

A Family's Guide to Gender & Pronouns

Basic Terminology – Gender

Sex Assigned at Birth: The assignment and classification of people as male, female, or intersex based on a combination of anatomy [genitalia], hormones, and chromosomes (i.e. primary and secondary sex characteristics) when a baby is born. This is most often determined by a doctor, nurse, or parent. For some people, the sex they were assigned at birth does not match who they know themselves to be.

How do I talk about this?

- “I was assigned male at birth.”, “My child was assigned female at birth.”
- We recommend avoiding terms like “born a girl”, “biological female”, or “real sex”.

Gender Identity: An individual's basic self-conviction of being a man, woman, a blend, or neither. In other words, who they know themselves to be. This conviction is not contingent upon the individual's sex assigned at birth. Below you'll find broad examples of gender identities.

Cisgender: An adjective used to describe someone who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth. A gender identity, or performance in a gender role, that society deems to match one's assigned sex at birth. A term used to call attention to the privilege of people who are not transgender. “Cis” is a Latin prefix for “on the same side”.

How do I talk about this?

- “I am a cisgender man.” “I am a cis woman.”, “My son is cisgender.”

Transgender: An adjective used most often as an umbrella term and frequently abbreviated to “Trans.” This adjective describes a wide range of experiences of people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from expectations of their sex assigned at birth. Some, but not all, trans people undergo medical transition (surgery, hormones, etc.) or social transition (changing name, haircut, clothing, pronouns, etc) to have their gender expression (how they look) match their gender identity (who they are), rather than the sex they were assigned at birth.

How do I talk about this?

- “I am transgender.”, “I am a trans man.”, “My child is transgender.”
- We recommend avoiding saying “transgendered”, “transsexual”, or “transvestite”.

Non-binary: An umbrella term for all genders other than binary understandings of woman and man, used as an adjective. Some nonbinary people also identify as trans or there may be overlap with other identities like genderfluid and gender non-conforming. See image below for more examples.

How do I talk about this?

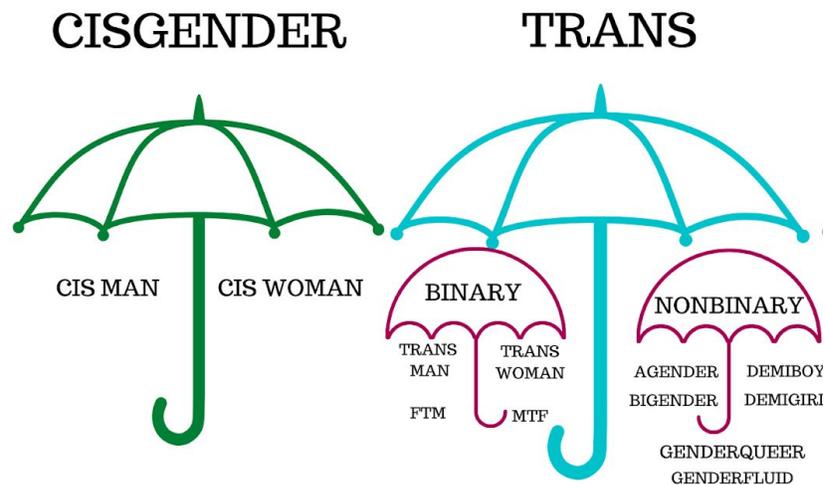
- “I identify as trans nonbinary.”, “My oldest is nonbinary.”

Gender Expression: The physical manifestation of one's gender identity through clothing, hairstyle, voice, body shape, etc. and how one expresses oneself in terms of their behaviors and role in society (or in a family). Commonly used descriptors of gender expression include feminine, masculine, androgynous, and gender non-conforming. Trans people may seek to make their gender expression (how they look) match their gender identity (who they are), rather than their sex assigned at birth.

How do I talk about this?

- “I have more of a masculine gender expression, though I identify as a woman.”

We are often brought up to think that because we know what someone's body looks like when they are born, that we therefore know what their gender is, how they want to be referred to, who they will fall in love with, what clothes they will wear, and even what their favorite color should be. However, our gender identity, gender expression, and who we are attracted to are not determined by the sex we were assigned at birth. Furthermore, people often take cues of how we dress or act and predict who we are attracted to. Sexual orientation is not determined by our gender and gender expression, and vice versa.



Pronouns

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are words that are used in the place of nouns. If you say “That’s Eric. He is nice,” the word “he” is the pronoun, which is being used in place of “Eric”. Simply, pronouns are how we wanted to be talked about by others. Often, people make assumptions about the gender of another person based on the person’s appearance, voice, or name and assign gendered pronouns accordingly, like calling someone with short hair and a beard “he”.

Why does this matter?

Pronouns are simple linguistic tools, but they are also deeply meaningful. The assumptions we make about others’ genders and pronouns are not always correct, and the act of assuming sends a potentially harmful message that people have to look/sound a certain way to demonstrate the gender that they are (or are not). Like our names, pronouns reflect how we want to be respected in our identities. This is especially important for those who are transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming.

What is misgendering?

Misgendering is the occurrence of referring to someone as the incorrect gender or with incorrectly gendered terms. Examples include calling a woman “sir” or using “she” to refer to someone who uses they/them pronouns. Getting misgendered can be strange for all people, and particularly harmful or anxiety-producing for transgender and nonbinary people. Many trans folks go through a long process of self-discovery and self-advocacy to be seen by others as they see themselves, so when they are misgendered, even accidentally, it can contribute to feeling isolated, misunderstood, or unwelcome.

Why do folks share pronouns in introductions?

Including your pronouns as part of an introduction is a way of sharing with others how you want to be referred to and respected. It removes the need to assume which pronouns to use when referring to people in the third person. By saying “my name is Eric, I use he/him pronouns”, it allows folks to talk about Eric in a respectful and affirming way and avoid misgendering him. When more folks choose to share or ask for pronouns, it normalizes the process of sharing so that others, like trans or nonbinary folks, do not feel further outcasted if they choose to share. Sharing your own pronouns, if you feel comfortable to do so, is a great starting point for allyship. This is always an invitation, never a mandate.

Examples of using pronouns:

Pronouns	Subjective	Objective	Possessive Adjective	Possessive Pronoun
she/her/hers	She laughed.	I like her.	Her shirt is red.	That is hers.
they/them/their	They laughed.	I like them.	Their shirt is red.	That is theirs.
he/him/his	He laughed.	I like him.	His shirt is red.	That is his.
ze/zir/zirs*	Ze laughed.	I like zir.	Zir shirt is red.	That is zirs.

Tell Me More About They/Them Pronouns:

- “They” is often considered a gender-neutral or gender-inclusive pronoun. You can use it to refer to someone who has not shared their pronouns with you yet.
 - Example: “Someone dropped **their** wallet on the ground, I wonder if **they’ll** come back.”
- For many transgender, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming people, using they/them pronouns enable them to navigate the world in a non-gendered way & have their identity reflected back to them in a respectful way.
- “They” has been used as a singular pronoun cited as far back as the 14th century. Webster-Merriam dictionary and Dictionary.com includes it as a singular pronoun to be used for people’s personal pronouns. The notion that “they” only ever refers to multiple people and is plural is incorrect, similar to how “you” can refer to one person or multiple people.
- APA Writing Guide includes “they” in the singular tense as an accurate and appropriate use of the pronoun, and even cites that it is more grammatically correct than “his or her”.
- Examples:
 - “My youngest is in college. They’re studying Engineering.”
 - “Tell them I say hello! I miss speaking to them.”

Tell Me More About Other Pronouns:

- While they, she, and he are pronouns that are typically used already in the English language, folks have created additional pronouns to specifically denote their trans/nonbinary experiences. These include ze/zim, ze/zir, xe/xem, per/pers, etc.
- Z and X are often used because they are letters used least frequently in English and often have connotations of being different, non-traditional, expansive, or creative. Additionally, these letters are often used in math as variables, denoting variety.
- Examples:
 - “Max left zir book behind. I hope ze comes back to get it.”
 - “Cleo is my kid. Xe is sweet and always makes me laugh. I love xem.”

Tips for How to Talk About Pronouns:

- If you do not know someone’s pronouns, ask them or use their name.
 - Ex. “Sorry, I forgot to ask. I use they/them/their pronouns, how about you?”
 - Ex. “Can you remind me what pronouns your friend uses?”
- We are all going to mess up. When you do, apologize, correct yourself, and move on.
 - Ex. “She was going, excuse me, they were going to the store. Sorry about that.”
 - Ex. (When corrected) “Thank you for the reminder.”

Gender Inclusive Language

We insert gender into a lot of our language, beyond just pronouns. Here are some other things to consider, particularly for folks who are non-binary, trans, etc. If unsure if you should use a word to refer to someone, you can always ask if they have a preferred term.

Gendered	Gender Inclusive
Man, Woman	Person
Mother, Father	Parent
Son, Daughter	Kid, Child, My Youngest/Oldest
Brother, Sister	Sibling
Grandpa, Grandma	Grandparent, Gran
Niece, Nephew	Nibling, Sibling
Aunt, Uncle	My Parent's Sibling, Cousin, Aunt, Nibling
Girlfriend, Boyfriend	Partner, Significant Other
Husband, Wife	Spouse, Partner
Hey girl! Hey dude!	Hey friend!
Yes ma'am	Yes, of course!
Have a good day, sir!	Have a good day!
You look like a queen/king!	You look like royalty!
Looking handsome/beautiful today!	Looking good today!

We know that changing our language does not always happen easily or automatically. Making efforts to recognize your kid with the language that feels best will only mend and strengthen your relationship with them. Most times, making attempts, even if you slip up and make mistakes, can send a really powerful message that your love is unconditional and that you are willing to grow with them through this process.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why did it take so long for my kid to come out to me?

There could be many reasons this was the moment they chose to come out. For many trans and gender non-conforming people, we don't understand our identities right away when we are little. Often, there are messages throughout our lifetime that make us view ourselves differently than others, and can contribute to a feeling of isolation, difference, or something being wrong with us. Sharing these thoughts and putting language like "transgender" to it can be very vulnerable and scary because there are still many people who do not understand gender diversity and actively disagree with or have bias toward trans people. Additionally, there are still federal and state laws that discriminate against transgender people and restrict access to things like equitable healthcare or housing. Your kid is likely navigating a lot of fear, particularly if they are unsure how their immediate and extended family will react. Additionally, LGBTQ+ college students take out 60% more in loans than their non-LGBTQ+ peers due to their family pulling funding support when their kids come

out or from not having familial support. Your kid may not know that you are supportive and love them unconditionally in this way. Whatever time they chose to tell you was the right time for them.

Will my child go through medical transition?

Some transgender people chose to go through transitions so that they feel more at home in their body and in their communities. Generally, we think of transition being solely medical, but there are many ways to socially transition. Some trans people may choose to go through Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), meaning receiving regular doses of hormones that will make some permanent and some temporary changes to their body (hair, voice, weight distribution, face shape, etc.). Others may opt for a surgical procedure to change their bodies (chest, genitals, weight distribution, etc.). Other types of body modification may be pursued through voice lessons, weight training, hairstyling, shaving/hair removal, or wearing clothing designed to change the appearance of one's body (chest binders, bra inserts, compression underwear, etc.). Social transitions may include changing one's name, pronouns, clothing, involvement in gendered activities like sports, how they are referred to (son, daughter, child), the name and gender that shows up on their legal documents, and the role they have in relationships and families. There are many options that your kid may pursue - some are more permanent than others. Some people may not make any changes to their appearance at all. The most important factors are to ask supportive questions, let them take the lead on their decisions, help them access the resources they need, and show unconditional love.

I'm worried about my kid's mental health and safety.

Many LGBTQ+ young people, especially transgender people, experience anxiety, depression, fear for safety, and suicidality. A lot of this stems from fear of not receiving family or community support, fear of violence and discrimination, and overwhelming loneliness or hopelessness. Research shows that LGBTQ+ youth who receive explicit acceptance from their parents are substantially less likely to attempt suicide or abuse substances. [Read more here](#). It's okay to feel concerned about their safety. At the same time, pay attention to how wanting to protect them can translate to a desire for them to hide who they are. Listen to what your kid needs, and trust them. Furthermore, consider advocating and voting for policy changes in school, locally, statewide, and nationally that protect your kids' safety and self-determination. Your kid does not need to change for them to be more safe - society's acceptance and affirmation of trans people needs to change.

How do I show my kid that I support them?

- Honor their identities and pronouns. Even if you don't understand, don't dismiss them as "not real".
- Check in about what language they prefer or expect you to use, like son/daughter.
- Find other parents who you can talk to. Two resources for this are [PFLAG \(Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays\)](#) (here is a local Northern Colorado chapter) and [Trans Youth Education & Support of Colorado](#).
- Keep researching to get your questions answered. Don't place the burden on your kid to teach you.
- Identities can shift overtime. Don't force them to choose a box.
- Ask open ended questions from a place of care, not judgement.
- Support their events, organizations, friends, and interests. Get excited with them!
- Check in about the climate with roommates, professors, advisors etc. They may not bring up bullying, harassment, or issues without being prompted.
- Check in on their mental health. Normalize having conversations about seeking therapy or other types of support for anxiety, depression, and suicidality.
- Have those difficult conversations with other family members. Be an ally to your kid with the name & pronouns.