

I'm a Teen Who Is Nonbinary: Here's What I Wish Parents Would Know About Gender

In this week's 'Teen Talk' column, a nonbinary teen shares what they want parents to understand about their experience with gender identity.

By **Rosen Piperni**

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If you met me, you might not know if I'm a girl or a boy. And you would be right. I'm neither. I am nonbinary.

What is nonbinary? it's an identity that is separate from male and female. Think of it this way—there are not only two genders, but many, and

nonbinary is one. A nonbinary individual would most likely use they/them pronouns instead of he/him or she/her. I use they/them.

If you've ever thought about transgender people, you may have assumed it's something people become. But I've been who I am forever.

From as early as I can remember, society has tried to instill in me this idea that there are only two genders, and each gender has its own clothes and colors and toys. But as soon as I understood this, I wanted to break away from what was expected. I never wore dresses unless forced to. I wore "leather" jackets and cut my hair short, wore my father's button-up shirts tucked into trousers. I made my voice as low as I could manage and gravitated towards activities like skateboarding and drumming that typically corresponded to masculinity.

Until I turned twelve, I believed this was the activist in me, following the notion that gender should not be associated with clothes and colors, and a deep wanting I'd acquired somewhere to break stereotypes. And, I still believe that inanimate objects should not have genders written on them. But I realized there was a deeper reason for my resistance. Now I want to help parents understand what it is like to be a nonbinary teen today.

How I came to realize I was nonbinary.

I was first introduced to the concept of not having to identify with either gender in sixth grade, when one of my friends came out to me as nonbinary. I researched online and learned about different identities, that being nonbinary actually existed. Looking at people's experiences, I realized that I was similar to them. Female pronouns didn't feel okay, and before I came out, being called "she" or referred to as "her" was painful. I never minded he/him, but it also didn't feel quite right.

You might be wondering, how can such little words cause pain and do damage? How does being described by a word that essentially has no meaning hurt someone? I don't have a good explanation for why misusing pronouns hurts but it's an instinct. It's a feeling. It's unquestionable to me. Just like if you identify as male or female, you probably wouldn't feel right being called the other gender. It might even make you angry—it's the same feelings for nonbinary people.

Coming out to family and friends can be scary.

For me, it was terrifying to come out. I understood that my immediate family would probably accept me, but it still took me around a year to tell my parents. There have been countless cases of people kicked from their homes after coming out, cases of identities being denied, and attempts to "change" people. I was afraid this would happen, however irrational my fears were. And, thankfully, my parents have been nothing but supportive.

I haven't come out at school yet—not many people believe there are more than two genders, and most haven't heard of anyone being trans or nonbinary so I decided to avoid the conversation here entirely. The hardest part was navigating the bathrooms: I had to use the girls' bathroom, and I tend to look male. The students who don't know me stop what they're doing and stare and whisper to their friends. To them, I seem like an alien.

Please don't misgender us.

Being misgendered is just like what it sounds like—when someone assumes and refers to me as a gender that I'm not. And I go through the

world in fear of it. So I bind my chest, wear my hair short, and try as much as I can to pass as a boy. For me, being misgendered as a boy is much better than being misgendered as a girl. I speak in a low, gravelly voice, and I make use of my father's wardrobe, which thankfully is very good. I walk around occasionally in suspenders, belted trousers, waistcoats, and blazers, and when I see myself in the mirror, I can smile.

The way I dress, the way I act, the way I speak—nearly everything I do—is to avoid being misgendered, to avoid people thinking that I'm a girl. There are many things I would like to do, many things I would like to wear—lighter colors, earrings, and high-waisted trousers—that are off-limits because I believe people will misgender me in them.

We know you named us, but please call us by our preferred name now.

One of the worst things that happens to me and other nonbinary or trans people is deadnaming, being called by the birth name I no longer use or seeing this old name written on official forms of school documents. Many trans and nonbinary people choose a name that conforms to the gender they identify with—and drop their old name which maybe had a feminine or masculine sound, and reminded them of the gender written on their birth certificate.

My deadname represents the box that I've been stuffed in since the moment I've been born—female. It represents the pain of being misgendered, and the pain of being forced into a category I never belonged to. Soon after I came out to my parents as nonbinary, I changed it. It was difficult for them to remember the new name at first, but what mattered to me is that they tried. Recently they helped change my name legally and update my passport. At first, I was afraid they would

be opposed to it, but they did everything I asked and more. I'm very grateful, and I'm happy every time I see my name on a form or plane ticket. It may seem like a simple thing, to change one's name, but to me it signifies acceptance and love. I smile sometimes when I hear my new name, because I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not anymore.

The world is slowly changing and you can help.

As I was growing up, society always seemed gendered. Clothing stores were divided between menswear and womenswear, bathrooms are split into two categories: male and female. I couldn't create an account on most websites or fill out most forms without being given the same dreaded options: a figure in a dress or a figure with pants, with the choice of gender listed underneath.

However, this is changing. For example, with the release of the new Animal Crossing game, there is no option for gender—simply a more masculine character and a more feminine character. As I'm asked to sign up for different websites or fill out forms for doctors' appointments more and more often the gender options are not limited to two. I hope we continue to advance as a society, and that someday there won't be only two options anymore. Parents can help this happen by acknowledging gender diversity and helping their children navigate this changing landscape. Someday, my pronouns will be accepted everywhere, and hopefully so will I.

Rosen Piperni, age 14, is in 8th grade and lives in Brooklyn, New York. They enjoy playing the guitar, writing poetry, and trying out random recipes from the internet.