



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN
FOUNDATION

Welcoming Schools



THEY SHE HE ME: FREE TO BE! UNDERSTANDING PRONOUNS

SUGGESTED GRADE LEVEL: 2 – 5

LENGTH OF TIME: One session of 40 minutes for reading and discussion. One to two project sessions of 40 minutes

GOALS

- + To help students share and explore pronouns through discussion of literature and art.
- + To explore the concept of pronouns with students and to embrace differences in the classroom community.
- + To explore the concept of gender expression with students.



OBJECTIVES

- + Students will listen to a book read aloud and discuss its meaning.
- + Students will create bubble letter pronouns for a class pronoun word wall.
- + Students will share their bubble letter pronouns and practice respectfully understanding the pronouns that people use.
- + Students will learn to accept and embrace the many ways people may choose to express who they are through clothing and hairstyles, free of gender norms.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

- + CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 3 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. (Also SL.2.1, 4.1 and 5.1)
- + CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.2: Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood. (Also SL.2.2, 4.2 and 5.2)
- + CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.7: Use information gained from illustrations (e.g., maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text. (Also RI.2.7 and 4.7)

EDUCATORS' NOTES

It is natural for young children to notice differences. Discussing pronouns serves as a familiar starting point for kids and adults to expand their ideas about gender. This lesson offers an opportunity to build classroom community by giving students a chance to share and learn about pronouns.

The book *They She He Me: Free To Be!* by Maya and Matthew Smith-Gonzalez provides a wonderful opportunity to discuss pronouns and gender expression with students. One of the learning objectives of this lesson is to teach children to accept and embrace the many ways people may choose to express who they are through clothing and hairstyles, free of gender norms (gender expression). This lesson also helps students gain important social skills around respectfully understanding that there are many pronouns that people use. For example, some people use their name instead of using pronouns. After the reading and discussion of the book, each student will create a bubble letter drawing of a pronoun.

If you have students in your school or classroom who are transgender or non-binary, be mindful not to put those students in the position of teaching other children about their identity. That is the job of the educator, not the student. Also, remember student privacy—it can jeopardize a student's safety and well-being if they are outed to their peers or non-affirming adults. It is ALWAYS a student's choice whether to share private information or not.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- + *They She He Me: Free To Be!* by Maya and Matthew Smith-Gonzalez
- + Video: [How to Draw Bubble Letters](#)
- + 4.5" x 12" sturdy white paper (cut 9" x 12" paper in half horizontally), 8.5" x 11" can be used as well
- + Pencils, black permanent markers, colored pencils, crayons or markers
- + Chart paper

BEFORE READING *THEY SHE HE ME* TO YOUR STUDENTS

- + Read the book yourself and think about what questions you and your students may have. Practice how you want to respond. Being prepared will help you to be comfortable with a topic you may be unfamiliar discussing.
- + Review the note "For the Grown-Ups" in the back of *They She He Me: Free To Be!*
- + Review [Defining LGBTQ Words for Elementary School Students](#) to prepare to define words for students.
- + For ideas on ways to respond to questions or put-downs about gender, take a look at the Welcoming Schools handout [Be Prepared for Questions and Put-Downs on Gender](#).
- + If a student asks you a question and you're unsure of the answer, it's OK to say that you don't know! You could say you'll figure it out and get back to them.
- + You may want to reference the [Gender Snow-person](#), a simple tool to break down the concepts of gender identity (how you feel), who you love, girl/boy assigned at birth and gender expression.
- + Notice that the words "girl" and "boy" are not used in the text for kids. This is intentional to help us all move out of binary thinking. By providing other ways to think about and navigate the world beyond assuming someone's pronouns, the text naturally helps redirect readers away from assumptions and stereotypes.
- + You may want to pair this lesson with a pronoun unit that you are doing in language arts.

- + Finally, it is often important to review classroom rules about respect and being an ally when having discussions about gender, given that gender is a common way that children participate in identity-based bullying behavior. Our lesson [Ally or Bystander](#) gives students an opportunity to practice and learn ally skills.

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION

- + Ask your students to tell you about pronouns. Generate a definition with them.
- + Ask your students to list pronouns and write them on a piece of chart paper.
- + Remember that some people may use only their name as a pronoun. Write the word “name” on the chart paper.

READ AND DISCUSS THE BOOK

- + Look at the illustrations throughout the book with your students without reading the pronouns, so that they feel free to relate to and associate with who they want without judgments or expectations. (You may want to use a piece of paper to cover the pronouns at the bottom of the page.) This will help ease your students out of the habit they may have of assuming a character’s gender based on how they look.
- + Next, read through the book again with the pronouns. (Model being curious and open about what pronouns each child in the book claims as their own.)
- + Have students notice which children from the “ME” pages show up with other pronouns on the other pages. Find the children who don’t claim more pronouns than me. Ask students to find the child who identifies as both he and she. (This child is wearing a head wrap with a top knot.) **Note:** Calling someone a “he/she” is transphobic and is also different than the person in this book who uses more than one pronoun. It is important to understand this difference.

- + Read the page that says “Pronouns.”
 - » Ask your students if someone’s gender expression (how you wear your hair or how you express the spirit of who you are, even what colors you like) is affected by their pronouns? Is there one way to be if your pronouns are she? Is there one way to be if your pronouns are he? Can we know someone’s pronouns by how they look or do we need to politely ask?
- + Read the page that says “Freeing Pronouns.”
 - » Ask your students if you can know how someone feels on the inside based on how they look on the outside. Let your students know that some people use more than one pronoun. Some people choose not to use pronouns at all; they might use their name instead.
 - » Can we know someone’s pronouns by how they look (gender expression)? If you are unsure of what pronouns someone uses, you could ask politely, “My pronouns are she/her/hers; what, if any, are your pronouns?” Using the right pronouns is one way to show someone they are seen.
- + Read the page that says “Claiming Pronouns.”
 - » Ask your students what the author means by, “You can have an outside pronoun and an inside pronoun?” Help them understand that how we feel inside can sometimes be hard to share because we might be afraid of the way other people will treat us. All of us have places where we show different parts of ourselves, and the more respectful and kind students are to each other, the more of ourselves we will all feel safe to share in our classroom community.
- + Read the page that says “Creating Pronouns.”
 - » Today people are adding new pronouns to our vocabulary.

- + Read the page that says “Using Pronouns.”
 - » Have your students practice using they/them pronouns. Example: “Where is Lenny?” “They went to the library” or “They went to get a drink of water.”
- + Read the page that says “Playing with Pronouns.”
 - » Let your students know that when you are reading books in class, you will change the pronouns sometimes to explore this. Consider doing a read aloud of a favorite class book using they/them pronouns instead of she/her or he/him.
 - » Remind students that it is not OK to change someone else’s pronoun—that is teasing or bullying, not play. Be respectful and practice using pronouns people want to be called.
- + Read the page About M+M (optional)
 - » If needed, refer to [Defining LGBTQ Words for Elementary School Students](#) to define the terms “queer” and “LGBTQ” for your students.

SESSION 2: BUBBLE LETTER PRONOUN ACTIVITY

- + Go back to the pronoun anchor chart. Ask your students if there are any pronouns they want to add after reading the book.
- + Show the video [How to Draw Bubble Letters](#).
- + As you show the video, you may find that your students start wondering if the artist is a “girl” or a “boy.” This is an excellent opportunity to say that you don’t know what pronouns the artist uses and that we don’t want to assume their gender or pronouns. If you look at the “About” section on the YouTube page, you will see that the artist does not use any pronouns in their description.
- + Give each student a 4.5” x 12” (or an 8.5” x 11”) piece of paper and a pencil.

- + There are two ways to do this lesson:
 - » **Option One:** Have each student choose a pronoun from the pronoun anchor chart that they want to draw in bubble letters. Students do not need to choose their own pronoun. This lesson is an opportunity to create a classroom visual filled with many bubble letter pronouns. Try to get as many different pronouns as you can.
 - » **Option Two:** If you have done a lot of gender inclusive work in your classroom and you feel that your students are at a developmental level where it would be safe, respectful and affirming for students to illustrate their own pronouns, then the activity can be done in that fashion. Have each student draw their own pronoun (or name if they use that for their pronoun) with bubble letters. (If you have a student who uses more than one pronoun, such as she and they, make sure to give them two pieces of paper.)
- + Remember, it is always a student’s choice whether to share private information or not.
- + Have students follow the steps from the video to create their bubble letters in pencil.
- + Once they have letters they like, have students outline over the pencil in black permanent pen.
- + Have students decorate their letters with colored pencils or markers.

SHARING THEIR ARTWORK

- + Put all of the students’ pronouns up in your classroom. Use them as a reference when you are reading books in your class.

EXTENSION

- + Read the book *A House for Everyone* by Jo Hirst. Children build a house together on the playground. Each one has a different way to express their gender identity.
- + The Welcoming Schools lesson [Red: A Crayon's Story](#) is a wonderful tool to explore looking one way on the outside and feeling/being different on the inside.
- + Use the Welcoming Schools lesson [Call Me Tree/ Lláname árbol](#) to explore the concept of not using pronouns at all.
- + Have students draw their faces and put them up in the room on a bulletin board with the pronoun "WE" in bubble letters.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

- + Offer an opportunity for students to share their artwork with each other in pairs. Direct students to share one thing they like about their picture with a classmate. Next, ask students to give an appreciation to their partner about their picture.
- + While the students are sharing their work with each other, are they using vocabulary and showing comprehension of the concept of pronouns?
- + Assessment for this lesson will be mostly informal. Observe your students' reactions during class and small-group discussions. By paying attention to their conversations and individual responses, you can assess their comprehension of diversity and their ability to apply this comprehension by exploring their own differences.

ADDITIONAL CHILDREN'S BOOKS ON GENDER AND PRONOUNS

- + *Are You A Boy Or Are You A Girl?* by Sarah Savage.
- + *A House for Everyone: A Story to Help Children Learn about Gender Identity and Gender Expression* by Jo Hirst.
- + *I'm Jay, Let's Play* by Beth Reichmuth.
- + *It's Me* by Nina Benedetto.
- + *Jamie is Jamie: a book about being yourself and playing your way* by Afsaneh Moradian.
- + *Neither* by Airlie Anderson.

Additional Resources from Welcoming Schools

- + [Lessons to Understand Gender](#)
- + [Books that Look at Gender and Support Transgender and Non-Binary Students](#)
- + [Resources for Gender Inclusive Schools](#)
- + [Defining LGBTQ Words for Children](#)
- + [Professional Development Training](#)

Credit: Adapted from the book *They She He Me: Free To Be!* by Maya and Matthew Smith Gonzelez