Her:** "**She** is an artist and painted that **herself**. Those paintings are **hers**."

**They/Them:** "**They** are an artist and painted that **themselves**. Those paintings are **theirs**."

Although "**they**" pronouns here are singular and refer to an individual, the verbs are conjugated the same as with the plural "**they**" (e.g. "**they are**"). Also note that in this singular pronoun set many use "**themselves**" rather than "**themselves**", although both are acceptable.

**Ze/Hir:** "**Ze** is an artist and painted that **hirsself**. Those paintings are **hirs**."

"ze" is usually pronounced with a long "e" and "hir" and its forms are usually pronounced like the word "here." Some use "ze/zir" pronouns for a more consistent pronunciation and spelling.

**More pronouns:** The examples above are NOT an exhaustive list. There are additional pronoun sets, like ze/zir, per/pers, ey/em, xe/xem, fae/faer, etc. Do your research to learn more about them!

### **There are so many pronouns, what can I do?**

Language is amazing isn't it?! There are infinite amounts of pronouns - including some that are unfamiliar to most people. While we may be more familiar with some gender-neutral pronouns, others may be different to us. Take a deep breath then start to do some work to practice using the pronouns that someone has asked you to use for them. It takes some time, but practice can help you get better at using them. It can also be helpful to do a quick internet search to learn more about gender-neutral pronoun usage throughout history. Examples of the singular "**they/them**" are older than you think! Language is constantly shifting to meet our needs, so if you are worried about grammar, there are a number of examples. Look it up!

### **At what age is it "appropriate" to talk about these things?**

We learn language and put meaning to words even before we start talking. Once a child is talking, this is when they start to share the pronouns and other words they use / like for themselves. Sometimes as early as two to four. Children may not know the word "**pronouns**" unless we talk about it, but can understand that people go by different "**words**" like "**he**", "**she**", "**they**", and sometimes other pronouns like "**ze**"!



### **Someone I know just changed their pronouns *again*, help!**

For many, their gender identity is something that is not fixed / static, it may be fluid and/or shifting. Sometimes people want their pronouns to reflect this. Sometimes people just like to mix it up! While frequently switching pronouns can feel challenging, it's important to recognize that some people are in the process of figuring out their gender, some peoples' gender shifts or is fluid, and regardless of the reasons, everyone deserves to be gendered correctly. You can talk with the person about how they would like to let you know what to use is a great solution. Perhaps they would like you to ask daily, or maybe they have different visual markers (like a pin) that can let you know which pronouns they are using.

### **What if a caregiver says not to use the name/pronouns a youth asks me to use?**

It's important to talk to the young person about what they would like you to use— they know what kind of support they need best. When you are with that young person, you *can* use the name and pronoun a young person asks you to use. Doing so will help them feel seen and respected. There are great resources from [Gender Spectrum](#) (like the [Gender Support Plan](#)) that can help us navigate these conversations with youth AND how to support them when they are with us. The plan can also be to use one name and pronoun when the caregiver(s) aren't present, and a different set when they are. It should be noted that, of course we'd love to bring the caregiver(s) along for this journey, however, it may not always be safe to do so initially. Especially if the caregiver(s) are unsupportive. We need to assess the safety of that young person and what would some support be to help bring that family along (often over time). You can, when it makes sense, offer resources to the caregiver(s) to learn more about LGBTQ+ youth. Some of those resources include The Family Acceptance Project, PFLAG, among others. You can also check out [family/caregiver programs](#) and [additional resources](#).

### **What else can I do to be an ally to trans and nonbinary people?**

There are lots of things we can do. We can start by being reflective of all the different ways gender affects our lives. Think about your own identities and how rigid boxes of gender, assigned sex, and gender expression are limiting to everyone! Beginning to raise our own awareness for the ways in which these constructs impact us, can help us shift our behavior and work on being accountable to others. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Model that this work can be challenging but it is possible. We need allies and accomplices to improve the climate of our communities for everyone, including trans and nonbinary people!