

CREATING IDENTITY-INCLUSIVE SPACES: Focusing on Gender Identity & Neurodiversity



At Dougy Center, we are committed to fostering an environment that is both safe and inclusive. A safe environment is more than just physical safety. It also means working to minimize the negative judgment and invalidation many children, teens, young adults, and adults encounter when expressing their grief outside of our program. An inclusive environment is one that actively welcomes and values diverse identities and perspectives. As a facilitator, you play a crucial role in trying to create both safety and inclusion. You can do this by upholding our safety guidelines, using the skills of facilitation, and employing practices that honor personal identity, autonomy, and shared experiences.

This Facilitator Tip Sheet provides general guidance on fostering a more identity-inclusive environment, with specific information and suggestions for two aspects of identity: pronouns & gender identity and neurodivergence & disability.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR IDENTITY-INCLUSIVE SPACES

If someone were to ask what makes a space feel inclusive for you, what would you say?

Here are some of the responses we've heard from participants and volunteers when asked that same question:

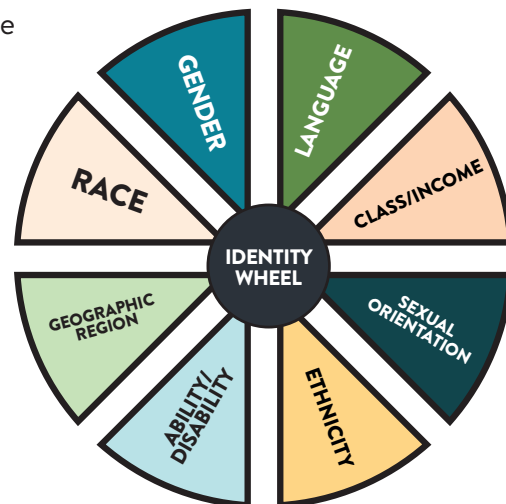
- ✓ **Choice & Autonomy:** The "I pass" guideline is always respected. Being able to choose how much of our story we tell and when.
- ✓ **No Evaluation:** Having space to share without others trying to analyze, fix, dismiss, or bright side how we are thinking or feeling.
- ✓ **Confidentiality:** Knowing that what is said in group will stay in the group.
- ✓ **Respect & Consideration:** Trusting each person's lived experience and identity will be honored.
- ✓ **Physical Safety:** Implementing policies and practices around supervision, upholding guidelines like "No Hitting or Hurting," keeping the exterior doors locked at our locations, having adequate lighting, etc., all play a role in creating a space that is physically safe.

UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY & WORLDVIEW

We all navigate the world with unique perspectives shaped by **identity and culture**. Think of identity as a **prescription for your own unique set of glasses** — it's shaped by life experiences, background, and social influences. Even identical twins, raised in the same family, will see the world differently.

We each hold multiple, intersecting identities that include, but are not limited to:

- Gender
- Language
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Sexual Orientation
- Ability/Disability
- Class/Income
- Geographic Region



Facilitator Tips:

Our perspectives are further influenced by cultural traditions and values, such as:

- Holidays and celebrations
- Attitudes about work and money
- Family and parenting beliefs
- Religious and spiritual traditions

FACILITATOR SELF-REFLECTION:

What is a cultural/family tradition or value that shapes your perspective?

Please don't think that you need to become an expert in each aspect of someone's identity in order to create an inclusive environment. Upholding our Safety Guidelines and practicing the essential skills of facilitation — awareness, reflection, and communication — are great first steps to fostering inclusive environments. The skill of **awareness** helps you recognize when your unique worldview is sparking assumptions or judgment. The skill of **reflection** gives participants room to share without having to navigate someone else's reactions or interpretations. Using the skill of **communication** invites participants to say more about what is true for them. These skills help break down the barriers and obstacles that people who are grieving often encounter when expressing their grief, particularly when that grief and its expression are connected to their identity.



“Growing up, I heard ‘everyone in this family needs to make money, you always need to have a job,’ so when I listen to people talk about not having a job, I catch myself having some negative judgment towards them.”

PRONOUNS & GENDER IDENTITY

Using someone's correct pronouns is a simple and meaningful way to show respect and create a more inclusive environment. It's also important to remember that pronouns, like identities, can change over time. At Dougy Center, we invite — but never require — people to share their pronouns. Keeping this practice optional helps ensure everyone feels comfortable and respected.

Once we know someone's pronouns, why is it important to use them?

Using the correct pronouns:

- Fosters belonging
- Affirms identity and dignity
- Demonstrates that we value lived experience
- Reduces harm
- Recognizes identity as fluid

How many different pronouns are there?

There's not one answer to this question, but here are some you might hear:

Common pronouns:

- **She/Her/Hers**
- **He/Him/His**
- **They/Them/Theirs**

Less common and neo-pronouns:

- **Ze/Zir/Zirs** (pronounced “zee/zeer/zeers”)
- **Xe/Xem/Xyr** (pronounced “ze/zem/zeer”)
- **Ey/Em/Eir**

Culturally specific pronouns:

- **EI/Ella/Elles:** Spanish pronouns, with “elles” being a gender-neutral option

Facilitator Tips:

- **Other Indigenous, cultural, or personal pronouns:**
Some people create or reclaim pronouns that reflect their heritage and gender identity

Other Pronoun Considerations:

- **Some people use multiple sets of pronouns**
(e.g., she/they or he/they)
- **Some may not use pronouns at all** and prefer to be referred to by their name

FACILITATOR SELF-REFLECTION:

How comfortable are you asking for and using someone's pronouns?

Additional Tips

- Avoid asking for “preferred” pronouns
- Instead, ask: **“What pronouns do you use?”**
- If you make a mistake, just correct yourself and move on. A simple, “I’m sorry, *they* went to the restroom,” is great.

NEURODIVERSITY & DISABILITY INCLUSION

Neurodiversity is a term to describe the natural variation in how our brains develop, learn, process, and engage with the world. Disability is currently defined as “a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2025).

Many terms fall under the umbrellas of neurodiversity and disability, including, but not limited to:

- **ASD:** Autism Spectrum Disorder
- **ADD/ADHD:** Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder
- **Dyslexia**
- **Dyspraxia:** Developmental Coordination Disorder
- **OCD:** Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- **Tourette Syndrome**
- **Anxiety, Depression, and Mood Disorders**
- **Schizophrenia and Other Psychotic Disorders**
- **Intellectual Disabilities**



Again, you don’t need to become an expert in neurodivergence or disability to be an effective facilitator. However, it can be helpful to recognize the ways children, teens, and adults may be impacted. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Sensory Sensitivities (lights, noise, textures):** This can look like people asking to turn down the lights or having difficulty in noisy environments like the big energy play spaces, etc.
- **Rejection Sensitivity (strong reactions to social exclusion):** You might see kids or teens have big reactions to another participant not wanting to play with them in a certain room.
- **Social and Communication Differences:** Some participants will want to share verbally, while others are more comfortable drawing or playing. Others might have challenges with speech and might need a facilitator to sit near them and listen more closely.
- **Increased Need for Structure and Routine:** This can look like participants who ask at every group, “What time will opening circle be over? When does play time start? When do we go home?” Some participants benefit from extra notice and time when transitioning between activities. Offering multiple reminders about how much time is left can be helpful. You could also provide visual cues, like pointing to a clock or holding up fingers to show the number of minutes remaining.



Facilitator Tips:

Use your skill of awareness to notice when you or others use terms related to neurodivergence or disability as adjectives. For example, instead of saying, “Sorry I’m late, I was being so OCD about cleaning my kitchen today,” you could say, “Sorry I’m late, I got so focused on cleaning my kitchen that I lost track of time.”

Other Tips for Supporting Accessibility:

- Provide extra processing time for activities
- Respect personal tools (e.g., fidgets, headphones, chew necklaces, comfort items)
- Reflect and acknowledge a participant’s experience and collaborate to find accommodations. “You said it’s too loud in the music room right now. Is there somewhere else you’d like to take the guitar to play?”

OVERALL TIPS FOR CREATING INCLUSIVE SPACES AT DOUGY CENTER

As noted earlier, this tip sheet highlights just two aspects of identity related to creating inclusive

environments. No matter what someone’s unique identity constellation is, the following guidelines can help foster a welcoming, accepting, and understanding space.

- **Use Participants’ Correct Names and Pronouns**
- **Demonstrate Compassion and Open-Mindedness**
- **Be Present & Engaged**
- **Acknowledge Unique and Shared Experiences**
- **Consider the Physical Space (lighting, seating, noise level)**

REFLECTION FOR FACILITATORS

✓ **What’s one thing you can do to create a more inclusive space?**

✓ **What areas do you feel you need more information or support in?**

By fostering an inclusive, identity-affirming space, we allow participants to show up as their full selves – supported, respected, and valued. Thank you for being interested in doing this work with us!



**The National Grief Center
for Children & Families**

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center’s practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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