Gender-Neutral Pronouns Make Headlines

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

Pronouns matter.

There has been a cascade of recent news about the use of ‘they’ and ‘them’ as gender-neutral pronouns. These stories provide a useful teachable moment about the importance of pronouns and in understanding people who are non-binary. Evolving knowledge of pronouns is a result of our society becoming more aware of gender identity and expression.

Here are a few terms and definitions that may be helpful:
**Merriam-Webster adds ‘they’ as a singular pronoun**

The use of gender-neutral pronouns has become more prevalent in recent years. Merriam-Webster has taken note. In September 2019, they added another definition of the word “they” to explain the word’s use as a singular pronoun. One of their definitions of ‘they’ now reads: “used to refer to a single person whose gender identity is non-binary.”

The addition signals an important milestone in recognizing that gender does not have to conform to the rigid binary of male and female. Non-binary people often use gender-neutral pronouns like they, them and theirs. Some use other gender-neutral pronouns. It is relevant and meaningful that our go-to online dictionary now includes “they” as one of those pronouns.

**Pew research offers a new survey on the use of gender-neutral pronouns**

During the same month, the Pew Research Center reported that 60% of Americans have heard “at least a little” about people using gender-neutral pronouns such as ‘they.’ Of them, 22% have heard “a lot” about people who use those pronouns. Encouragingly, 73% of young adults ages 18-29 have heard about people using

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- **Gender Expression**: Refers to how people communicate their gender to oneself and others through appearance, behavior, dress, etc.
- **Gender Identity**: Relates to a person’s internal sense of their own gender. Since gender identity is internal, one’s gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.
- **Non-Binary**: People whose gender identity falls outside the “gender binary” or who don’t identify as exclusively male or female.
- **Transgender**: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Cisgender**: A term for people whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.
gender-neutral pronouns, and 32% personally know someone who uses these pronouns.

The Pew data also reveals that people have varying levels of comfort in using gender-neutral pronouns. Roughly 50% say they are somewhat or very comfortable using a gender-neutral pronoun. There are distinctions among age groups. Practice in using gender-neutral language can help. As the use of these pronouns becomes more public and prominent, people will likely move from uncomfortable to confident with the terms.

**Sam Smith announces their use of they/them on Instagram**

Sam Smith, a British singer and songwriter and recipient of several awards, recently updated their pronouns. On their Instagram and Twitter, Smith wrote: “I’ve decided I am changing my pronouns to they/them. After a lifetime of being at war with my gender, I’ve decided to embrace myself for who I am, inside and out.”

Smith came out as gay in 2014. A few years later, they addressed their gender identity as non-binary: “I don’t know what the title would be, but I feel just as much woman as I am man.” This latest development in Smith’s life contributes to the public conversation about gender-neutral pronouns.

Research suggests that we are increasingly likely to know someone who is non-binary and uses gender-neutral pronouns. Because pronouns are used frequently in everyday interactions and written communication, being respectful and inclusive with pronouns is vital. We should work hard not to make assumptions about people’s pronouns and accept and strive to use pronouns that align with each person’s identity.

One way that people can practice allyship and use gender-inclusive language is to provide their pronouns upfront. It challenges the common practice of assuming someone’s pronouns. Recently, three 2020 presidential candidates added their pronouns to their Twitter bios. Increasingly, people are placing their pronouns in email signatures, digital profiles and nametags.
Questions to Start the Conversation

- Why are pronouns important?
- What do you know about people who identify as non-binary and those who use gender-neutral pronouns?
- What do you think about the Merriam-Webster dictionary adding ‘they’ as a singular pronoun? Are there times when you have seen ‘they’ used as a singular pronoun?
- Do you know anyone who identifies as non-binary and who uses gender-neutral pronouns?
- How can we make sure to use accurate pronouns and names for people?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- How comfortable are you with using gender-neutral pronouns such as they and them? What would help you feel more confident in using gender-neutral pronouns?
- Is the use of pronouns addressed in your school and if so, how?
- How can our school, community and society be more inclusive of people who are transgender and non-binary?

Take Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?
Learn more about people who are transgender and non-binary by reading books and articles, following specific hashtags and viewing films and TV shows that feature people who identify as trans or non-binary.

Talk with others at school, including staff and administrators, about making school more respectful and inclusive for transgender and non-binary people, including the use of pronouns.

Connect with local or national organizations (or start one of your own) that address gender identity issues by working with them directly, joining their fundraising efforts, or volunteering.

Additional Resources

- Let's Get it Right: Using Correct Pronouns and Names
- Transgender Identity and Issues (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Pronouns: Why Do They Matter? (HS student-direct activities)
- Beyond the Binary: Discussing Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Identity in K-12 Schools
- Children's and Young Adult Books about Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Identity
- About one-in-five U.S. adults know someone who goes by a gender-neutral pronoun (Pew Research Center report)