



SHARING PRONOUNS

Just as you share your name when introducing yourself, sharing your pronouns is a helpful way to communicate how you want to be addressed. Sometimes we may feel a need to rely on stereotypes—about someone’s clothing, haircut, or other aspects of their appearance—to determine the gender of someone whose pronouns we don’t know. By asking people directly what their pronouns are, we can avoid making potentially harmful assumptions.

It might feel awkward at first to ask someone about their pronouns. We’ve gathered a few tips to help guide you through this important (and easy!) process.

1. Share your pronouns first.

By saying something like, *"I use 'she' and 'her' pronouns. Can I ask what pronouns you use?"* you provide a model to your conversation partner for how they can reply, which is especially helpful if they’ve never been asked before. This phrasing also puts less pressure on them to share their pronouns if they don’t want to.

2. Invite everyone to share pronouns-not just people who “look trans”.

You can't necessarily tell what pronouns someone uses just by looking at them. When you invite each person in a group to share their pronouns—even those whose pronouns you think you already know—you normalize the process and make communication easier and more comfortable for everyone.

3. It's an invitation, not an order.

Someone might not want to share their pronouns due to their environment, their familiarity with you, or for other personal reasons. Whether in writing or as a verbal request, it’s important to clarify that sharing one’s pronouns is always a choice. If cisgender people feel uncomfortable sharing their pronouns, encourage them to consider why they might feel that way.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Does this actually matter?

Think about the last time you met a really cute dog 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 your cute dog?* Even if you used the word *gender*, you were probably actually asking about pronouns without realizing it. 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. Having that information is really helpful, though we don't actually need to know what gender someone identifies with, if you think about it. 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 are 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.

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 - partially because we don't always value people who don't fit into our nice, neat 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. This is one way where we can see the transphobia and misogyny 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 people whose gender is outside of society's norms are less valuable.

We also often value the comfort of cisgender (not transgender) people over the safety of transgender people. While a cisgender person might be uncomfortable being asked their pronouns, a transgender person might be less safe if they are not asked.

At what age can you ask this?

As soon as someone is talking. Many kids start to share the pronouns they like young, sometimes as early as two to four. They probably won't know the word "pronoun" 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* or *ze*.

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

That's definitely a tricky one. It's a good idea to talk to the young person about what they would like you to use—they know what kind of support they need best. It is absolutely okay to use the name and pronoun a young person asks you use when you are with them. Doing so will help them feel seen and respected. The plan can also be to use one name and pronoun when the parents aren't present, and a different set when they are.

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. The Family Acceptance Project has fantastic resources for parents of LGBTQ+ youth.

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?

Just correct yourself and try 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, practice can help. Have a five-minute conversation with a colleague or friend about that person to try to practice.

What if the pronouns someone uses change frequently?

Many people's gender identity is fluid or shifting. Sometimes people want their pronouns to reflect this. Sometimes people just like to mix it up! If this is the case, it can be hard to know what pronoun someone would like you to use on any given day. Talking with the person about how they would like to let you know what to use is a great solution. Some people will want to be asked daily, some people have even wear different bracelets or use visual markers to let people know which pronouns they're using.

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 people's gender shifts or is fluid, and regardless of the reasons, everyone deserves to be gendered correctly.

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 a more 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 changes to meet our needs. You can do a quick internet search to find lots of great articles about how useful "they" as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun is—even Jane Austin used 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 care 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. Try not to approach pronouns with negative thinking. What matters is that you make the effort, improve, 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's an important part! 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 there are lots of great online resources, or please contact us - info@maebright.com.