

SEL Activity

Understanding Pronouns



grades 6–8



45 minutes

Objectives

- Students understand the importance of pronouns and the potential impact of misusing them.
- Students reflect on the role of understanding and acceptance as expressions of kindness.
- Students appreciate that perspectives and experiences can vary and that all deserve respect.

Essential Questions

- How do the pronouns we use influence our understanding of identity and respect for others?
- How does using someone's correct pronouns show empathy?
- How can we create an inclusive environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their identity?

Vocabulary

Pronoun: noun; a word that replaces a noun, referring to participants in a conversation (e.g., I, you) or something previously mentioned (e.g., she, it, this). Also, a third-person pronoun chosen to reflect a person's gender identity (e.g., he, she, they).

Gender Identity: noun; a person's deeply held sense of their gender, which may be male, female, a blend of both, neither, or something else entirely. It is how individuals perceive themselves and what they choose to call themselves. Gender identity may align with or differ from the sex assigned at birth.

Empathy: noun; the ability to understand and share someone else's feelings.

Before you Begin

- Prepare to show the Slides: [What Do You See?](#) (THINK.GIVE section).
- Gather paper (1/student) and markers/colored pencils (CONNECT + CLOSE section).

MATERIALS + MEDIA

Paper
Markers/colored pencils
Slides: [What Do You See?](#)
Video: [The Importance of Pronouns](#) (start at 5:43)

SEL CORE COMPETACIES

Self-awareness: Examining biases
Social awareness: Perspective-taking
Social awareness: Empathy

Program Connections

This activity aligns with lessons in our ThinkGive Middle School programs, in which students practice inclusion and empathy as they take action. To learn more, visit our [PROGRAMS](#) page.

THINK • GIVE

Show the Slides: [What Do You See?](#)

Ask: What do you see in this image? [Encourage students to use pronouns when describing the photos.]

Students describe what they see in each image. Most will likely say things like “She is shooting the basketball” or “He is receiving the baton.”

Discuss:

- What words did you use to describe the athletes in the slides?
- How did you use the pronouns “he” and “she”? Did we use other pronouns (e.g., they, them, everyone, anyone)?

Explain: We use pronouns when describing people or things. Depending on the pronoun used, it can give us information about the individual or thing. While context clues or societal norms may guide our pronoun choice, it’s important to remember that assumed pronouns are not always correct. Misgendering someone or using pronouns that are not their preferred ones can be hurtful.

Watch: [The Importance of Pronouns](#) (start at 5:43). In this TEDxYouth talk, Ruby George explains how the language around gender identity is constantly evolving and why using someone's correct pronouns matters.

Discuss (in small groups or as a whole class):

- Did anything in the video surprise you?
 - Why is it important to use someone’s correct pronouns?
 - How might you feel if someone used the wrong pronouns for you?
 - Ruby George mentions that it’s okay to get pronouns wrong sometimes. How should we respond if we use the wrong pronouns?
 - How does apologizing when we make a mistake show empathy?
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CONNECT + CLOSE

Activity: Name Tag

Hand out paper (1/student) along with markers or colored pencils. Students create a name tag for their desks (either hanging in front or folded as a tent). Encourage students to include their names, pronouns (if they feel comfortable), and any other aspect of their identity they'd like to share.

Discuss:

- How does it feel to express your identity in this way?
- If someone wishes to be addressed in a specific way, how can we ensure they feel comfortable and respected?
- Can you think of different ways to address someone? (e.g., by name, pronouns, or titles)

DIGGING DEEPER

Discuss:

- How can you encourage others to learn about and respect pronouns?
- How has a lack of acceptance of identities created conflict or social injustice in the past?
- How might not respecting someone's pronouns make them feel uncomfortable or unwelcome?

ACTION

Explain: Understanding and respecting others' identities and pronouns is important for fostering honest and respectful conversations. In the coming days, try to notice how others express their identity and, when appropriate, ask about their preferences before making assumptions.

REFLECTION

Lead a discussion or allow students to journal. Use these questions to guide their thinking:

- What can you learn about someone when you ask them about themselves rather than making assumptions?
- How can pronouns relate to empathy and understanding?
- How do you encounter and use pronouns in your daily interactions?
- Why is it important to respect a person's chosen pronouns?