

# WHAT ARE PRONOUNS?

You may have noticed that our updated enrollment forms include a space to enter your and your student's personal pronouns. But what are pronouns?

**Merriam Webster** defines pronouns as:

1. “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.”
2. “the third person personal pronouns (such as he/him, she/her, and they/them) that a person goes by.”

Simply put, **pronouns are words we use in place of proper names**, so we don't have to repeat them repeatedly.

Without pronouns, sentences can become clunky. “Allison likes to go to the movies with Allison's friends. Allison and Allison's friends enjoy watching movies together.” A particular beloved red monster is known for talking like that, but most people prefer to substitute pronouns for names when we talk.

**Everybody uses pronouns when we speak**, and most people have pronouns they want to be addressed by that reflect who they are. For many people, those pronouns line up with their gender assigned at birth, but **not everyone keeps the pronouns that their parents used for them at birth**. Some people realize that those pronouns aren't the right fit for them, and they settle on a different set of pronouns. This realization is often the case for many transgender and non-binary people.

**Why does it matter?** Using someone's pronouns demonstrates that you value them and who they are. Addressing someone by pronouns that aren't the ones they've asked you to use, however, can make that person uncomfortable and make them feel unsafe around you if you do it deliberately. Cisgender (that is, people who are their assigned gender) don't like being addressed by the wrong pronouns either. Just as they deserve the respect of being addressed with dignity, so do transgender and non-binary people.

**What if I don't know their pronouns?** Knowing how to broach the topic of pronouns with a stranger can be challenging. It's usually best to introduce yourself and offer your pronouns. If the person feels comfortable sharing, they'll take your gesture as an invitation to share theirs too. **Many people include their pronouns on their nametags or in their email signatures.** Doing so makes it easier to know how to address people. When cisgender people choose to do this, it also normalizes the sharing of pronouns and makes it less awkward for transgender and non-binary people to share theirs.

**What if I get it wrong?** Humans are flawed and make mistakes. If you accidentally use the wrong pronouns, you can briefly apologize, correct yourself, and move on. Correcting yourself and moving on without an apology may even be appropriate. Most people understand that mistakes happen and won't be angry over a simple error that gets corrected. It's okay to get it wrong sometimes, so have grace with yourself.

**How do I avoid mistakes?** Again, people make mistakes, and everybody slips up once in a while. If you are trying to support someone you know and will interact with regularly, an excellent way to cut down on mistakes is to make the switch in your head. Think to yourself that that person is the gender they've told you, and think of them with their pronouns. Whenever you think about them, correct yourself if you think of the wrong pronouns. Use their pronouns when speaking of them to others, even when they aren't around. The constant practice will help you adjust more naturally and quickly than if you keep bouncing back and forth between their pronouns and their old pronouns. It will still take time, but the practice makes it easier. Again, have grace with yourself if you make a mistake.

**Where can I learn more?** The website [Pronouns.org](https://www.pronouns.org) is a handy resource for learning about pronouns.