



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

APAGS COMMITTEE ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER DIVERSITY

A Guide for Supporting Trans and Gender Diverse Students



INTENDED AUDIENCE

Leaders in graduate psychology education and training, including department chairs, program and fellowships directors, directors of training, internship site supervisors, and others.

PURPOSE

This is a timely and necessary resource to provide a safe learning environment for trans and gender diverse (TGD) students who continue to be marginalized in many aspects of their lives.

AUTHORS

American Psychological Association of Graduate Students subcommittee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity (CSOGD). Providing support for TGD students aligns with our mission to ensure successful graduate experiences for LGBTQ students.

Meredith Maroney (Chair), Emmie Matsuno, Samantha LaMartine, Abby Nissenbaum, Sean Rose, J Stewart, Mary Guerrant, Taymy Caso, Elyssa Berney, and Juan Pantoja-Patiño

Note: Per APA Rule 30-60.2: APA reports synthesize current psychological knowledge in a given area and may offer recommendations for future action. They do not constitute APA policy nor commit APA to the activities described therein. This particular report originated with the authors stated above.

INTRODUCTION

Given the rise of anti-transgender and anti-LGBT actions (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2019¹), our committee feels that this guide is a timely and necessary resource to provide a safe learning environment for trans and gender diverse (TGD) students who continue to be marginalized in many aspects of their lives.

TGD individuals are at high risk for negative mental health outcomes including suicide (APA, 2015²; Bockting, Miner, Swinburne Romine, Hamilton, & Coleman, 2013³; Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006⁴; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014⁵). The largest study on TGD adults conducted in the United States (N = 27,715) recently found that 40% of TGD adults have attempted suicide (James et al., 2016⁶). This rate is 10 times higher than the national average. Harassment, bullying, and violence at work, school, and home contribute; however, TGD individuals who receive support in these settings can still thrive.

This guide contains several documents and an action plan intended to help make academic institutions, field placements, and other graduate training sites more supportive and affirming of TGD students.

The guide contains the following documents:

1. Action Plan
2. Glossary of Terms and Definitions
3. Gender Pronouns 101
4. Inclusive Bathroom Sign
5. The Gender Unicorn:
A Tool to Facilitate Conversations About Gender

We strongly encourage you to utilize these resources and complete an action plan to work toward providing safer environments for TGD students. Please contact us at apags@apa.org if you have any feedback or questions.

Sincerely,

APAGS Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity
AUGUST 2019

1 The Discrimination Administration. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>

2 American Psychological Association (2015). Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people. *American Psychologist*, 70(9), 832-864.

3 Bockting, W. O., Miner, M. H., Swinburne Romine, R. E., Hamilton, A., & Coleman, E. (2013). Stigma, mental health, and resilience in an online sample of the US transgender population. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103, 943-951.

4 Clements-Nolle, K., Marx, R., & Katz, M. (2006). Attempted suicide among transgender persons: The influence of gender-based discrimination and victimization. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51, 53-69.

5 Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. I., Cook-Daniels, L., Kim, H. J., Erosheva, E. A., Emlen, C. A., Hoy-Ellis, C. P.,... Muraco, A. (2014). Physical and mental health of transgender older adults: An at-risk and underserved population. *The Gerontologist*, 54, 488-500.

6 James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. transgender survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.

Action Plan for Psychology Graduate Programs

Below is a list of specific actions you can take to help support transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students.

ACTION PLAN

- Include pronouns as part of class introductions.
- Use gender inclusive language.
- Create gender inclusive restrooms.
- Expand options on demographic forms, applications, etc.
- Receive training on gender diversity.
- Include trans and queer authors on syllabi.
- Challenge binary assumptions of gender.
- Center queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) in discussions about transness.

The following sections have details for each step in the action plan. You can do this! APAGS is here to support you in taking action.

INCLUDE PRONOUNS AS PART OF CLASS INTRODUCTIONS

One easy and effective way to support TGD students is to include pronouns as an optional part of introductions. We don't know someone's gender pronouns from their appearance, so it's important to ask.

Think about pronouns like names: We don't know someone's name until we ask them. Including pronouns during introductions can help TGD students feel seen and affirmed and help avoid misgendering. There are times, however, when sharing pronouns can feel like disclosing one's identity which may feel uncomfortable for some TGD students. It is important to normalize sharing pronouns while never forcing anyone to disclose their pronouns. It can also be helpful to emphasize that pronouns do not indicate someone's gender identity and that students shouldn't assume someone's gender identity based on pronouns. When the instructor introduces themselves with their pronouns first, it can normalize the experience and set an inclusive and culturally sensitive tone.

At the beginning of class (or anytime there are introductions), students can introduce themselves with their preferred name only (no need to share given names), gender pronouns (optional), and other introductory info. If the preferred name is different than the name on the class roster, you can ask the student their last name to take roll.

It is important to not announce someone's birth name in front of the class because this can be an embarrassing and uncomfortable situation for TGD students who have changed their name. For example, calling out "Jill" when the student goes by "Josh" could make the student feel "outed" and uncomfortable. Students can make name cards that include their name and pronouns, so that it's easy for the instructor and students to remember.

In recent years, there has been a shift away from asking for "preferred pronouns" because pronouns are no more a preference than other individual demographics.

Discussing pronouns is an opportunity to expand students' understanding of gender. It can be helpful for the instructor to model sharing their pronouns if they feel comfortable doing so.

TIP: Adding your pronouns to email signatures can help spread awareness about pronouns. When using name tags, include space where people can add their pronouns.

Short Sample Script:

"Hello everyone! Welcome! To start off today, we are going to do introductions. Please introduce yourself by stating your preferred name, gender pronouns if you feel comfortable doing so, and year/major. Your gender pronouns might be she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/their, or something else. It's important that we all use the correct pronouns when referring to others. I'll start by introducing myself. My name is _____ and I use (she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/their) pronouns. I'm a faculty member in the counseling psychology department..."

Extended Sample Script (Recommended):

"Hello everyone! Welcome! To start off today, we are going to do introductions. Please introduce yourself by stating your preferred name, gender pronouns if you feel comfortable doing so, and year/major. Your gender pronouns might be she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/their, or something else. Some people use more than one set or a combination of pronouns like she/they. Often people assume that we know what pronouns to use based on appearance. But pronouns are not based on someone's body or appearance. Although pronouns often relate to someone's gender identity, it is important not to assume someone's gender identity based on the pronouns they use. For example, you shouldn't assume that someone who uses they/them pronouns identifies as trans or that people who use he/him or she/her are cisgender. Also, some non-binary people use she/her or he/him pronouns rather than they/them. It's important that we all use the correct pronouns when referring to others. I'll start by introducing myself. My name is _____ and I use (she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/their) pronouns. I'm a faculty member in the psychology department..."

USE GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Using gender inclusive language is an easy way to ensure that students feel affirmed and aren't misgendered. Practicing using gender neutral language is also a great way to disassociate someone's gender and pronouns with their appearance (since gender identity and pronouns are not based on appearance). This is especially important with strangers, whose pronouns you don't know. Use the chart on the following page to help you.

Avoid	Instead Use...
Ladies/Gentlemen	Everyone
Ma'am/Sir	Folks, Friends
Girlfriend/boyfriend	Partner, Spouse
You guys/ladies	Y'all, All
Man/Woman	Person, Student, Client
Boy/Girl	Child
She/He	They

Table above adapted from <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>

TIP: Practice using they/them as singular pronouns on a regular basis. For example, “They are a student in my class.” Or, “Each student should sign up for a presentation date before they finish the book.” It is hard to relearn the use of this pronoun, which is why practice is essential! You can practice with a friend when talking about a stranger or pet or try writing a short story about someone with they/them pronouns. Mistakes are bound to happen, but it is important to commit to learning to use the correct pronouns when referring to someone.

CREATE GENDER INCLUSIVE RESTROOMS

Using a public restroom can be an extremely stressful experience for TGD people because bathrooms are where many TGD people are harassed, confronted, physically hurt, judged, or stared at. Due to this fear, 59% of TGD people report refraining from using public restrooms to avoid these negative consequences (James et al., 2016). TGD people also report refraining from eating and drinking to avoid using a public restroom, and TGD people experience a higher risk for urinary tract infections from avoiding use of the restroom. Gendered restrooms limit TGD people’s ability to be in public spaces. In other words, *if you can’t pee in public, you can’t be in public.*

Are there restrooms in your department that can be converted into gender inclusive restrooms? Do you know where there are gender inclusive restrooms at your institution? What plans are (or will be) in place to create gender-inclusive bathrooms, family bathrooms, or all gender bathrooms? Single stall restrooms can easily be converted with new signs. Multi-stall restrooms can also be converted but may be more difficult to get approved by the institution. This guide provides examples of signage that can be used both outside and inside gender inclusive restrooms.

EXPAND OPTIONS ON DEMOGRAPHIC FORMS

When TGD people do not find options on demographic forms that represent them, they may feel unwelcome, misunderstood, or unsafe at that organization or institution. Here are examples of improving forms used for admissions, intake, and other purposes.

Instead of:

Gender (circle one): Male or Female

Try using:

Legal name: _____

Preferred name: _____

What sex were you assigned at birth? (What does your original birth certificate say?)

- Female
- Male
- Intersex

Which best describes your current gender identity?

- Cisgender (non-transgender) Woman/Girl
- Cisgender (non-transgender) Man/Boy
- Transgender Woman/Girl
- Transgender Man/Boy
- Non-binary
- Genderqueer
- Gender fluid
- Agender (non-gender, neutrois)
- Polygender (third gender)
- Indigenous/other culturally-specific gender minority (e.g., two-spirit, hijra, mähū, etc.)
- Another identity (please specify): _____

Gender Pronouns (Check all that apply):

- He/Him/His
- She/Her/Hers
- They/Them/Theirs
- Other: _____

RECEIVE TRAINING ON GENDER DIVERSITY

It is important for departments to receive training in this area and educate themselves on how best to provide a culturally affirming environment for TGD students and trainees, rather than having the burden of educating the department/training program on this subject fall onto TGD students. Have your department’s faculty and staff been trained on gender diversity and how to best support TGD students? Does your institution offer training in this area (keep in mind it would be ideal to have the trainer be someone outside of the department with expertise in gender diversity)? If it has not, are there plans in place to gain instruction on gender diversity and how to support TGD students?

INCLUDE TRANS AND QUEER AUTHORS ON SYLLABI

Gender and sexual minority students broadly, and TGD students in particular, typically experience school climate as negative. More specifically, students cite the silence around queer issues and the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in curriculum as especially negative

and impactful (Page, 2016⁷). Inclusive curriculum, or a curriculum where all students' access to knowledge is taken into account, can be anchored by including authors typically ignored in academia. In this case, including a variety of TGD authors on course and seminar syllabi (including in courses not specific to studies of TGD people) can both recognize the valuable contributions of trans and queer people to many areas of study and emphasize to TGD students that they are not alone. Below are resources that may be helpful to educators looking to develop an inclusive curriculum.

- Fostering Trans Inclusion in the Classroom (bit.ly/tgdguide1)
- Creating Trans-Inclusive Curricula (bit.ly/tgdguide2)
- Creating LGBTQ+ Inclusive Curriculum and Classroom Spaces at Colleges and Universities: A Guide for Faculty/Instructors (bit.ly/tgdguide3)
- LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum and Classroom Climate (bit.ly/tgdguide4)

CHALLENGE BINARY ASSUMPTIONS OF GENDER IN CONVERSATION

Too often, TGD students are subjected to misgendering and mislabeling, having a corrosive and invalidating effect on their desire to be perceived as and treated like the gender identity with which they identify. Sometimes this occurs as a blatant form of oppression, while other times it occurs out of ignorance. Although both instances are inexcusable, it is our hope that providing information on how to have conversations challenging binary assumptions of gender will be a step toward normalizing such conversations and allowing all members of our society to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of understanding gender identity as a fluid construct that exists more on a spectrum than a binary.

To help us conceptualize and distinguish gender identity from gender expression, sexual orientation, and anatomical sex, we have included the “Gender Unicorn” at the end of this document. As you will see, there are more than three options for each domain of gender and sexual identity, and three options describing one’s physical sex. Challenging a binary understanding of sex, sexuality, and gender involves a recognition that iterations of each of these categories of identities lie outside of the rigid two-option system enforced by hetero- and cis-normative social systems. If we can accept that each of these aspects of identity (e.g., sex, sexuality, gender identity, gender expression) are fluid concepts that flow into any number of self-defined (not societally prescribed) categories, we can take steps towards more openly and compassionately accepting, appreciating, understanding, and respecting TGD students, peers, family, and other TGD members of our community!

Lastly, to distinguish gender identity, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth can be very important in explaining that although a TGD student may appear one way, that appearance and someone else’s own appraisal and opinion of that appearance does not and should not dictate the nature and truth of that student’s internal reality and understanding of themselves. Thus, you can amicably yet assertively challenge such statements as shared above; for example, you might consider saying:

“He may identify as a trans man who is more feminine in his gender expression; it’s important to remember, though, that he identifies as a man, and I invite you to join me in respecting and honoring his understanding and expression of himself as a man.”

Another example:

“It can be difficult at first to use the right pronoun when someone has decided to change them, especially since we are socialized to gender things the moment we see them. But it is so important that we offer the respect and validation every person deserves to them by respecting their wish to be addressed by they/them/their pronouns, if those are the pronouns with which they identify.”

Having such conversations with colleagues as an ally may look like this...

Colleague: *Kip wants me to use he/him/his pronouns to describe her, but all I see when I look at her is a woman. I have tried to use he/him/his pronouns with her, but I get nervous and confused switching between pronouns, so I keep calling her by she/her pronouns. Honestly, I’m just afraid that by making more mistakes, I will just make it worse.*

Ally: *I acknowledge that many people are socialized to assign gender pronouns to others without first taking a pause to consider how a person identifies themselves. However, I feel it is important that people are afforded the dignity and respect of being addressed in the way that they identify.*

Colleague: *Okay...but if she wants me to use he/him/his pronouns, why does she still look and act like a woman?*

Ally: *Gender identity and gender expression are similar but different aspects of a person’s identity, and I think it’s important to realize that not everyone’s gender identity and gender expression match traditional expectations of gender roles and performance based on sex assigned at birth.*

Colleague: *Sure, but if he wants to be seen as a man, then why does he present like a woman? Why doesn’t he cut his hair or stop wearing makeup or wear more masculine clothing?*

Ally: *Sometimes, not even a person’s gender identity and gender expression seem to match within the traditional tropes of the gender binary, which dictate among other things that only women can wear makeup, that there are “masculine” ways of dressing by which men must abide, and so on. It’s not anyone’s job to regulate how these aspects of identity come together. It can be much more liberating, for everyone in our society, if we try not to make assumptions and take someone’s word that their expressed identity is authentic, true, and valid. If we can accept that Kip identifies as a trans man who uses he/him/his pronouns—regardless of whether or not his gender identity, gender expression, and sex assigned at birth “match” traditional expectations of gender—we can work towards building a community where everyone feels a little more seen, a little more respected, and a little more safe.*

7 Page, M. (2016). Teaching in the cracks: Using familiar pedagogy to advance LGBTQ- inclusive curriculum. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 60(6), 677-685. doi:10.1002/jaal.616

Now, let's practice!

How might you respond to the following comment?

Colleague: *My client told me a month ago that they'd like to go by Ash now instead of Ashton, and that they'd like to use they/them/their pronouns as a genderqueer individual...but it's just too difficult to make these changes consistently in my notes—I keep putting "Ashton" and she/her/hers! Do you think it's a big deal if I just keep it that way? I mean...it's even still "Ashton" in the electronic health record with a designation of "Female" for sex, and the psychiatrist they see on our team still uses she/her/hers pronouns in her notes for the client, so it should be fine, right?*

CENTER QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOR (QTPOC) IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT TRANSNESS

Queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) have different experiences within graduate programs and the academy as compared to their white counterparts. Typically, there are few faculty of color or queer/trans faculty in a program. The burden of educating, advocating, and mentoring often falls on the same individuals (both faculty and students). When there is an issue within a program, students are often expected to self-advocate and procure resources for change. This disproportionately impacts QTPOC, as they are burdened with navigating institutional bias and gender as people of color, on top of other stressors. Here are some things to you can do to center QTPOC voices in conversations about transness:

- As a program, become more aware of the unique stressors and needs of QTPOC. Are there training or learning opportunities for all faculty members within the department? This can avoid placing additional burdens on one faculty member and/or student(s) who might share these identities.

- Be intentional about recruiting and retaining students (and faculty) who are QTPOC, as this can begin to shift the culture of the program.
- Take the time to understand what student needs are without singling out certain students or making assumptions about them. Consider conducting a student needs assessment or an anonymous survey at the beginning of the year to proactively equip students with resources. Depending on the size of your program, you may want to think about hosting a town hall or community dialogue so that students and faculty can discuss these issues collaboratively.
- Be mindful of who is in what positions of power within your program.
 - If you hold power, provide or create spaces where QTPOC and allies can work together for change.
 - Recognize that allyship is in action, not self-identification. Allies are those who do ally-like things, not those who call themselves allies.
- Develop partnerships by working collaboratively with and not for QTPOC faculty and students, since such individuals have valuable expertise about the needs of their own communities.
- Recognize the leadership of queer women of color, trans women of color, and queer sex workers of color for the queer community (e.g., leadership in activism, intersectionality). There has been a lot of whitewashing and racism within the LGBTQ+ community, and it can be important and affirming to acknowledge the work done by queer Black and Latinx individuals in our history.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

APA Terms and Concepts Sheet

apa.org/pi/lgbt/programs/safe-supportive/lgbt/key-terms.pdf

APA Non-binary Fact Sheet

apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/advocacy/non-binary-facts.pdf

APAGS Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity Training Videos

apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/lgbt-training.aspx

Breaking the Binary in Psychology: APA Division 44 Newsletter

apadivisions.org/division-44/publications/newsletters/division/2019/04/support-nonbinary

Gender Spectrum

genderspectrum.org

National Center for Transgender Equality

nctequality.org

The Safe Zone Project

thesafezoneproject.com

The TransLatin@ Coalition

translatinacoalition.org

Transgender Law Center

transgenderlawcenter.org

Trans Student Educational Resources

transstudent.org

Terms and Definitions

GENERAL

Coming out

To recognize one's sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex identity, and to be open about it with oneself and with others.

LGBTQIA

An acronym that typically stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual. The acronym is also commonly written as LGBTQ.

Out

Refers to varying degrees of being open about one's sexual orientation and/or sex identity or gender identity.

Questioning

The process of considering one's own sexual orientation or gender identity. Usually, an individual is considering an identity that is not heterosexual or not cisgender. This can also be a static identity.

Queer

1) An umbrella term to refer to all LGBTQIA people.

2) A political statement, as well as a sexual orientation, which advocates breaking binaries and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid.

3) A simple label to explain a complex set of sexual identities and experiences. For example, a person who is attracted to multiple genders may identify as queer. Many older LGBTQ people feel the word has been hatefully used against them for too long and do not prefer to use it. However, younger generations of LGBTQ people have reclaimed the word as a proud label for their identity.

QPOC

Abbreviation for Queer People of Color.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Asexual

A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction towards any gender or sex.

Bisexual

A person who is attracted to two or more sexes/genders, but not necessarily simultaneously or equally. This was defined as a person who is attracted to both genders or both sexes, but since there are not only two sexes or genders, this definition is inaccurate.

Demisexual

A person who experiences sexual attraction only after forming a strong emotional connection with another person.

Fluidity

A notion or understanding that sexual orientation, sexuality, and gender are dynamic identities that may change over time as individuals discover more about themselves. Fluidity can be an identity, such as sexually fluid or gender fluid.

Gay

A man who is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to men. Colloquially used as an umbrella term to include all LGBTQIA people. Generally preferred over the clinical term homosexual.

Heterosexuality

Sexual, emotional, and/or romantic attraction to a sex other than your own. Commonly thought of as attraction to the opposite sex or gender but since there are not only two sexes or genders, this definition is inaccurate.

Lesbian

A woman who is emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to women.

Pansexual

A person who is fluid in sexual orientation and is attracted to others regardless of gender.

Sexual Orientation

The direction of one's sexual attractions. It is on a continuum and not a set of absolute categories. Sometimes referred to as affectional orientation or sexual identity. Sexual orientation can change over time through a multistage developmental process.

SEX & GENDER

Androgyny

A gender expression that exists outside of masculinity and femininity.

Cisgender

Refers to people whose gender identity and assigned sex are congruent by predominant cultural standards: women who were designated female, men who were designated male.

Drag

The performance of gender on a temporary basis, which may or may not pertain to daily life. A drag queen is a person who appears as a woman, and a drag king is a person who appears as a man.

Intersex

Someone whose combination of chromosomes, hormones, and sex organs differs from the expected patterns of male or female. Formerly known as hermaphrodite, which is now derogatory.

Gender Binary

The idea that there are only two genders—male/female or man/woman.

Gender Expression

Personality traits, behaviors, appearance, and mannerisms pertaining to one's own gender identity. Words that refer to gender expression include masculinity, femininity, and androgyny.

Gender Identity

The way that people self-identify and define their genders. Words that refer to gender identity include: man, woman, transgender, and genderqueer.

Non-Binary

A person who identifies outside of gender binaries. Some non-binary people identify under the trans umbrella. Common terms include agender, genderqueer, genderfluid, and gender-nonconforming.

Personal Gender Pronouns (PGPs)

A phrase used as an affirmative way of asking someone how they would like to be referred. Common examples: she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, ze/hir/hirs.

Sex

Refers to a person based on their anatomy (chromosomes, hormones, and/or organs). Sex terms are male, female, and intersex. Sex is often thought of as biological and legally designated at birth; however, it is experienced as socially and culturally constructed.

Transgender or Trans

Describes a person whose gender identity or expression differs from the social expectations of their assigned sex or gender. Transgender or trans are sometimes considered umbrella terms for anyone whose gender identities transgress societal norms. Trans people may or may not identify with a particular descriptive term (e.g. genderqueer, MTF, FTM).

Trans Man

Someone assigned female at birth who identifies as a man.

Trans Woman

Someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman.

BIAS**Biphobia**

The intolerance of bisexual people. Biphobia perpetuates the myth that bisexual people have not made up their minds.

Discrimination

The act of showing partiality or prejudice; a prejudicial act.

Hate crime

Hate crime legislation often defines a hate crime as a crime motivated by the actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexual orientation of any person.

Homophobia

The intolerance of same-sex desires within others or one's self. This assumes that heterosexuality is superior and reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is somehow better or more "right" than queerness.

Outing

Unwanted disclosure of another person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Privilege

Those benefits derived automatically by holding a dominant identity. Examples of dominant identities are heterosexual, cisgender, and white.

Stereotype

An exaggerated, oversimplified belief about an entire group of people without regard for individual differences.

Transphobia

The intolerance of trans people. Transphobia is manifested in a number of ways, including policing someone else's gender expression in gendered spaces or inciting violence based on someone's trans identity.

Terms adapted from:

Resource Center for Sexual & Gender Diversity, University of Santa Barbara

Gender Pronouns 101

Why are gender pronouns important?

Though we may not think about pronouns as we use them daily, gendered language has an impact. Understanding pronouns beyond she/he creates space for experiences outside of the gender binary. We have been taught to make assumptions about pronouns based on the way someone looks and the way we perceive them. It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. In order to affirm each person's gender identity, it is important that we check in about pronouns.

Additionally, pronouns are not *preferred*, they are *established*. Referring to "preferred pronouns" can imply that it is optional to use a person's pronouns. This simple effort can make a profound difference in a trans person's experience of safety, respect, and support.

How do I know which pronouns to use?

Figure out if you truly need to know. Though it may be coming from a very supportive and inclusive intention, we do not always need to know the pronouns of strangers or people around us. However, if this is someone you connect with regularly, and you do not know how to refer to them, it is best to ask.

How do I ask about pronouns?

Simply asking, "*What pronouns do you use?*" can provide an opportunity for someone to offer their personal pronouns for you to use. Other options include: "*How would you like me to refer to you?*" or "*How would you like to be addressed?*"

Previous parlance recommended "preferred pronouns" as a reference to gender pronouns. This has since been updated to avoid the implication that using the correct pronouns is optional (<http://www.transstudent.org/pronouns101/>).

Begin by offering the pronouns you use: "*I use they, them, their pronouns. Do you mind if I ask what pronouns you'd like me to use when referring to you? I want to make sure I respect your identity.*" At times, someone may be confused by the question. This provides an opportunity for you to educate them about pronouns. Educating someone about pronouns lifts the burden from a TGD person who likely has this conversation many times per day.

What if I make a mistake?

It is OK to make mistakes. Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, such as "*I'm sorry, I meant ze.*" If you refer to people with the wrong pronouns in front of others, they may assume it is OK to use the wrong pronouns as well. If you realize your mistake after the situation, apologize in private and move on.

It can be tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel that you messed up or how hard it is for you to get it right, but please, do not! Creating a spectacle makes the person who was misgendered feel awkward and responsible for comforting you. If you use the wrong pronoun, apologize, correct it, and move on.

If someone corrects the pronouns you are using, thank them and commit to using the correct pronouns in the future. Be grateful if someone trusts you enough to disclose that information to you, and also recognize the courage it takes for them to give you feedback and/or come out to you. It is not necessary to ask why their pronouns may have changed.

How do I respond when someone uses the wrong pronoun for someone?

It is possible someone may not be out to family, friends, professors, or others in their communities. In those cases, it is common for someone to switch their pronouns based on context. It is important to consider this in order to respect their safety. When checking in with the individual, it may be a good time to ask about how they would like you to respond to someone misgendering them.

Sometimes, correcting someone causes more embarrassment for the person, and it is important that they have autonomy over their identity. It may be appropriate to gently correct someone who is misgendering them without further embarrassment for them. This can include, "*Actually, Jay uses they/them pronouns,*" and moving on.

It may be appropriate to approach the individual and say something like "*I noticed someone was misgendering you earlier, and I know that can be really hurtful. Would it be OK if I reminded them about your pronouns? I want to make sure this group is a safe space for you.*" Follow up if necessary, but take your cues from the individual's comfort level.

If people consistently use the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to show you care about the safety of trans people.

Resource adapted from:

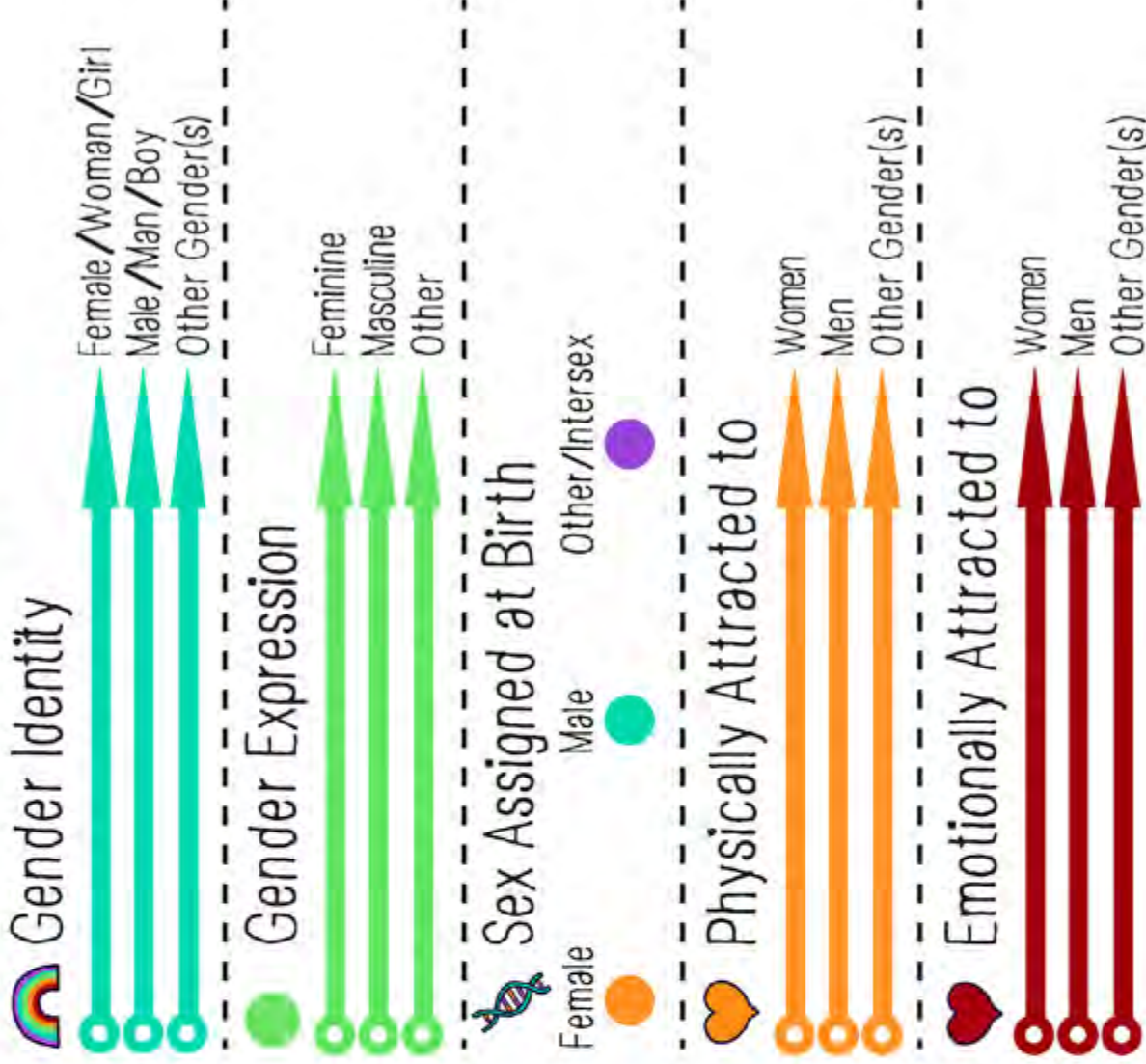
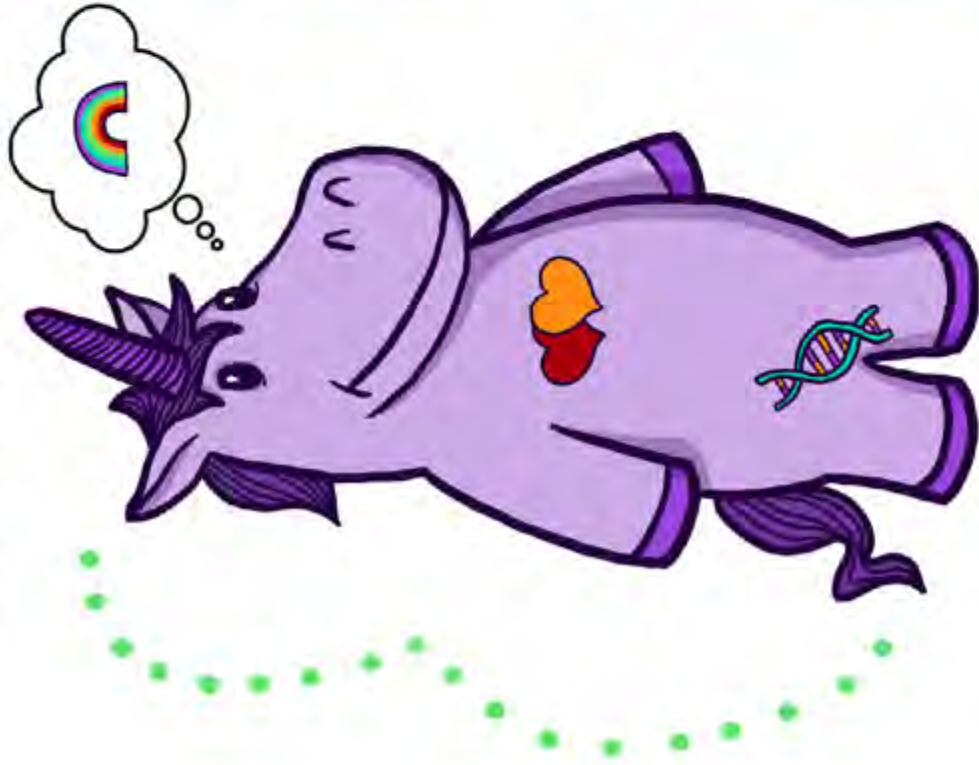
Resource Center for Sexual & Gender Diversity, University of Santa Barbara



This image was created by former APAGS-CSOGD member Kiet Hyunh.

The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by:
TSER
Trans Student Educational Resources



To learn more, go to:
www.transstudent.org/gender

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore

