

Gender and Circus Coaching

Basic Guidelines for Circus Coaches and Mentors
by the AYCO Youth Advisory Committee

Hello, Circus Friend!

Thank you for picking up our resource sheet. We created this document as a guide to the sometimes complex world of gender, in the context of teaching and mentoring youth in circus arts. Societal acceptance of all gender identities and expressions is a very important issue for our generation. We believe it is especially important in the circus world, since circus has traditionally welcomed members of society who live a little differently than the majority. Circus is for everyone!

Before you read on, a brief note: our resource sheet is not meant to be the definitive text for all situations. Different geographies have different cultures and vocabularies around gender, and those can change over time. Keep in mind that **it is okay to make mistakes!** The important thing is that you take the initiative to listen, learn, and adapt. It is your responsibility--and everyone else's, too--to make your circus place the safest and most welcoming place it can be.

If you have resources, questions, suggestions, or anything you'd like to share with us, please do!

— AYCO Youth Advisory Committee, 2017
yac@americanyouthcircus.org

1: Being Mindful of Language

Pronouns

Pronouns are the words we use to refer to people in place of their names. “He” is the pronoun in “he walked,” instead of “Josie walked.”

The most commonly used pronouns are **she/her/hers**, **he/him/his**, and **they/them/theirs**. Multiple other invented gender neutral pronouns exist, including **ne/nem/nirs** and **ze/hir/hirs**.¹ To most people, the pronouns others use to refer to them are very important to their identity. Therefore, it’s important to be respectful of the pronouns by which someone wants to be called, and to **never assume somebody’s pronouns**. People’s pronouns can change over time or stay the same, so **frequent check-ins on names and pronouns are vital**.

When an individual uses “they” as their pronoun, it functions as a singular pronoun that agrees with plural verbs. For example:

“Jack runs; he is running. Jack and Mack run; they are running. Tim runs; they are running.”

Language in the Classroom

Make checking in about pronouns part of your culture, and make them part of regular introductions. Often, younger students are used to this practice, and have done it in other places. For example, start a class or workshop with a circle where everyone says their name, pronouns, and whatever other information you choose. Set the first example. Often, younger generations are used to this practice and have done it in other places.

¹ See more on pronouns in Further References at the end of this document.

“My name is Ellie, I use she/her pronouns, I’m from southern New Hampshire, and my favorite ice cream flavor is Purple Cow.”

If you forget someone’s pronouns, you don’t need to make it a big deal. The simplest way to ask:

“Can you please remind me of your pronouns?”

To normalize pronoun check-ins, and to give space for people to switch pronouns, consider starting every week with a quick check-in.

Gendered Praise

It’s easy to fall into complimenting students based on traits typically associated with their genders.

Often associated with “female”:

Beautiful

Graceful

Gorgeous

Sexy

Flexible

Elegant

Often associated with “male”:

Strong

Solid

Explosive

Powerful

All those traits are awesome, but we don’t want to perpetuate the idea that only boys are “strong” and only girls are “beautiful.” Strive to actively invert and mix these stereotypes.

“Everybody, look at the way Colin got into that. He made it so graceful!”

“Alex is so strong! They’re so dedicated.”

“Great power there, Ty. Nice toe point, too.”

Addressing the Group

Avoid gendered phrases like:

Hey guys! Nice work, ladies. Good morning, gentlemen. 'Bye, girls.

Better alternatives include:

Hi, everyone! Great work, folks. What would you all like to do next? 'Bye, friends!

Shifting to gender-inclusive language removes assumption.

Messing Up

If you misgender somebody (i.e., call them the wrong pronouns or use improperly gendered language to describe them), correct yourself, apologize, and move on.

Apologize briefly and sincerely but not profusely—If you ask forgiveness, you are redirecting the attention to yourself instead of the misgendered person.

“Notice how he—Oh, I’m sorry, John. Notice how they are keeping their shoulders extended the whole time.”

If you realize your mistake after the fact, still apologize and say the correct pronouns going forward.

“Rebecca! I’m so sorry; I just realized I misgendered you during that demo in class today.”

If a student misgenders another student or teacher, try to follow up with a subtle correction.

Student: Andrea did a great job; she really nailed it!

Teacher: Absolutely. They’ve been working really hard.

Afterwards, follow up with the misgendered student. Their comfort is first and foremost: Ask if they're alright with you giving other students reminders of their pronouns. If you feel it's appropriate, talk with the student who made a mistake one-on-one—not in front of the group—to give them a kind reminder.

2: Acknowledging and Subverting Stereotypes in Disciplines

Have a conversation with your students about circus stereotypes and why they exist. Consider: tradition, aesthetics, physicality, sexism, homophobia, and the historical development of different disciplines. Try making a list of disciplines and see if they have gender associations with them (eg, contortion = feminine or female-dominated, straps = masculine or male-dominated).

Acknowledge that “female” and “male” bodies are constructed differently and lend themselves to different disciplines for physical reasons. For example, “male” bodies tend to have an easier time building shoulder and bicep strength, and as typically larger and stronger bodies, they might be more inclined towards “strength-based” disciplines like basing in partner acrobatics or flying trapeze. “Female” bodies tend to have more flexibility, especially through the hamstrings and spine, so female people may have historically been encouraged towards the flexibility-based arts such as contortion. Ask your students how these trends might also be affected by various cultures’ ideas about what “male” and “female” people are “supposed” to be like, and whether they can think of examples of people who go against stereotype. Female acrobats are strong, and male acrobats are flexible too!

We all know well the stereotypical male/female performance narratives: The fraught love story of the mixed-gender hand-to-hand act; the quiet and powerful male straps solo; the ensemble with men wearing shirts and long pants, and women in sports bras and spandex. Be conscious of these when casting and choreographing.

Take special initiative to encourage students to try, and not give up on, disciplines outside the stereotypes of their genders. It is important to cultivate a supportive environment so your students feel safe to express themselves according to what they really like, not just what they think they “should” like.

If possible, give your students some choice in their costumes for performances rather than assigning “male” and “female” costumes according to biological sex. Even better, consider non-gendered options.

3: Being Mindful of Different Identities, **a.k.a. The Difference Between Sex and Gender**

Gender identity — what gender you feel describes you — and **biological sex** — the M or F on your birth certificate, usually defined by your physical anatomy—are **not the same thing**.

A person whose gender identity matches their biological sex is called **cisgender**, a **cis woman/cis man** for short. Someone whose gender identity differs from their biological sex might identify as **transgender, genderqueer, agender, or non-binary**. Anatomy itself is not always perfectly straightforward either; some people have features of both male and female” anatomy, and might identify as **intersex**.

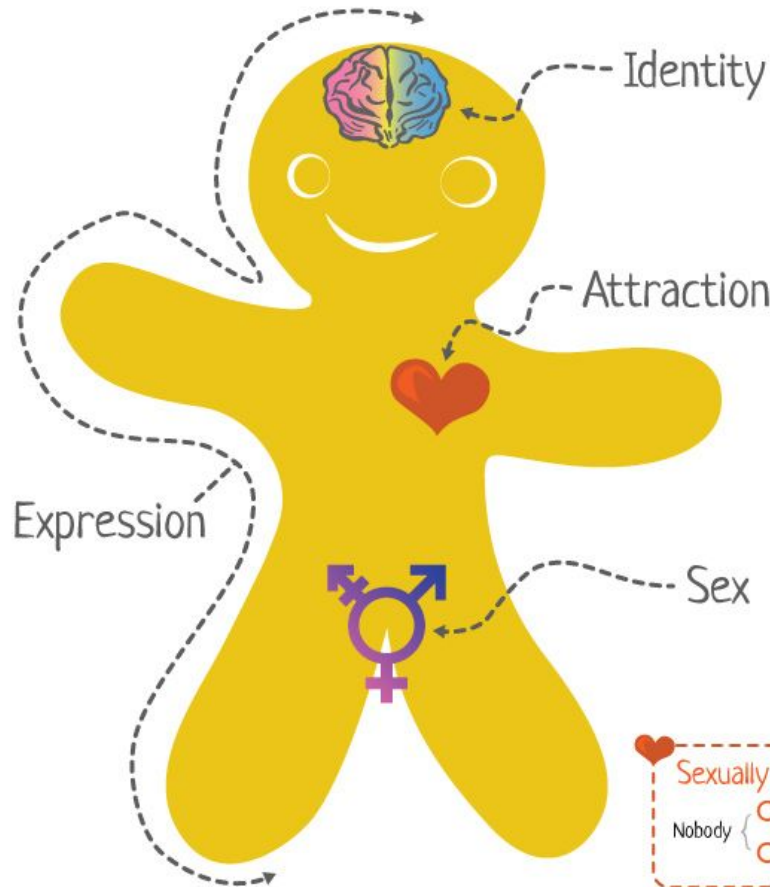
Gender expression is the term for how one presents one’s self to the world. Someone might identify as a cis woman, but cut her hair short and wear “men’s” clothing. Ultimately, the choices of what to wear, what name and pronouns to use, and how to behave are personal decisions. **Don’t assume that someone’s appearance thoroughly represents their identity.**

We borrowed this great graphic (on the next page) to give a visual.

The Genderbread Person v3.3

by *it's pronounced* **METROsexual**.com

Gender is one of those things everyone thinks they understand, but most people don't. Like *Inception*. Gender isn't binary. It's not either/or. In many cases it's both/and. A bit of this, a dash of that. This tasty little guide is meant to be an appetizer for gender understanding. It's okay if you're hungry for more. In fact, that's the idea.



Plot a point on both continua in each category to represent your identity; combine all ingredients to form your Genderbread

4 (of infinite) possible plot and label combos

Gender Identity

Indicates a lack of what's on the right.

Woman-ness

Man-ness

How you, in your head, define your gender; based on how much you align (or don't align) with what you understand to be the options for gender.

Labels: "woman", "man", "two-spirit", "gender-queer"

Gender Expression

Feminine

Masculine

The ways you present gender; through your actions, dress, and demeanor; and how those presentations are interpreted based on gender norms.

Labels: "butch", "femme", "androgynous", "gender neutral"

Biological Sex

Female-ness

Male-ness

The physical sex characteristics you're born with and develop, including genitalia, body shape, voice pitch, body hair; hormones, chromosomes, etc.

Labels: "male", "female", "intersex", "MtF Female"

Sexually Attracted to

Nobody

(Women/Females/Femininity)

(Men/Males/Masculinity)

Romantically Attracted to

Nobody

(Women/Females/Femininity)

(Men/Males/Masculinity)

For a bigger bite, read more at <http://bit.ly/genderbread>

In each grouping, circle all that apply to you and plot a point, depicting the aspects of gender toward which you experience attraction.

Glossary of Terms

Agender - *Not identifying with any gender (male, female, or anywhere in between).*

Asexual - *Not sexually attracted to anyone.*

AFAB - *Assigned female at birth.*

AMAB - *Assigned male at birth.*

Biological sex - *The sex (“male” or “female”) assigned to a person at birth based on physical anatomy.*

Bisexual - *Sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of more than one sex or gender (not to be confused with pansexual).*

Cisgender - *A person whose gender matches the sex assigned to them at birth. Associated terms: Cis man; cis woman.*

Gender identity - *“One’s internal, deeply held sense of one’s gender.”²*

Gender expression - *How a person chooses to present their gender identity, through actions, attire, and demeanor.*

Heterosexual - *Sexually and/or romantically attracted to the “opposite” sex, when gender is viewed through a binary lens (e.g., men attracted to women).*

Homosexual - *Sexually and/or romantically attracted to to the same sex, when gender is viewed through a binary lens (e.g., men attracted to men).*

HRT - *Hormone replacement therapy. Many transgender people choose to have HRT (e.g. taking synthetic testosterone, or T) so that their physical body more closely matches their gender identity. **Not all transgender people choose to have HRT.***

Non-binary - *Not identifying with either “male” or “female” as a gender identity.*

Pansexual - *Sexually and/or romantically attracted to any sex or gender (not to be confused with bisexual).*

Queer - *An umbrella term to define non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, sexual orientations, and/or gender presentations. This word is accepted in many communities, but not all.*

SRS - *Sex reassignment surgery, also known as gender confirmation surgery. Many transgender people choose to have surgery so that their physical body more closely matches their gender identity. **Not all transgender people choose to have surgery.***

Transgender - *“An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.”³*

Transitioning - *Refers to a period of time in which someone is taking steps to live as the gender they identify with, rather than the gender they had been presenting as before.*

² Definition from <http://transfigurations.org.uk/filestore/preferred-terminology.pdf>

³ Definition from <http://transfigurations.org.uk/filestore/preferred-terminology.pdf>

Further References

On Gender in Circus:

Thoughts from Susie Williams, managing director of Acrobatic Conundrum

<http://www.acrobaticconundrum.com/blog/2016/8/3/gender-in-circus>

Response to Susie William's post by Catherine Jett of Spoke Movement

<https://spokemovement.exposure.co/gender-and-circus>

Other resources:

Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog

<https://genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com/>

Definitions and More

www.transfigurations.org.uk