

Gender and Circus Coaching

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

Hello, Circus Friend!

Thank you for visiting 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. We believe that acceptance of all gender identities and expressions is very 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
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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. Darryl runs; ze is running.”

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.”

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

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.

Language in the Classroom

In introductions, check in with pronouns:

“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, the simplest way to ask is:

“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

Flexible

Elegant

Often associated with "male":

Solid

Explosive

Strong

Powerful

Handsome

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, or avoid them entirely.

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

"Alex is so strong! They're so dedicated."

"That was a powerful moment in that performance, 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. This also applies to families and caretakers. Instead of telling students to "Make sure your **mom** packs your water bottle," say "**parent**" or "**grown-up**".

2: Being Mindful of Different Identities, **a.k.a. The Difference Between Gender and Sex Assigned at Birth**

Gender Identity

Gender identity (what gender you feel describes you) and the sex (typically male or female) which you were assigned at birth, defined by your physical anatomy, are **not the same thing**. Anatomy itself is not always perfectly straightforward either; some people have features of both “male” and “female” anatomy—this person will be typically referred to as **intersex**, and this may or may not factor into their gender identity.

A person whose gender identity matches their assigned-at-birth sex is called **cisgender, a cis woman/cis man** for short. Someone whose gender identity differs from their assigned-at-birth sex might identify as **transgender, genderqueer, agender, or non-binary**. Not every intersex person is “out” as such, and due to some protocols in which parents of intersex children were traditionally encouraged to “decide” the child’s gender almost immediately after birth via surgery, they may not even be aware of this part of their identity.

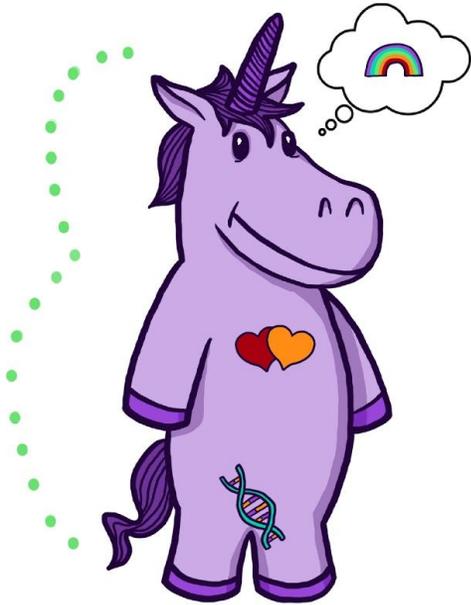
Gender Expression

Gender expression is the term for how one presents oneself to the world: Choices of what to wear, what name and pronouns to use, and how to behave. Many trans people will physically transition (i.e., undergo surgery and hormone changes), but many trans people also choose not to. **Don’t assume that someone’s appearance thoroughly represents their identity. Gender expression is also separate from sexual orientation.**

We borrowed this great graphic from Trans Student Educational Resources:

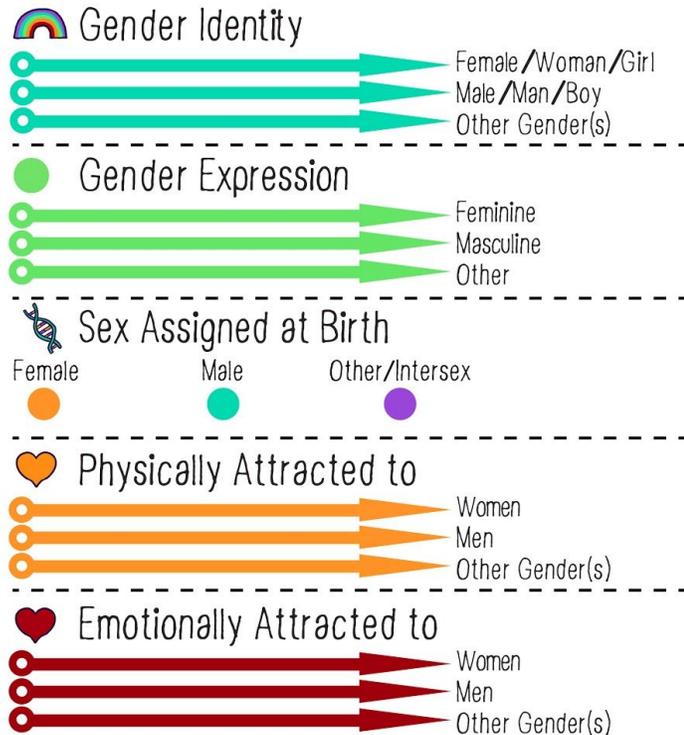
The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by:
TSER
Trans Student Educational Resources



To learn more, go to:
www.transstudent.org/gender

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore



Note that the spectra represented in the graphs are not mutually exclusive — masculinity is not necessarily the opposite of femininity, and so on. Many people often feel that they are a combination of genders (often dubbed “polygender”), and male and female are not the only options.

3: 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 bodies are constructed differently and lend themselves to different disciplines for physical reasons. For example, bodies with more

testosterone, either those born producing more testosterone or those taking testosterone, may tend to have an easier time building shoulder and bicep strength. Bodies with more estrogen may tend to have more flexibility, especially through the hamstrings and spine. However, these factors are not necessarily determined or even particularly influenced by sex assigned at birth.

Many of us fall back onto stereotypical male/female performance narratives. Recognize that your students may not feel comfortable with these.

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 an environment in which your students can express themselves according to what they really like, not just what they think they “should” like.

Give your students some choice in their costumes for performances rather than assigning “male” and “female” costumes according to assigned-at-birth sex. Even better, consider non-gendered options.

4: Bathrooms

Most bathrooms are separated and labeled male/female. This can be uncomfortable for trans people, gender non-conforming people, or anyone! An easy fix is to label them all as gender neutral. If you don't have control of your school's bathrooms, be sure to make it clear to your students that they may use whichever bathroom makes them most comfortable.



One example of a circus-style gender neutral bathroom sign, created by **Kitsie O'Neill** from the **Philadelphia School for Circus Arts**.

Helpful 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.*

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.*

GCS - *Gender confirmation surgery, also known as sex reassignment 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.***

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).*

Sex Assigned at Birth - *The sex/gender marker assigned to a person at birth, typically based on physical anatomy and/or chromosomes.*

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.*

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 Spectrum - resources for creating inclusive environments

www.genderspectrum.org/resources/

Transfigurations - definitions and more

www.transfigurations.org.uk

Transstudent - Infographics and more

www.transstudent.org/graphics

Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog

genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com/

Gender Expansion Project - advocacy group

genderexpansionproject.org/

Advance Gender Equity in Arts

<http://ageinthearts.org/>

United Nations - Sustainable Development Goal: Gender Equality

<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

Human Rights Campaign - LGBTQ civil rights organization

www.hrc.org/

The Trevor Project - suicide hotline for LGBTQ youth

www.thetrevorproject.org/

GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) - acceptance & advocacy organization

www.glaad.org/

PFLAG - Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays

www.pflag.org/

