

# Pronouns in Native Spaces

Honoring pronouns is culturally-appropriate for Indigenous people, too. Find out why here.



## Pronouns & Names

A pronoun is a word that refers to the person or people talking (such as I or you). It can also refer to someone or something that a person is speaking about (such as she, them). Gender specific pronouns such as she, he, they, and ze refer specifically to the individual someone is referring to. The table below shows examples of gender pronouns. The first four rows show the most commonly used pronouns, but there are many other pronouns used.

It is important to note that the vast majority of traditional Indigenous languages do not utilize gendered pronouns at all. To make space for (re)membering Indigenous gender expansiveness, we must make adaptations to colonial languages such as English by broadening use of pronouns. Also, Indigenous societies place incredible importance on respectful communication. With this in mind, it is imperative that we refer to people in ways that feels respectful and affirming to them. We are, after all, one another's relatives.

## How to use pronouns

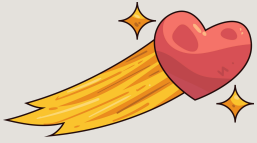
### *Why are pronouns important?*

Pronouns are important to a person's identity. Pronouns allow people to be truly seen and acknowledged in all settings (home, school, work, sporting events, a doctor's office, etc.) You cannot assume pronouns based on how someone looks, so it is always best to ask them which pronouns they use. Asking about someone's pronouns is also a sign of respect. Using the wrong pronoun or forgetting to ask for someone's pronouns might cause people to feel ignored or alienated.

It's okay to feel uncomfortable asking about pronouns at first. It may take some time to make this part of your routine, but pronouns will help to make others feel comfortable. They can also help you form more trusting relationships.

## Tips for asking others about their pronouns

- Keep it simple!
- Introduce yourself using your chosen name and pronouns.
- “What pronouns do you use?” and “I use she/her/hers pronouns”
- Be respectful and non-judgmental.
- Some individuals may not use pronouns or identify with any gender in particular. These people may not wish to provide any pronoun. Instead, they may ask that you call them by their name only. Asking questions will help you understand what is most appropriate.
- This may feel uncomfortable or awkward at first, but it can help you create an inclusive and affirming environment.
- *Note: an individual’s pronouns may change over time and from context to context. One’s level of outness, comfort, and gender fluidity may cause these to vary. When working with youth, be particularly mindful of a young person’s wishes when it comes to the pronouns they would like for you to use with other people, especially other adults and caregivers.*



Gender Pronouns

Subjective	Objective	Possessive	Reflexive	Example
She	Her	Hers	Herself	She is looking. I looked at her. The basket is hers.
He	Him	His	Himself	He is looking. I looked at him. The basket is his.
They	Them	Theirs	Themselves	They are looking. I looked at them. The basket is theirs.
Ze	Hir/Zir	Hirs/Zirs	Hirself/Zirself	Ze is looking. I listened to hir. The basket is zirs.
e/ey	Em	Eir	Eirs/Eirself	E is looking. I listened to em. The basket is eirs.
Ve	Ver	Vis	Vis/Verself	Ve is looking. I listened to ver. The basket is vis.
Xe	Xem	Xyr	Xyrs/Xemself	Xe is looking. I listened to xem. The basket it xyrs.

Your Nation's language may have other gender pronouns not listed here- speak with a language bearer and find out!

## Indigenous cultural perspectives on pronouns

There are several reasons why discussions about respecting trans and gender-expansive people's pronouns in Native spaces can be a challenging discussion. We offer insight into those challenges with some culturally appropriate ways to address each.

- Some have suggested that it is rude for younger people to ask elders to change the way they speak, introduce themselves, or address younger people.
  - We brought this idea to a community elder and got this teaching in return: The Elders have a close connection to the youth. That connection is based on reciprocal respect and learning. Respect for Elders is reciprocally tied to their respect for the fact that they are cultivating those who will be the leaders of tomorrow. Elders and youth learn from one another. The youth get to learn teachings and traditions and they get to decide how to apply those things to the worlds they are living in and those they will lead. Elders learn from youth in order to stay relevant and to be aware of all that is going on in the community so that they continue to offer heartfelt guidance and support to all those who look up to them. It is, in part, their role to foster an environment where youth will want to continue to invest in their communities and work for the advancement of their people.
  - Note: If you have this conversation with an Elder, do so with kindness, gentleness, and reciprocity. Many boarding school survivors were punished for not using English "correctly." While a singular "they" may now be considered correct, it was not always regarded as so in some uses. We must be sensitive to trauma when we offer loving spaces to discuss hard topics.
- Some have pushed back that because the sharing of pronouns is not part of traditional protocols for introducing oneself, it is culturally inappropriate.
  - There is a lot of truth to this. We don't know if any "traditional" protocols that call for the sharing of pronouns. However, the idea of cultural appropriateness is interesting in this example. In most original Indigenous languages from across Turtle Island, gender pronouns are not used, especially historically. (In some that do utilize gender pronouns, there are pronouns for more than two genders.) Most of these languages are fairly neutral, and may only be gendered in terms of roles (i.e. Mother), though the languages don't usually specify who can serve in those roles (and we have stories of AMAB two spirit historical figures serving in mother roles, for example). Therefore, one could also offer that using neutral pronouns, like they/them, is a way to make our use of English more culturally appropriate. Therefore, when we translate our traditional introductions to English, we could add pronouns in.
    - Note- Indigenous nonbinary folks may use traditional introductions where they share the meaning of their original names in neutral ways (i.e. the one who stands strong vs. He who stands strong). Also rather than saying "I am the daughter of Sam Corn and Beatrice Eno," They may say "I am the child of Roy Corn and Beatrice Eno." A similar thing may be done when sharing their clans.
- Lastly, some have received the feedback that the pronoun conversation is "white" or comes from the mainstream, not from us as Natives.
  - It is important to note that while the conversation may feel foreign to us, it's fairly new to most communities in this time. It comes from an acknowledgement of two primary truths, both reinforced strongly in traditional Native values:

- 1) Sex at birth, and genitalia, do not determine the role that someone will play in their life, family, community, or traditions
- 2) Sex (and certainly gender) are not binary. There are many genders beyond male and female, and Intersex people also exist.
- Indigenous Nations on Turtle Island (and all over the world) have histories, stories, ceremonies, and original words that communicate these truths, but most of us live in a world where we are forced to use languages like English or Spanish which are heavily gendered. Adapting those things is a great way to decolonize our use of language.
- One of the most common philosophies shared across the Nations of Turtle Island is the idea that “we are all related” or “all my relations.” This phrase not only accounts for our close connections to all our human kin, but our more-than-human relatives as well. If the way we are referring to someone causes them harm, that runs counter to this ancient philosophy and way of life. Did you know, using the correct name and pronouns for a young person can lead to as much as a 56% decrease in suicide attempts?[1] There are very few things that reduce suicidality as easy as using the correct pronouns!