

DADD *Express*

Volume 32, Number 3 • Summer 2021



A publication of the DIVISION ON AUTISM AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES, a unit of the Council for Exceptional Children
Focusing on individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and related disabilities

Teachers' Corner

Why Pronouns Matter



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May 2018 was the first time the phrase “What are your preferred pronouns?” was entered into a Google search engine, and there has been an upward trend in pronoun-related searches since (Google Trends, 2020). By 2019, Merriam-Webster declared “they,” a nonbinary pronoun option, word of the year (Merriam-Webster, 2019). At the same time, the dictionary published an expanded definition recognizing “they” as an appropriate pronoun for a single individual. While the expanded definition may seem irrelevant to teaching those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), there are clear reasons why special education teachers should consider pronoun usage with all students.

Why Is This Important for People with ASD?

Research suggests there is a strong intersection between individuals with ASD and those who fall outside of cis-heterosexual norms (Dewinter et al., 2017; George & Stokes, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2018). In fact, individuals with ASD are 7.59 times more likely to identify with a gender variance than members of the general population (Strang et al., 2014). Compared to those without a diagnosis, individuals with ASD have more than double the risk of suicide (Kirby et al., 2019), and youth who identify as LGBTQ+ have three times the rate of suicide attempts compared to heterosexual counterparts (Marshal et al., 2011). The intersectionality of identities puts LGBTQ+ individuals with autism at a significant risk of harm, making it imperative to consider an educator’s role in reducing this risk.

What are Preferred Pronouns?

People who identify with pronouns different from those assigned at birth commonly identify as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) community. LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term used to represent those who

identify outside of gender and heterosexual norms. Changes in pronoun identification are often in response to dysphoria related to a person’s gender presentation. Specific pronoun use aligns the pronoun with the person’s gender expression (LGBT Resource Center, n.d.; Rizzo-Smith, 2020). Within the gender binary there are two forms of pronouns: she/her/hers and he/him/his. It is now common for individuals to identify outside of the gender binary and subscribe to different pronouns. They/them/theirs is the most common nonbinary set of pronouns; other less common but no less valid alternatives exist.

How Do I Find Out Someone’s Pronouns?

Pronoun identification has become more prevalent in society with visibility in professional emails, on name tags, or included during an introduction. It is becoming standard practice for all people to identify their pronouns, regardless of how they identify, to normalize expressing pronouns for everyone and not single out those who may have different than expected pronouns (LGBT Resource Center, n.d.). Current etiquette allows for a person to introduce their pronouns when meeting someone new and to ask for the other person’s pronouns. If a person does not immediately volunteer their pronouns in conversation it is OK to ask, which can be made easier if offering your pronouns. If you aren’t comfortable asking someone their pronouns and are unsure about their pronouns, take cues from others more familiar with the person and use gender-neutral options (they/them/theirs).

What If I Use the Wrong Pronouns?

The appropriate response when you use wrong pronouns may vary depending on the environment and the individual. The LGBTQ+ Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin recommends that in some cases a brief recognition of the error may be warranted, but often quickly changing to use the appropriate pronouns is sufficient (2020). It’s inappropriate to have an extended conversation about how you feel bad or how difficult it is to get it right. Asking to have your pronouns respected is not to make you uncomfortable, but rather to make the person requesting specific pronouns to be comfortable (LGBT Resource Center, n.d.).

Educators’ Impact

Teachers are an integral and influential part of a student’s life, and with that comes the opportunity to make a large impact in the lives of all students. Using a person’s identified preferred

pronouns reduces risk and prevalence of anxiety, depression, and suicide. Of transgender youth who have attempted suicide, 92% of survey respondents reported attempting taking their own life before the age of 25 (The Trevor Project, 2019). School staff are contacting LGBTQ+ students at an age when they are most vulnerable. Respecting someone by using the pronouns they have identified for themselves is an act that can benefit the asker.

Research suggests that the risk of suicide in LGBTQ+ youth decreases if they have one supporting adult in their life (Trevor Project, 2019). The accepting adult does not have to be a parent; it can be a teacher, clinician, or neighbor. That accepting adult could be you. Accepting a person is more than simply offering verbal support of LGBTQ+ youth, it is reflecting and demonstrating support in actions. Recent figures suggest that transgender and nonbinary youth populations have half the suicide rate when they have their pronouns respected in all or most of their lives. Respecting pronouns in youth is a form of suicide and harm prevention.

Are you an educator who strives to create safe spaces for your students and believes in reducing harm? Then you are an educator who should support using identified personal pronouns. Looking for more resources to help educate yourself and your colleagues, or seeking out resources on creating a more inclusive classroom? Consider accessing the *History Un erased* curriculums, The Trevor Project, and the GLSEN (formerly the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) Safe Space Kit. The efforts of individuals, especially those in positions of influence, can make an incredible difference in the lives of youth at risk. ■

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