

Making the Switch

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How respecting pronouns and using gender-neutral terms can make a difference.

Every start to the school year begins with a day full of introductions and get-to-know-you games. Not only is it important for teachers to get to know their new students, but for students to become comfortable with each other. A question asked in many classrooms this year was, “What are your pronouns?” Pronouns? After hearing giggles and the mocking of this question throughout classrooms this year, I felt like there was a strong need for some more clarification.

So, what is a pronoun and why is it such a big deal? The Merriam Webster dictionary defines pronouns as any of a small set of words (such as *I, she, he, you, it, we, or they*) in a language that are used as substitutes for nouns or noun phrases and whose referents are named or understood in the context. For example, Susie likes to ride **her** bicycle, so **she** bikes to work every day. ‘She’ and ‘her’ replace the name Susie in this context. Traditionally, a person’s pronouns are determined by their gender-identity. She/Her for females and He/Him for



males. But what happens if someone doesn’t identify within the gender binary of male or female? They/Them pronouns are a common set of pronouns to use when referring to non-binary people that do not identify as male or female. As society is progressing, it is important to acknowledge that someone’s gender identity doesn’t always match up with the pronouns they use or with the gender they were assigned at birth. Combinations pronouns such as He/They, They/She, or the use of any pronouns are also common forms of pronouns that make people feel more comfortable with their gender identity.

Principal Sherry Poole (she/her) interacts with students of all walks of life on a day-to-day basis. Poole views pronouns as a way for people, especially students, to express their true identity.

“Pronouns that each of us use are part of our identity. They/them; he/him; she/her --whatever we use, help us all to openly be who we are. Most of the time, we use pronouns in place of our name which is typically assigned to our gender. Some people don’t fit into one particular pronoun or the one they might have been



assigned at birth so using pronouns allows them to belong to where they identify,” Poole said.

To make students feel more comfortable, Poole’s staff is aiming to bring reassurance to students that how they identify matters and is respected.

“A lot of our [staff] trainings have us introducing ourselves with name and preferred pronouns, especially when we are on Zoom or TEAMS calls. We do need more in-depth training on this topic however, so that we consistently change the way we are addressing students such as ‘Mathematicians, Historians, etc.’ instead of ‘ladies and gentlemen,’” Poole said.

Using gender-neutral terms in the classroom setting can be crucial for students that are trying to figure out who they are. Another aspect of this includes transgender students that use a name different from the one given at birth to feel comfortable in their new gender identity. A study completed by the University of Texas found that respecting young people’s preferred name and pronouns can literally save their lives.

“Researchers interviewed transgender youths ages 15 to 21 and asked whether young people could use their chosen name at school, home, work and with friends. Compared with peers who could not use their chosen name in any context, young people who could use their name in all four areas experienced 71 percent fewer symptoms of severe depression, a 34 percent decrease in reported thoughts of suicide and a 65 percent decrease in suicidal attempts.”

Not only will students feel safer at school, but they will also feel more welcome. Many people have a hard time trying to figure out gender-neutral terms such as they/them pronouns. It has been taught in English literature for so long that the proper way to address a singular person is with the terms he or she. For example, your English teacher might tell you that the sentence, ‘A student must come collect their pencil’ is incorrect and should be ‘A student must collect his or her pencil,’ because the singular ‘student’ in this case is not the plural pronoun of ‘their’. But as society evolves, so does our language.

Many people stray away from using they/them pronouns because “it’s not grammatically correct.” John McWhorter, an American linguist and English professor, argues that there can be a shift of gender-inclusive language in his Atlantic article ‘*Call Them What They Wants*’.

“...words’ meanings are always changing—what Shakespeare meant by *generous* was “noble,” not

“magnanimous”—pronouns never sit still...in earlier English, *thou* was the second-person-singular form, and *you* was used only for two or more people,” McWhorter said. “Pronouns change, just as we do. We celebrate language change that has already happened as pageant, procession, progress. Why not celebrate it while it’s happening?”

Another reminder is that you don’t always know what someone’s pronouns are by looking at them. So, just ask! Sophomore Paisha Goodrich (they/she) has advice on becoming comfortable with using they/them pronouns.

“Some advice I would give to people who aren’t completely educated on they/them pronouns is to first always ask for people’s pronouns if you are unsure. Next, I would say to practice using they/them pronouns and practice saying them instead of she or he. (I used to practice saying they/them with my friends outside of school when our friend told us the pronouns they wanted to use). And also, it’s not gonna be as flawless as you think, you may accidentally say the wrong pronouns but if you do say the wrong ones accidentally to make sure you correct yourself,” Goodrich said.

Asking someone for their pronouns can be a way to get to know them, as well as make them feel comfortable and respected. Rather than asking the rude question of “What are you?”, consider asking, “What pronouns do you use?”

Making space for conversations about pronouns is the first step of making others feel included. By simply introducing yourself with your own pronouns or putting your pronouns on your social media or educational platforms are just a few simple ways to help make people who may have different pronouns more comfortable.

Practicing using gender-neutral terms in all aspects of your life will not only help you to become more inclusive, but it can also generate conversations of inclusivity with those around you.

**ASK ME ABOUT MY
PRONOUNS**