



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CAMPAIGN®

# **NON-BINARY GENDER FLUID & GENDER-EXPANSIVE YOUTH**

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**FAQ for Parents & Guardians**



# TERMS & DEFINITIONS

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## Non-Binary

An adjective describing a child who does not identify exclusively as a boy or a girl. Non-binary youth may identify as being both a boy and a girl, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary children do.

## Gender Fluid

An adjective describing a child who is unconfined by one single gender identity, and whose gender identity manifests differently over time. Some gender fluid youth will identify differently day to day, while others will shift over longer periods of time.

## Gender-Expansive

An adjective describing a child who does not conform to their culture's expectations for boys and girls. Being transgender is one way of being gender-expansive, but not all gender-expansive children are transgender.

# IDENTITY

**My child was assigned [ex: female] at birth and was a conventionally [ex: feminine] child. Now they say they are non-binary. This isn't like the other gender stories I have heard — did their identity really change?**

This can be a confusing question for many parents. Most stories we hear about transgender youth describe a child who has “always known they were born in the wrong body” — and this is the true experience of many transgender youth. For others, gender identity shifts and manifests differently over time, especially through adolescence. Many adult trans people have fond memories of their childhood in which they accepted the gender identity they were assigned at birth. What is most important is taking an affirmative approach that focuses on your child's current gender identity and presentation. There are no permanent consequences of social transition, which might include calling them by their preferred name, changing expectations around clothing and hairstyle choices, providing transitional underclothing (such as binders or bras), etc. This will help your child feel more comfortable in their skin and in their day-to-day lives.

While gender identity may manifest differently over time, this does not mean that the gender identities your child has expressed were or are “just a phase.” Referring to your child's identity as such can come off to your child as invalidating — instead, affirm your child, and take the opportunity to improve their mental and physical well-being.

**Other parents I know who have binary transgender children don't understand exactly what I'm going through. Where can I find people who do?**

It can be difficult for parents of binary children — whether transgender or cisgender — to understand the experiences of parents of non-binary children. Parents whose children identify outside of the binary are asked to question their most fundamental understanding of gender in a way few others have to, even if their child is transgender. Parents of non-binary children confront what “inclusion” really means, when just self-identifying into “one or the other” (for example, bathroom access) doesn't cut it for their children. You may find yourself navigating your child's gender identity in nearly every part of daily life, and dealing with the constant misgendering that non-binary people experience can be draining.

Fortunately, you are not alone in your experience! Take some time to research support groups in your area, both online and in-person. If you can only find support groups for parents/guardians of trans youth of all identities, it's worth reaching out to the center or group, and asking if there are other parents/guardians of non-binary youth who attend. There are many of you out there, eager to find each other and share your stories.

**No one seems to know what non-binary/gender fluid/gender-expansive means. How do I explain it people close to me, such as friends, family, and educators?**

As in any situation in which you hope to educate someone, it's best to go with the simplest explanation, which will vary based on your child's experience of their gender. For some, it may make sense to say "Anna isn't a boy or a girl," or you might say "Max wears dresses some days, and would like you to use 'she/her' pronouns when she does." Young children, in particular, often have very straightforward explanations of who they are, as they tend to naturally be open-minded and accepting of difference. Talk to your child and use their responses to help you formulate what to tell others; they might explain, simply, that they're "a little bit of a boy and a little bit of a girl, too." In taking this approach, you avoid a need for expertise. You don't need to be a scientist in order to support your child!

Some people are receptive to the idea of the gender spectrum, and that everyone — including cisgender people — experience their gender differently than one another. If you are a cisgender woman, for example, you might explain that you are not very feminine, but you are more feminine than your sister. Ask the person you're talking with to apply that idea to non-binary folks; just like cisgender people, no two non-binary people experience their identity in the same way.

For family members, it can also be helpful to offer alternatives to gendered familial language. Consider these options:

INSTEAD OF...	→	TRY...
<b>Sister/Brother</b>	→	<b>Sibling</b>
<b>Daughter/Son</b>	→	<b>Child, Kid, Kiddo, Oldest/Youngest</b>
<b>Niece/Nephew</b>	→	<b>Nibling, my sister's child</b>
<b>Granddaughter/Grandson</b>	→	<b>Grandchild/Grandkid</b>

**How do I prepare in case my child's gender identity or presentation manifests differently in the future?**

The best (and really, only) way to prepare for your child's developing gender identity is to maintain trusting, open, and honest communication. Let your child know that you will support and love them unconditionally, and look for adults in other parts of their life (at school, at camp, etc.) who can serve as similar advocates. If your child trusts that you have their back, they will feel comfortable letting you know what they need if their identity or presentation shifts.

# PRONOUNS

## My child wants to use the gender-neutral pronouns “they, them, theirs.” Isn’t this grammatically incorrect?

The short answer to this question is: no! A number of highly regarded dictionaries, including *Merriam-Webster* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, indicate that “they/ them” as a singular pronoun is correct. They also note that this is not a “new fad”; in fact, we’ve been using the singular “they” since at least the 16th century!

Grammar aside, remember that language is something that changes all the time, based on necessity and how people are commonly using it in conversation. The bottom line is that no rules of language take precedence over your child’s wellbeing. If you’re struggling, remember that the work you may need to put into getting someone’s pronouns right is much less painful than the hurt non-binary youth can feel when someone intentionally uses the wrong pronouns for them or completely ignores their request to be referred to with “they/them” pronouns.

## How do I explain my child’s pronouns to other people?

First, it can be helpful to explain that we already use the singular “they” all of the time when we don’t know an individual’s gender. For example, in a restaurant, when you return to the table after a bathroom break you may ask: “*Did they take our order yet?*” It also might be most effective to explain that the singular “they” is in fact not grammatically incorrect, and that dictionaries list “they” as a singular or plural pronoun.

For those less caught up in the rules of grammar, you may choose to ignore those details, and say something like, “*it takes some getting used to, but using ‘they/ them’ pronouns for Tyler really shows that you respect them and see them as who they are.*” You can also remind others that the work they may need to put into using someone’s pronouns is much easier than the hurt non-binary youth can feel when someone intentionally uses the wrong pronouns for them. The bottom line is that no rules of language take precedence over your child’s wellbeing — it is okay to tell people that, quite simply.

For those who seem eager to support your child, but may struggle to get used to using gender neutral pronouns, let them know that it is okay to make mistakes! If they do, they should simply apologize quickly and honestly, correct themselves, and move on. Practicing consistently is the only way to get better — but if folks continue to struggle, let them know that it is okay, sometimes, to use your child’s name in place of pronouns, even if it feels awkward (for example, “*I asked Kai what Kai wants to eat for dinner*”).

### What do I do when someone uses the incorrect pronouns for my child?

Explaining pronouns can be the most exhausting part of navigating the world as a non-binary person, or as the parent of a non-binary child. Explain pronouns to the people in your life who you see somewhat regularly or often — don't expend energy on people you will never see again, unless your child requests that you do. There is a time to educate, and there is a time to move on, for the well-being and comfort of both yourself and your child.

If you decide that there is an opportunity to correct someone in their pronoun use, there are several ways to approach this:

- + Directly and succinctly name it in the moment: "Sorry to interrupt, but Ace uses ze/hir/hirs pronouns."
- + Correct by setting an example: "Yes, ze is a great student."
- + Wait until the interaction is over, and correct the person to the side: "I noticed that you used he/him pronouns for Ace earlier. Ace actually uses ze/hir/hirs pronouns."

Whenever someone makes a mistake and uses the incorrect pronoun for your child, check in with your child and start a conversation if necessary. It means a lot to young people to acknowledge that this is hard, and that you will continue to work together, one person at a time.



# TRANSITION

## **What does social transition look like for children who identify outside the gender binary?**

Social transition will look completely unique for every child, whether they identify as a boy, a girl, another gender, or no gender at all. Just as there is no “right” way to be a cis boy or cis girl, there is no “right” way to be a trans person. Non-binary youth are uniquely positioned to explore their gender identity and expression. Like many young people who have already rejected binary “boy/girl” identities, your child probably already knows that they should wear what feels right, do activities that feel right, and have hobbies and passions that they truly care about.

Remember that some non-binary children will feel comfortable in their presentation already, and may present in a way that appears to align with their sex assigned at birth. This doesn't mean that they are not non-binary, but rather that this is the right expression for them right now. Again, there is no “right” way to be non-binary. Find ways to celebrate your child's gender identity that go beyond physical appearance. Ask your child what they love most about being non-binary, and what it means to them.

## **My child's gender is manifesting differently over time. Should I wait before we pursue physical transition?**

John Dean, Chair of the National Clinical Reference Group for Gender Identity Services in England, has stated that: “Not treating people is not a neutral act. It will do harm: there are a number of studies that report evidence of suicide and self-harm among trans people who are unable to access care.” This is true for non-binary youth, just as it is for binary transgender youth. That your child's identity may be fluid does not make their identity right now any less real, or any less deserving of affirmation. Research has shown that the method of “watchfully waiting” does far more harm than good. Make sure your child has what they need to feel at home in their body based on what they are experiencing today.

Because hormone therapy and gender-affirming surgeries are not options until later into adolescence and adulthood, parents of younger children shouldn't fear that their decisions may not be reversible. For parents of non-binary adolescents considering hormones, remember that this is a daily decision made on the part of the teen, and one that must be discussed thoroughly with a medical professional before informed consent is given. While some effects of testosterone and estrogen may not be reversible, they certainly do not occur all at once — and because many non-binary teens who pursue hormone therapy opt for lower-than-average dosages, the effects are more gradual. A teen can stop taking hormones at any point in time. Trust that your teen, at this point, is thinking deeply and intently about their gender identity. They know better than anyone their gender fluidity (or lack thereof) and will not feel a strong need to take more permanent physical transition steps unless it is necessary to them.

**Can non-binary children use puberty blockers too?**

For any child who is seriously questioning their gender identity (or is certain that they are not cisgender), puberty blockers can be a helpful way to delay the effects of puberty that may cause dysphoria, such as breast development or voice changes. If a child does choose to physically transition when they are older, then certain surgeries or medical treatments may not be needed due to the impact of the blockers.

The effects of puberty blockers are completely reversible. However, as with any decisions around physical transition, you should consult a medical professional so they can work with your family to determine what makes the most sense for your child.

**Will my child want to have surgery?**

This is a very personal decision, as it is for any transgender person, and one that does not come into play until later in adolescence. Some transgender and non-binary people have a desire or need for surgical intervention, while others don't. Leave the conversation open with your child to ensure that they can communicate what they need to feel comfortable in their body by the time they are an older adolescent, and establish a relationship with a medical provider and therapist who will be better equipped to guide your family through these decisions.

Physical transition looks different for every person, and non-binary people may find themselves bumping up against the limitations of science in seeking a body that matches who they are inside. Some non-binary teens may be comfortable forgoing puberty blockers and opting for top surgery later on. Some may wish to go on estrogen, but expect to feel uncomfortable with breast growth. Unfortunately, we cannot pick and choose the ways in which hormones affect our bodies. However, the more open we are as a society with gender expectations, the more freely our children can express the many dimensions of their gender identity through clothing and other, less permanent interventions.

A medical provider will be able to lay out what is reasonable to expect with any medical intervention, and explain limitations to your child or teenager.

# SCHOOL

## **How do I address my child's gender identity and wellbeing at school and how will my child navigate this day-to-day?**

Everyone in school, from other students, to teachers, to administrators, benefits from being prepared. Arrange meetings with your child's principal and teachers to discuss your child's needs during the school day, from bathroom access to emotional support.

Not all schools will be receptive. Gender-specific language is also deeply embedded in many people's vocabulary, of course, and some will argue that they do not need to make adjustments, especially if they assume that your child is the only non-binary student they will encounter.

If the school administration does not have an official policy around gender inclusion or if you find that policy to be inadequate, suggest that you work together to find at least one trusted teacher or counselor to be your child's 'safe space' in case any issues arise surrounding their needs while in school. Most teachers and administrators want to support your child, but may need the guidance from you, outside resources, and organizations such as HRC.

Navigating these matters on a daily basis is something your child will have to work through, as they become better prepared to advocate for themselves and speak up to peers and teachers. Many young children are nervous about speaking out, whether because they anticipate outright hostility or simply because they do not want to single themselves out. The more time you spend communicating with administrators and teachers yourself, the less likely it is that your child will have to confront these situations themselves. However, being able to speak confidently about their identity to peers is a skill that comes from developing self-esteem and pride in their own identity and voice--all of which improve among children whose parents show support, love, and a commitment to advocacy.

## **My child's school divides students into boys and girls for activities. What should I do to address this?**

Make sure your school knows that your child identifies as non-binary and does not have a "team" to join when their class is divided into boys and girls for activities. Suggest that teachers have students count off into twos (one, two, one, two...) for team activities.

For activities that are overnight, or which require changing clothes, such as a gym class or a sports team, your child will likely have to let you know with which gender group they feel most comfortable. This should be communicated to the school well before such an activity takes place. Make sure that the school is in agreement with the arrangement and will have an ally teacher/chaperone on-hand to advocate for your child at all times in case issues arise with other students or their family members.

**Find more guidance on building gender-inclusive schools on our Welcoming Schools website: [WelcomingSchools.org](https://www.welcomingschools.org)**



**My child’s school has restrooms for boys and for girls, but no all-gender restrooms. Where can my child use the restroom?**

In an ideal world, all restrooms would be accessible to people of any gender. However, as most schools are constructed, this is not the case, and because of zoning laws and other regulations, it is not easy to change. Furthermore, many people are still resistant to the idea of all-gender restrooms. In schools that offer explicit access to facilities for transgender students, the bottom line is typically that children should use the restroom that aligns with their gender identity. By extension, non-binary children whose schools support their access to restrooms should be able to use the restroom which most closely aligns with their gender identity, or which feels most comfortable or safe for the student.

As with any issue in school, it is helpful to be proactive and speak with the school administration beforehand, so you can begin a conversation around any administrative pushback. If the administration will not allow your child to access a gendered restroom of choice, suggest that they be allowed to access the teacher or administrative restroom, which, in most schools, is an all-gender, one room restroom (similar to those in a home). For your child’s safety, it is recommended that they be escorted by an ally teacher or counselor to access such a facility, since using this “special” bathroom can single children out among the school community.

Some schools may outright reject these requests--in which case, we suggest researching the successes of others in similar situations, and perhaps engaging legal counsel when necessary.

**My child’s teachers use a lot of gendered language every day, and are reluctant to change. What examples of gender neutral options can I give them?**

Most people use gendered language in a gender-neutral way in their daily lives without even realizing it (for example, addressing people as “you guys”). We must also take into consideration that many people (especially those of older generations) have been trained that gendered language like “ma’am” and “sir” is the most respectful and professional language to use. With a little thought and practice, it’s easy to shift from “ladies and gentlemen” to “folks,” or other polite gender-neutral options like those listed here:

**Students**

**Mathematicians**

**Y’all**

**Artists**

**Folks**

**People**

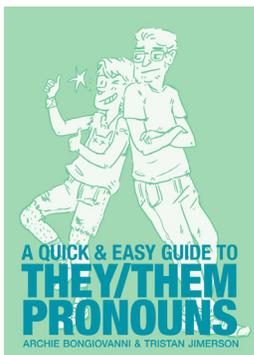
**Friends**

**Everyone**

# RESOURCES

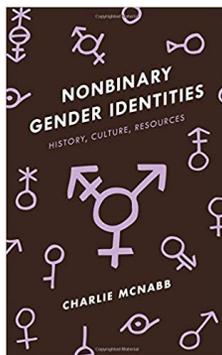
For you, for your family, and for question-askers!

## BOOKS



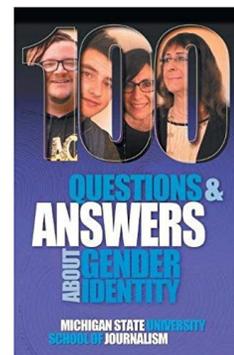
*A Quick & Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns*

By Archie Bongiovanni & Tristan Jimerson



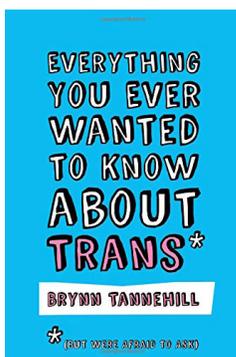
*Nonbinary Gender Identities: History, Culture, Resources*

By Charlie McNabb



*100 Questions & Answers About Gender Identity: The Transgender, Non-binary, Gender-Fluid and Queer Spectrum*

Michigan State University  
School of Journalism



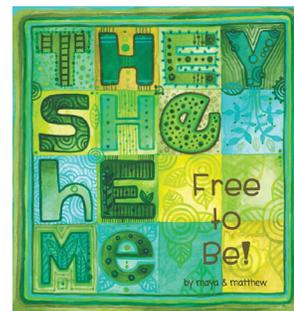
*Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Trans (But Were Afraid to Ask)*

By Brynn Tannehill



*The Gender Creative Child: Pathways for Nurturing and Supporting Children Who Live Outside Gender Boxes*

By Diane Ehrensaft PhD



*They She He Me: Free to Be!*

By Maya & Matthew  
Smith-Gonzalez



## ORGANIZATIONS



The National Center for Transgender Equality advocates to change policies and society to increase understanding and acceptance of transgender people. In the nation's capital and throughout the country, NCTE works to replace disrespect, discrimination, and violence with empathy, opportunity, and justice.

[transequality.org](http://transequality.org)



GLAAD rewrites the script for LGBTQ acceptance. As a dynamic media force, GLAAD tackles tough issues to shape the narrative and provoke dialogue that leads to cultural change. GLAAD protects all that has been accomplished and creates a world where everyone can live the life they love.

[glaad.org](http://glaad.org)



Uniting people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) with families, friends, and allies, PFLAG is committed to advancing equality through its mission of support, education, and advocacy.

[pflag.org](http://pflag.org)



GLSEN is a United States-based education organization working to create safe and inclusive K-12 schools.

[glsen.org](http://glsen.org)



We envision a world that honors and affirms the naturally-occurring human experience of gender independence. Our mission is to normalize this experience through connection, support and resources.

[transparentusa.org](http://transparentusa.org)



Gender Spectrum's mission is to create a gender-inclusive world for all children and youth. To accomplish this, we help families, organizations, and institutions increase understandings of gender and consider the implications that evolving views have for each of us.

[genderspectrum.org](http://genderspectrum.org)

## ARTICLES

### The Washington Post

*Why I had a hard time calling my transgender child 'they' - and why I'm doing it anyway*

Debra Malina, The Washington Post

### teenVOGUE

*All Your Questions About Gender-Neutral Pronouns Answered*

Desmond Meagley and Youth Radio, Teen Vogue



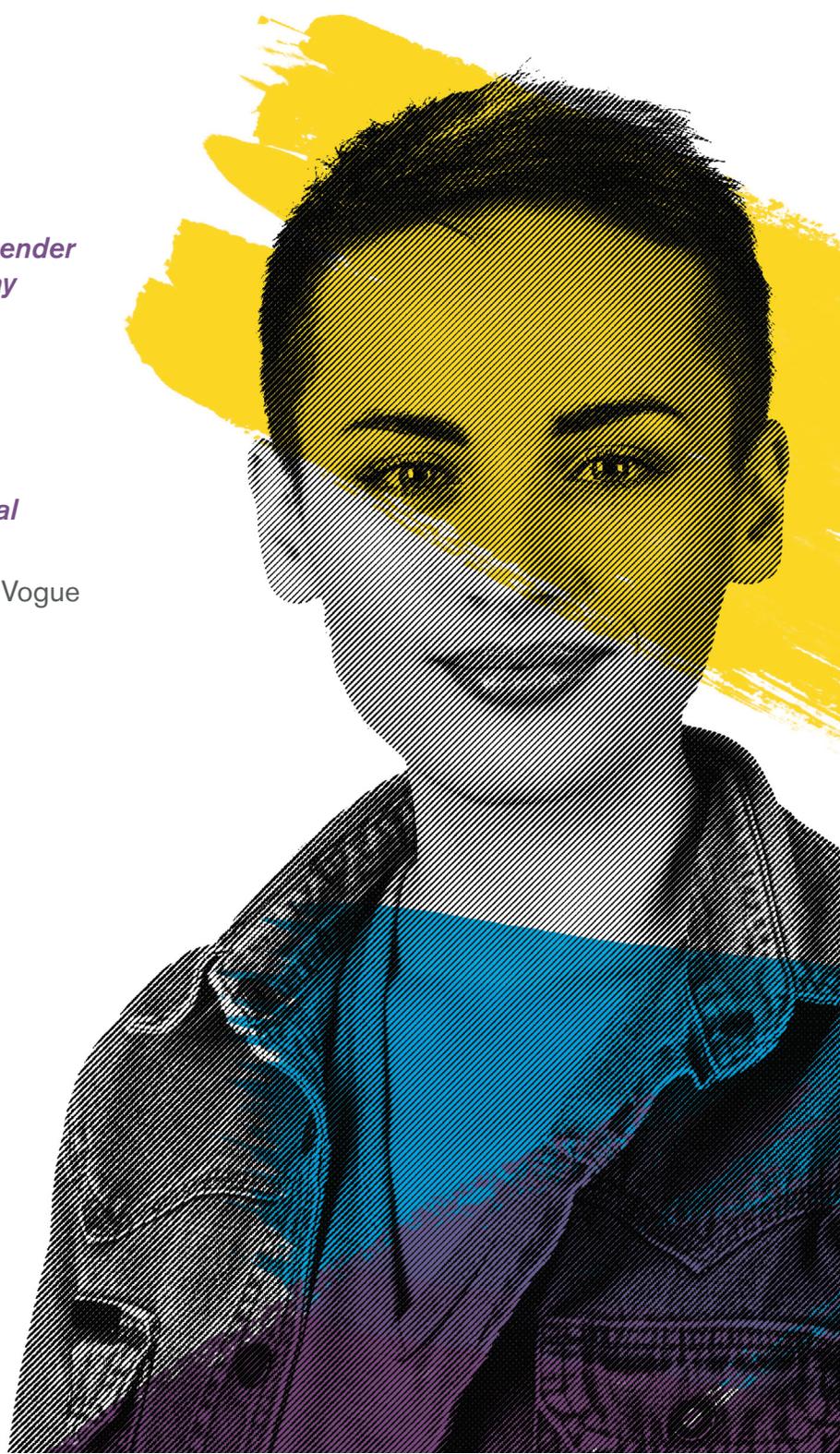
*Understanding Non-Binary People:  
How to Be Respectful and Supportive*

National Center for Transgender Equality



*Nonbinary 101*

The Enby Collective



## VIDEOS



**Trans 101: Ep 30 - Non-Binary Identities**  
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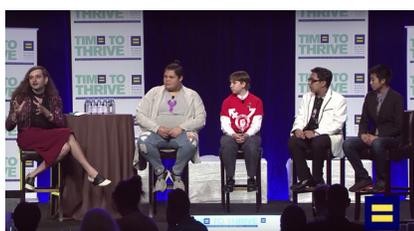


**What is a nonbinary gender? | Riley J. Dennis**  
Riley J. Dennis

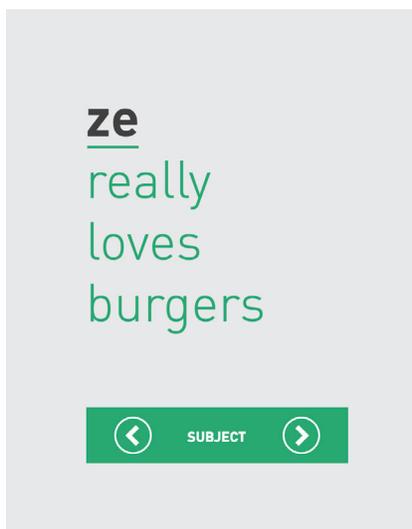


**Trans 101 - The Basics**  
Minus18

## OTHER RESOURCES



**Panel Discussion with Non-Binary Youth and Jacob Tobia at Time to Thrive LGBTQ Youth Conference**  
Human Rights Campaign



**Pronouns**  
[minus18.org.au/pronouns-app/](https://minus18.org.au/pronouns-app/)  
Minus18

An interactive experience which teaches various pronoun options and how to use them in everyday conversations.



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[HRC.org](https://www.hrc.org)