

Let's Get it Right: Using Correct Pronouns and Names

We use people's pronouns and names frequently and in regular, everyday communication, both verbally and in writing. We do it almost without thinking. Because names and pronouns are the two ways people call and refer to others, they are personal and important. They are also key facets of our identity. Therefore, calling someone by the wrong name or "misgendering" them by using incorrect pronouns can feel disrespectful, harmful and even unsafe.

From an early age, many were taught that pronouns should follow specific rules along the gender binary: "she, her and hers" for girls and women and "he, him and his" for boys and men. However, as our society has progressed in understanding gender identity, our language must also be updated. It should be accurate and convey understanding and respect for all people, especially for those who are transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary.

Because some people identify themselves outside the gender binary (gender binary is the idea that gender consists of two distinct, opposite and disconnected categories—male and female), it is important to make sure you know the specific pronouns people use, whether they use female, male or gender-neutral pronouns. Be mindful that the pronouns "he" and "she" come with a set of expectations and gender norms about how people express their identity. For many, these terms are limiting and confining, so gender-neutral options are preferable.

If you use the wrong pronoun or name, people may not correct you because they may feel awkward, uncomfortable or unsafe. If you don't know what people's pronouns and names are, you can listen to how they or others refer to them, or you can ask. There are suggestions below about how to do this in a school or classroom setting.

There has been a much-needed movement away from asking and identifying pronouns as "preferred." For example, people used to ask, "What is your preferred pronoun?" This question is problematic because a person's pronouns are not just "preferred"—they are the pronouns that should be used.

Using correct names and pronouns shows respect, acceptance and support to all students, especially those who are transgender, gender non-conforming and non-binary. While some schools and school districts have specific policies on a range of issues regarding transgender and gender non-conforming students, below are practical tips and strategies for showing respect to students.

At the beginning of the school year or new semester, many teachers distribute a "get to know you survey" to learn more about their students: how they best learn, their hobbies/interests outside of school, what they did over the summer, etc. You can add a question about pronouns such as: "What are your gender pronouns?" or "Which pronouns do you use?" You can also ask what name they use. This sends a message that you want to know their accurate name and pronouns, and it gives you the information you need to get it right.

You should also ask whether it's okay or not to use their name and pronoun in communication home to parents/family members and in parent-teacher conferences. Keep in mind that some students may not disclose this information to some or all family members.