

Understanding and using pronouns

Introduction

At KeshetUK we are asked a lot about terminology and language and specifically about pronouns. So we have put together a few of the most frequently asked questions. Please do let us know if you've got any more or would like to talk about this further!

Language is a constantly evolving tool we use to communicate with one another. As people's understanding of gender has changed, people have begun using language to reflect this more nuanced reality. You may have already seen people begin to state their pronouns on social media profiles, on their Zoom names and in their email signatures.

We hope to explain in the following what pronouns are, how they can be used, and why using them respectfully is important. It is important to stress that sharing one's pronouns should always be optional to avoid outing someone or making them feel uncomfortable. If you don't know someone's pronouns or they don't want to share, you can use their name or use they/them pronouns.

What is gender and what are gendered pronouns?

Gender can be understood to consist of your gender identity and gender expression. Gender identity is a person's sense of their own gender whether a man, woman, or non-binary person. Gender expression is the outward expression of one's gender; it can be shown through clothing, haircuts, voice or body characteristics, make-up, and many other things. Sometimes what is expressed externally matches with societies expectations of a person's gender identity, and sometimes what is expressed externally does not.

Pronouns are words we use in everyday conversation to refer to people (or nouns) without naming them. Typically, we use them to convey information with more ease. Some pronouns are she/her/hers, he/him/his, and they/them/theirs.

These are examples of how you might use pronouns:

- David enjoys playing fetch with his dog.
- Carol woke up for work early because she had to prepare for an important meeting.
- The children are unhappy because they lost their football.

What are gender-neutral pronouns?

Gender-neutral pronouns do not connect any gender to the individual you are talking about. The pronouns most used to refer to individuals in English are gendered – like he/him/his, she/her/hers. They describe the gender of the person being referred to.

They/them/their can refer to an individual or collection of people regardless of the gender identities of those people, meaning they are gender neutral. For example: 'all the children in Year 10 went to the theatre. They will be back at school at 8pm'. Similarly, we frequently use the singular they and them in English to refer to an individual whose gender is unknown to us. For example, 'Someone left behind their bag; they must be looking for it.'

People who fall outside the gender binary, such as non-binary people, often use gender-neutral pronouns such as they/them/theirs. Some other gender-neutral pronouns you may encounter are ze/zir/zirs. and ey/em/eirs. These are examples of neopronouns, or new (neo) pronouns. Neopronouns are often words created, in order for there to be a complete separation from the existing gendered pronouns (e.g she/her or he/him). If you encounter neopronouns and are unsure how to pronounce them, it's okay to ask!

Why is using the correct pronouns important and how can Jewish values help guide us?

Because pronouns in English can convey the gender of a person, it is important to most people that the pronouns used to refer to them match their gender identity. We should therefore aim to use the correct pronouns for people out of the same sense of respect for others that makes us want to pronounce someone's name correctly, or not refer to people by a nickname that they dislike. It is also important that we do not assume gender, much like we wouldn't assume someone's name. When we assume someone's gender, we are implying that people must appear in a specific way to use certain pronouns.

For many people, it can be offensive or even harmful to be referred to as the wrong gender, and this can happen by using the wrong gendered pronouns. This can also be referred to as being misgendered. This is particularly true for transgender and gender non-conforming people. There is a Jewish thought that embarrassing others in public is a significant transgression. While this mistake may seem harmless and small particularly when it's unintentional, the people being misgendered may experience this frequently. These actions can add up to feelings of great pain and disrespect for the individual being misgendered.

Multiple studies have shown that having people in their lives who use the correct gender pronouns[1] to refer to them can have a profound effect on the well-being of transgender people, particularly transgender youth. This simple act can dramatically reduce reported feelings of depression and suicide attempts for these people. In Judaism there are many values which are encouraged, including that no-one should be hurt by breaches of Ona'at Devarim (causing pain with words) or excluded through lack of Kavod Habriyot (respect for other people). Being careful to use the correct gender pronouns means we are taking steps to live out these values.

What do I do if I use the wrong pronouns for someone?

Despite our best intentions, everyone will use the wrong pronouns for someone at some point. When this happens, quickly apologise, correct the pronouns, and move the conversation on. If you are corrected by someone on your use of pronouns, simply thank them for informing you and endeavour to use the correct pronouns in the future.

It is important to recognise that over-apologising can be harmful, as well. It can make the person who has been misgendered feel guilty for wanting to be referred to correctly or make them feel responsible for consoling you. It can also draw further unwanted attention to them, making them even more uncomfortable.

What do I do if I do not know what pronouns to use for someone?

The best thing to do when you do not know someone's pronouns is to just ask! Asking someone what their pronouns are in good faith is not offensive. Be careful not to single people out if you are in a large group, however.

If the situation does not permit for you to ask someone directly what their pronouns are, you can always use their name or the gender-neutral pronouns they/them/theirs. For example, 'Sam is attending our session on Tuesday. They are going to bring their own lunch'.

Why might I want to share my pronouns?

It has become increasingly common for people to share their pronouns on their email signatures, in social media profiles, and at the beginning of meetings. You could support use of pronouns amongst your colleagues but it's a good idea not to force people to do it – some people might not want to share their pronouns for a variety of reasons.

You might think that your pronouns are 'obvious,' but sharing your pronouns can serve several key functions. Firstly, it normalises people sharing and asking for people's pronouns, helping to create a culture of using the correct pronouns and not making assumptions. Secondly, by sharing your pronouns, it makes other people feel more comfortable sharing their pronouns with you. Thirdly, it can act as a signal to trans and non-binary people that you are supportive of them and may be an ally to support them.

And finally, it can prevent embarrassing someone or yourself. We've all sent that email to Ashley and assumed their gender – and now we don't need to do that. We can either use gender-neutral pronouns, use their name or perhaps Ashley will have their pronouns in their signature.

This document was produced in partnership with the Jewish Leadership Council.

[1] The Trevor Project 2020 National Survey and Russell, et al. (2018). Chosen Name Use Is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation, and Suicidal Behavior Among Transgender Youth. *The Journal of adolescent health: official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 63(4), 503–505.