

Bitesized Belonging: What are pronouns and why do they matter?

Pronouns are the words we use to talk about a person when we're not using their name. Pronouns are often linked to our gender and our identity and allow us to present ourselves to the world in a certain way.

In English, pronouns are gendered, which means that the pronouns we use often refers to that person's gender. However, because we can't always tell someone's gender—and in many cases even how a person “presents” (how they appear to the world and the assumptions we make based on that appearance) may be inconsistent with the pronouns they use—we can't really know for sure what pronouns a person uses until we ask.

Some people find this difficult or frustrating. But it's important to remember that using a person's correct pronouns is about basic respect. Many people change their names—shortening them to nicknames or using middle names instead of first names—and we respect those choices because we inherently believe everyone has the right to be called by the name of their choice. It's in the same vein of respect and humanity that we use people's correct pronouns.

Struggling with pronouns? Here are some tips to get it right!

- **Don't assume anyone's gender.** How a person presents may be different than how they identify.
- **Get into the habit of introducing yourself with your pronouns.** “Hello, my name is Necko, I go by (he/him)” or “I'm Necko, I use (he/him) pronouns” are simple and effect ways of getting into the habit of using pronouns.
- **Overcome the dissonance with repetition.** Sometimes someone will tell us their pronouns but the dissonance of how they present themselves to the world can be difficult. When someone offers you their pronouns and it feels confusing, focus on that person and mentally repeat their name and their pronouns ten times. For example, “Ace goes by (they/them), Ace goes by (they/them)”
- **Don't be afraid to ask.** “What pronouns do you use?” is a perfectly respectful and polite way of inquiring about pronouns.
- **Multiple means you get to pick!** If Sally goes by (she/her) and (they/them) that usually means she's okay with you calling them by either of those pronouns. Since she doesn't mind either, you get to pick how you refer to them!
- **Warning! Subject to change.** Some folks change their pronouns as they learn more about their gender and identity. Be flexible.

Don't fear unfamiliar pronouns. Some folks may go by pronouns you've never heard/seen before. Like xe, xem, xyr, xyrs, xemself! Most folks who use unfamiliar pronouns will offer a neutral pronoun (they/them) and/or grace as you adjust. Don't hesitate to ask these folks to refer you to a resource so you can better use their correct pronouns.