

# I am the parent of a non-binary child

Susan Knoppow



The first time my oldest child told me that gender existed on a spectrum, we were parked in the driveway, sitting in our old Honda minivan with the engine idling and the radio off. Miriam had just returned from a youth group weekend and we were catching up.

“No, sweetheart,” I said to my precocious 14-year-old. “Sexuality is on a spectrum; you can be straight, gay or lots of things in between. Gender is either male or female.”

Miriam corrected me. “No, Mom. Gender is on a spectrum, too.”

At the end of high school, Miriam came out as non-binary. That, too, was a confusing surprise. My husband David and I listened intently, nodded in all the right places, and said we would do everything we could to be supportive. We had no idea what that meant. I would be lying if I pretended it’s been easy.

For the first 18 years of Miriam's life, I was sure I was raising a daughter. And I was. Until that daughter told me they were neither female or male, and that I should switch to "they/them/their" pronouns when referring to them in the third person.

Pronouns need their own discussion. We'll save that for another day. But in the meantime, here's the short version: People who are non-binary use a variety of pronouns, but they/them/their are the most common today. The English language is still figuring this one out. My child (and many other non-binary folks) use they instead of she or he, them instead of her or him, and their instead of hers or his.

After lots of practice, my ear is getting tuned to this change. The distinctions may seem like a clumsy trick of the English language, but the implications run deep.

The pronouns we use reflect our level of respect for the person we are speaking with or about. When someone tells me, "I'll just call Miriam 'she' because that's what I'm used to," they are passing judgment on my child. They are saying, "My comfort is more important than your child's comfort." Whether or not they intend to be dismissive they are telling me, "Miriam's identity is not valid because I don't understand it." Being mis-gendered – or mistaken for the wrong gender – stings. Hearing "she/her/hers" instead of "they/them/theirs" causes my child pain.

Does that sound harsh? Does it sound like I'm asking friends, family and strangers to engage in an issue that doesn't involve them? I can assure you that whether or not you think you know someone who is non-binary, you do. The more people I talk to and the more I write about this, the more I realize that David and I are experiencing something that is both utterly unique and increasingly common. You know someone who is non-binary. They just might not have told you yet.

As a parent, I am doing everything I can to expand the universe in which my child and other non-binary people can feel comfortable. That's what an ally does. I've had conversations about gender identity with my parents and with cab drivers, with my closest friends and with checkout clerks. When someone I haven't seen for months asks, "How's Miriam?" I say, "They're fine, thanks." When a business associate asks, "You have three kids? Boys or girls?" I tell them, "I have two sons, and my oldest is non-binary." Some people nod because they get it. Most of the time, I have to explain further.

Here's a peek into the types of questions and reactions I've heard from friends, relatives and strangers when I mention Miriam or talk about what's been going on in our lives, along with my responses.

**Do you think it's a phase?**

*No. And even if it were, what difference would that make? I want to keep the lines of communication open and help my child find a comfortable home in the world – with or without me. If I deny their reality, I will be shutting that door.*

**What you are describing is scientifically impossible. There are two sexes: male and female, and therefore two genders.**

*That's not helpful. And anyway, I'm talking about gender, not biological sex. Gender has always been a social construct (which changes by era and culture.) Some say sex is constructed, too.*

**This is just kids' latest way to try to be unique. They'll grow out of it.**

*The fact that many of the people who (publicly) identify as non-binary happen to be under 25 does not mean this gender identity doesn't exist for older people. They may not have had the language or the need for it, or they just might not be sharing it with you. Wait a few years until non-binary is more familiar to the mainstream public. You'll be hearing more of this.*

**My child says the same thing. I think it's because she's depressed.**

*If you think your child is depressed, I encourage you to get them help to deal with that directly. Please don't deny your child's identity.*

**I'm so sorry. I feel terrible for you.**

*Keep your pity to yourself. It is both misguided and unwelcome. As soon as you smugly think to yourself, "Thank God it's not my kid" you separate yourself from my family and isolate us from the larger community. Please deal with your discomfort away from me.*

**You are amazing (brave/courageous/etc.). I couldn't possibly handle this.**

*Annoying and unhelpful. See "I'm so sorry," above.*

**That's ridiculous. "They" is a plural pronoun.**

*Language is always evolving. You'll get used to it.*

**Can't you just use "they" when you're together and use the old pronoun with everyone else?**

*Language matters, and I have been asked to change mine. The best way to get used to that change is to use the preferred pronouns all the time. The more others hear "they" in reference to one person, the more familiar it will become, and the more welcome and comfortable my child (and other non-binary folks) will be in our communities.*

**I hear you. We're having the same conversation in my house.**

*Let's talk.*

**I am completely confused.**

*That's OK. You don't have to get it all at once.*

I love my child. They are exactly the same artsy, sensitive, insightful person they have always been – same concern for the world, same love of farming, poetry, Judaism and family, same funky sense of style. I keep exploring and sharing my experiences in my blog and in my daily encounters. It gets easier and more comfortable all the time.

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