

THEY SHE HE ME: FREE TO BE!

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION GUIDE



Talking about pronouns serves as a familiar starting point for kids and adults to expand their ideas about gender. 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. One of the learning objectives of this book is to teach children to accept and embrace the many ways people may choose to express who they are through clothing and hairstyles (gender expression), free of gender norms.

BEFORE A COMMUNITY READING OF *THEY SHE HE ME: FREE TO BE!*

- + Read the book yourself before your event so you can think about questions you and community members may have. Practice how you want to respond. Being prepared will help you be comfortable with a topic you may be unfamiliar discussing.
- + Review the notes “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 people.
- + If a community member asks you a question and you’re unsure of the answer, it’s OK to say that you don’t know or that there are likely multiple answers to the question depending on who you ask!
- + You may want to reference the [Gender Snowperson](#), a simple tool to break down the concepts of how you feel (gender identity), who you love (sexual orientation), pronoun assigned at birth (sex assigned at birth) and gender expression. Many people do not realize that gender identity and sexual orientation are two very different concepts and that all of us have both a gender identity and sexual orientation.
- + Notice that the words “girl” and “boy” are not used in the book. This is intentional. By providing other ways to think about and navigate the world beyond assuming someone’s pronouns, the text naturally helps to redirect readers away from assumptions and stereotypes.

READ AND DISCUSS THE BOOK

- + Share your name and pronouns (if you use pronouns) with community members .
- + Look at the illustrations throughout the book with community members.
- + Have people 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 people 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 people 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) determines their pronouns. Is there one way to express your gender 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 people if you can know how someone feels on the inside based on how they look on the outside. Let people 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 people 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 we are to each other, the more of ourselves we will all feel safe to share in our community.

**Read the page that says “Creating Pronouns.”**

- ✦ People are adding and creating new pronouns every day which are shaping and re-shaping our vocabulary.

Read the page that says “Using Pronouns.”

- ✦ Have people 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.”

- ✦ Remind people that it is not OK to change someone else’s pronoun—that is teasing or bullying, not play. Be respectful and practice asking and using the pronouns people want to be called (if they use pronouns).

**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 community members.

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Want a more in-depth learning opportunity?
Welcoming Schools also has a lesson plan
available for download at WelcomingSchools.org