

SHARING PRONOUNS



Sharing your name and pronouns can be helpful information to have when having a conversation with or about someone. Perhaps you've realized how important this is if you've ever had a conversation with someone and you weren't sure what pronouns they used. In the past, sometimes you might have relied on stereotypes based on what someone was wearing, their haircut, or other gender stereotypes. No need to rely only on assumptions - we can ask folks directly!

We all want to respect to people, but it might feel awkward to ask them about their pronouns. It is okay to ask someone about their pronouns - here are some tips that will help that to be less awkward.

1. Share your pronouns first.

If you share your pronouns first, you're making yourself vulnerable. For example, *"By the way, I use pronouns like she, her, and hers. Can I ask what pronouns you use?"* That example will sound more polite and respectful than just asking someone, *"Hey, what pronouns do you use?"*

2. Invite everyone to share their pronouns, not just folks you think might be transgender.

You can't necessarily tell what pronouns someone might use, or who is transgender, by looking at them. So, it's a great idea to invite everyone to share their pronouns. This is especially helpful if you are having folks introduce their names (and maybe their role or favorite ice cream flavor, if applicable.)

3. It's always an invitation. Make sure folks know that.

There are a lot of reasons why someone might not want to share their pronouns. For example, someone might identify as transgender but don't want to come out yet. It's important to not prompt people if they don't share their pronouns, even if they've just forgotten to share. Encourage cisgender people who are not sharing their pronouns because they are uncomfortable to consider why they may feel that way. Please don't forget to clarify that this activity is an invitation, not an obligation. You can include this on any written or verbal intakes, as well.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Does this actually matter?

Think about the last time you met a really cute dog that you wanted to pet. Here's how that interaction probably went with the dog's owner:

Oh my gosh! Your dog is so cute. Can I say 'hi'? What is your dog's name? Is your dog a boy or a girl?

Here's what you might have actually meant - *What name and pronoun should I use when I'm talking about how cute your dog is?* Even if you used the word *gender*, you were probably actually asking about pronouns without realizing it. Obviously, if we can show this respect to dogs, we certainly can show it to humans. When we're having conversations with people, not knowing someone's name or pronouns can make the conversation kind of awkward. So, having that information is really helpful. Actually, we don't even need to know what gender people identify with. Same as we don't necessarily need to know if they are a parent, what their race is, their sexual orientation, or their religious beliefs. For basic conversations, names and pronouns are really important. Otherwise, we may rely on assumptions and stereotypes.

How often should I do this?

If you a service provider, consider doing this with every intake. It is one of the most direct ways to indicate that you might be a supportive person to transgender people and that you are interested in having this conversation. Folks will be more likely to let you know about any changes to their name and pronouns if you've indicated to them that you're open to talking about names and pronouns.

If you are a teacher, consider doing this at the beginning of the school year, semester, or anytime you're in a meeting where folks are introducing themselves. If you have any other ways of having folks share information - such as an index card where people share their emergency contact and what they're hoping to learn that year, you can invite folks to share their pronouns on there as well.

If you're meeting someone at a party or through a friend you can also try this out. This isn't just for professional life, but for every part of your life.

Could this offend people?

It could. Part of the reason why is because we don't always value people who don't fit into our nice, neat boxes of gender at the same rate that we value those who do. Often times, people who are offended by this question are tapping into that cultural value without realizing it. This is one way where we can see the anti-transness that exists in our cultures and communities. Instead of holding on to that, we can recognize that every person holds value and deserves respect and challenge that underlying belief that might say otherwise.

At what age can you ask this?

As soon as someone is talking. Many kids start to share the pronouns they like to use at a very early age, such as 2-4 years old. They won't know the word "pronoun", necessarily, but they understand that some people go by *he*, some people go by *she*, and can understand that some people use other pronouns too, such as *they*.

What if a parent/guardian tells me that they don't want me to use the name and pronoun a youth asks me to use?

That's definitely a tricky one. It's a good idea to talk to a youth about what they would like you to do, because they know best about what kind of support they need. It is absolutely okay to use the name and pronoun a youth asks you use when you are with them to help them feel seen and respected (you probably wouldn't feel respected if someone refused to use your name and pronoun either.) Using the name and pronoun a youth asks to use in a learning environment can help them learn better - something you might

want to share with their parent/guardian. You also might want to offer support to their parent/guardian for meeting other parents with children like them.

What are some ways I can share my pronouns non-verbally?

Some folks put pronouns on their business cards, email signatures, or name tag. This is also helpful so you don't have to rely on guessing what someone's pronouns are based on their name or gender stereotypes.

What do I do if I make a mistake and use the wrong pronoun?

It's a good idea to correct yourself and not make too big of a deal about it. For example, "I was talking to him, *I mean them*, the other day and they told me about a great restaurant." If you're having a difficult time with the change, the only thing you can do is practice to help. Have a five-minute conversation with a colleague or friend about that person to try to practice.

I'm not used to using gender-neutral pronouns, such as *they/them/their* or *ze/zim/zir*. What can I do?

There are infinite amounts pronouns - including some that are unfamiliar to most people. *They/them/their* is often the most common gender-neutral pronoun. You might be used to hearing about in a plural sense, but not in the context of being a single gender-neutral pronoun. (You might even be worried that it's grammatically incorrect! But don't worry, English is an evolving language that evolves to meet our needs. You can do a quick internet search to find lots of great articles about how useful this pronoun is, as well as examples of Jane Austen using it.)

Getting down *they/them/their* is a great first goal. Don't know anyone who uses those pronouns? Practicing those pronouns on a pet is a great way to get more comfortable with it - since your pet doesn't know what pronoun you're using. As for other pronouns, there are great websites where you can practice using other kinds of pronouns - a quick internet search will help you find those as well!

I know I'm going to get it wrong. Can I just use someone's name so I won't offend them?

No one is expecting you to be perfect or get it right every time. What matters is that you make the effort and apologize if you make a mistake (and if you keep making mistakes - don't forget to practice!) You might find yourself avoiding pronouns, only using someone's name, or even not talking to someone who changed their name/pronoun. Please lean in and be open to making mistakes and learning from them. Otherwise you're not fully engaging with that person and might be missing out!

Awesome! I'm on board for this. This will make me a great ally or accomplice to trans folks, right?

It will! But, never forget that there are always ways we can improve climate for all people, including trans folks. A great place to start is to think about all the ways that gender affects your life, think more about your own identities, and realize how our strict boxes of gender identity, biological sex, and gender expression limit us all. We like to share that our goal is not to create perfect spaces and perfect allies - but to recognize how important it is to lean into discomfort and new things, get comfortable with apologizing and shifting behavior for next time, and be held accountable. If this is the only thing you do, you're not necessarily making a safer climate. For ideas on other ways you can create supportive environments for LGBTQ folks, please contact us.

