



## Fostering Safe and Supportive Schools through Language

Schools should be safe and supportive spaces that provide every student the opportunity to thrive and learn. With this shared value, we want to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex (LGBTQI+) youth are supported through the language used in schools throughout New Mexico.

Language is a dynamic aspect of our daily lives that changes over time depending on the needs and wants of the people using it and what works best for them. Embracing multiple identities and experiences, LGBTQI+ communities develop and use language to affirm and express their identities. Because of the evolving nature of language, it may be difficult to remain up-to-date with the language that LGBTQI+ youth and adults are using today. Nevertheless, as an ally to LGBTQI+ communities, it is important to actively strive to use inclusive and appropriate language to support your LGBTQI+ students and colleagues. The following information may be helpful for you as you navigate the LGBTQI+ language landscape.

### Pronouns

Pronouns are the language tool that we use to refer to others (and ourselves) when we do not want to keep using an individual's name repeatedly. It is a clever way to more efficiently communicate with those around us, but we often make assumptions regarding which pronoun to use based on our own perceptions of a person's gender. This can be harmful if we do not pause to check these assumptions. The most common pronouns we use when referring to other individuals are *he, him, his* and *she, her, hers*. You may also have heard some of your students or colleagues say they prefer more gender-neutral pronouns like *they, them, theirs*. Some people may even be comfortable with more than one set of pronouns. All these pronouns have to do with an individual's gender identity. In the English language, the pronouns *he, him, his* are masculine and *she, her, hers* are feminine. The most common gender-neutral pronouns are *they, them, theirs* and are generally used when referring to more than one person. However, it is also completely acceptable (and has been for ages) to use these pronouns when referring to one person. Other pronouns that you may hear are: *ze/hir, phe/per, thon/thon*, and *ey/em*. In the end, all that matters is that we respect and affirm those around us by using their asserted pronouns.

### Helpful Tips

- If you are not sure what pronouns you should use, just ask like this, "What pronouns should I use for you?" You can also listen for verbal cues from others who know the person well.
- If you find it difficult to use *they, them, theirs* to refer to an individual person, you might play a little game on your own and try referring to anyone you see while driving down the road using only these pronouns.
- Next time you introduce yourself, try including your pronouns like this, "Hi, my name is Jax, and my pronouns are he/him or they/them."
- Before you send your next email, go ahead and add your pronouns to your email signature. You can add them just below your name like this: Pronouns – she, her, hers.

### Common Mistakes

Many people are unfamiliar with the language used by the LGBTQI+ community to describe themselves and each other. This can lead to uncomfortable situations in which mistakes are made that may unintentionally harm LGBTQI+ youth and adults. Mistakes are bound to happen, and we all struggle with words from time to time, but it is important to learn from them in order to support your LGBTQI+ students and colleagues. If you do make a mistake, simply apologize, correct yourself, and continue the conversation. While it is important to apologize, dwelling on the mistake with continual apologizing is not helpful. Here are a few common language mistakes and how you can avoid them:

### Use Transgender as an Adjective without -ed

- Correct: "Susanna is transgender."
- Incorrect: "Susanna is transgendered."

### **Use Transgender as an Adjective, not a Noun**

- Correct: “Dave is a transgender man.” | “The transgender community is fabulous.”
- Incorrect: “Dave is a transgender.” | “The transgenders are fabulous.”

### **Use Transition or Transitioning, not “Transgendering”**

- Correct: “Jamie is transitioning.” | “Jamie is going through their transition.”
- Incorrect: “Jamie is transgendering.”

### **Use Assigned Female (or Male) at Birth, not “Biologically Female (or Male)” or “Born a Woman (or Man)”**

- Correct: “He was assigned male at birth.”
- Incorrect: “He was born a man.” | “He is biologically male.”

### **Use Gay or Lesbian, not “Homosexual”**

- Correct: “She is lesbian.” | “She is a lesbian.” | “He is gay.” | “He is a gay man.”
- Incorrect: “She is homosexual.” | “He is a gay.”

### **Use Intersex, not “Hermaphrodite”**

- Correct: “Vicki is intersex.” | “Vicky is an intersex person.”
- Incorrect: “Vicky is a hermaphrodite.”

## **Moving Forward**

There are a lot of terms to become familiar with when doing your best to use language that creates a safe and supportive school for all students. Remember that language will keep changing and evolving over time, so it is important to continue asking questions and learning as this happens. If a student or colleague chooses to share their sexual orientation or gender identity with you, it is important to carefully listen to how they identify and the terms they use to describe their identity. Above all, it is important to respect and use the terms LGBTQI+ individuals share with you. By doing this, you will be helping to make your school safer and more supportive for your LGBTQI+ students and colleagues.

## **Resources**

Transgender Resource Center of New Mexico

<https://www.tgrcnm.org/>

GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender Glossary of Terms

<https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>

GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Intersex Glossary of Terms

<https://www.glaad.org/reference/lgbtq>

The Gender Book

<http://www.thegenderbook.com/>

Intersex Media Guide (interACT – Advocates for Intersex Youth)

<https://interactadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/INTERSEX-MEDIAGUIDE-interACT.pdf>

Pronouns: A Resource for Educators (GLSEN)

<https://www.glsen.org/article/pronouns-resource-educators>

It’s OK To Use “They” To Describe One Person: Here’s Why

[https://www.dictionary.com/e/they-is-a-singular-pronoun/?fbclid=IwAR0Xo3\\_6nUMRyr2W5xIRAmP7LzKT7V2zVntURj6hJDInvU70UXB\\_ctumBnU](https://www.dictionary.com/e/they-is-a-singular-pronoun/?fbclid=IwAR0Xo3_6nUMRyr2W5xIRAmP7LzKT7V2zVntURj6hJDInvU70UXB_ctumBnU)

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