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Ask The Experts: 10 Tips for Honoring Pronouns and Identity

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Cisgender heteronormative structures have permeated family law. However, as these norms shift, it is critical for professionals to become familiar with the current and more expansive language used to describe transgender and nonbinary folks. Pronouns, traditionally aligned with binary categories of gender, have also become more expansive, inclusive, and a very personal aspect of identity. As we strive to be more trauma-responsive professionals, it is important to be open to learning language and its meaning to create and maintain more welcoming environments for the families we serve.

This article, inspired by the webinar, *Gender and Sex in Family Law: How to Work with a Gender Diverse Population* (sponsored by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee in April 2023 and available through the AFCC Webinar Archives), includes some tips for honoring personal pronouns and respecting identity of those we encounter to be more trauma-responsive in family court.

- 1. Make no assumptions.** Take a moment right now to think about the first thing you think about someone when you see them. Is it your assumption about their gender? This need to know someone's gender is a deeply held bias in our society and within our own systems. The first question often asked of a pregnant person is "what are you having?" That question assumes gender and sex even though that is not even the question being asked. Thus, unraveling the need to assume gender upon first meeting someone takes time, and it is the most important way to honor pronouns and identity. Working to unravel our immediate assumptions is key to the rest of these tips, and it is often the most difficult.
- 2. Learn the truth about gender identity.** Many of us have been raised to believe very specific ways of seeing gender as binary and as determined by birth. Despite rhetoric, the idea of gender identity as a spectrum has been around as long as people have existed. Many cultures, including likely your own culture if

you go back far enough, have had space for multiple gender identities. It is important to let go of the notion that thinking outside the gender binary is new and recognize these are identities that have always existed, and they are finally finding language in today's society.

3. **Take time to learn why pronouns matter.** Pronouns are the way we recognize and honor a person's gender identity. For people who do not fit within the proscribed gender binary, having their pronouns respected is a way to say, "I respect who you are, and you are safe with me." Mental health issues increase in people whose pronouns are not respected, and we know that when people feel seen, heard, and understood, their mental health issues decrease. The easiest way to show someone they are seen, heard, and understood is to use their correct pronouns. (While we are here, the term is "correct pronouns," not "preferred pronouns," because pronouns are not a preference; they are key to identity.)
4. **Normalize asking about pronouns.** Remember tip number one to make no assumptions? The act of asking about pronouns always ensures that no one feels called out when we ask. If we ask all the time and not only when we cannot make an easy assumption about someone's pronouns, then no one feels like they do not belong. As such, it is sometimes even more important to ask in spaces where no one is nonbinary or transgender. Normalization makes it safer for everyone.
5. **Ask questions and learn important language around gender.** It is easy to feel like there are new words and ideas all the time, but remember, gender diversity is not new. Learning terminology is simpler than you might think, and it goes a long way to helping people feel seen, heard, and understood. Using that terminology also helps. For example, learning that cisgender means "identifying with the gender you were assigned at birth" and using it as a common term reduces the stigma associated with being transgender, or "identifying with a gender different from the one you were assigned at birth." When we use all the terminology, there is no assumption that one is normal, and another is different. All identities are on a spectrum of experiences that we all share. Asking questions when you do not understand a term, and then learning more about it, are simple ways to help everyone feel safer in your presence.
6. **Practice using pronouns for people in your life.** Brains work from patterns, so learning to use new pronouns for someone in your life, or beginning to use "they" as a gender neutral, singular, and specific pronoun can take time. We have always used "they" as a singular, non-specific pronoun, so our brains can learn this specific use as well. We know that, with practice, anything is possible. Thus, practice, practice, and practice some more. Practice when the person for whom you are learning a new pronoun is not in your presence so if you make a mistake, you do not unintentionally cause them harm. Then keep practicing. Ask

people to correct you when you practice with them. And then keep practicing some more. Over time, this becomes simpler, easy, and eventually automatic.

7. **Apologize.** We all make mistakes. When you make a mistake about someone's gender, a simple apology is all that is needed. And the intent to do better the next time. It is important to acknowledge the mistake, fix it, and continue practicing.
8. **Practice using non-gendered greetings.** Common greetings in large spaces include words like "ladies and gentlemen" or "brothers and sisters." Can you think of ways to speak about groups of people without gendered words at all? How about saying "Welcome, everyone"? A simple change in our language ensures that everyone feels included. Many of our honorifics are also gendered, such as Mr. and Ms. The gender-neutral honorific is Mx. Or think about ways to address people that are still respectful without an honorific to ensure you are following tip number 1 and making no assumptions.
9. **Correct others.** If you notice someone misgender someone else, politely correct them. There does not need to be shaming, but it helps a gender diverse person feel safer when someone else notices a misgendering and corrects the mistake. The goal of all of this is for people to feel seen, heard, and understood. What better way to help someone feel seen and understood than when someone else supports their identity publicly?
10. **Curiosity and compassion are key.** You may not fully understand someone's gender identity, but can you begin from a place that says, "I want this person to feel safe, seen, and understood?" As family law practitioners our jobs include being curious about people's lived experiences. Gender identity is not anything that needs to change that. Beginning with curiosity and compassion make all the other tips possible. Just remember that we are all human, we all have unique experiences, and we all benefit when we hold each other in a space of respect and willingness to learn more about each other and how to address each other in ways that help us all feel safer, seen, and understood.



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