

Gender & Circus Coaching


Basic Guidelines for Circus Coaches & Mentors



BY THE AYCO YOUTH ACTION COMMITTEE



Hello, Circus Friend!




We created this document as a guide to the sometimes-complex world of gender, in the context of teaching and mentoring youth in circus arts. We believe that acceptance of all gender identities and expressions is very important in the circus world, since circus has traditionally welcomed members of society who live a little differently than the majority.

Circus is for everyone.

Our resource sheet is not meant to be the definitive text for all situations. Different geographies have different cultures and vocabularies around gender, and those can change over time. Keep in mind that it is okay to make mistakes! The important thing is that you take the initiative to listen, learn, and adapt. It is everyone's responsibility to make the circus community the safest and most welcoming place it can be.

You can find a more detailed version of this booklet on the Resources page of the ACE website. If you have resources, questions, suggestions, or anything you'd like to share with us, please do!

AYCO Youth Advisory Committee, 2018
yac@americanyouthcircus.org



Being
Mindful of
Language

Pronouns.

Pronouns are words we use to refer to people in place of their names. “He” is the pronoun in “he walked,” instead of “Josie walked.”

Examples: **she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs.** Multiple other invented gender neutral pronouns exist, including **ne/nem/nirs** and **ze/hir/hirs.**

To most people, the pronouns others use to refer to them are very important to their identity. Therefore, it’s important to be respectful of the pronouns by which someone wants to be called, and to never assume somebody’s pronouns. People’s pronouns can change over time or stay the same, so frequent check-ins on names and pronouns are vital.

When an individual uses **they** as their pronoun, it functions as a singular pronoun that agrees with plural verbs. For example:

“Jack runs; he is running. Jack and Mack run;
they are running. Tim runs; they are running.
Darryl runs; ze is running.”



Messing Up.

If you misgender somebody (i.e., call them the wrong pronouns or use improperly gendered language to describe them), correct yourself, apologize, and move on. **Apologize briefly and sincerely but not profusely — If you ask forgiveness, you are redirecting the attention to yourself instead of the misgendered person.**

“Notice how he — Oh, I’m sorry, John.
Notice how they are keeping their shoulders
extended the whole time.”



If you realize your mistake after the fact, still apologize and say the correct pronouns going forward.

“Rebecca! I’m so sorry; I just realized I misgendered
you during that demo in class today.”

If a student misgenders another student or teacher, try to follow up with a correction.

Student: Andrea did a great job; she really nailed it!
Teacher: Absolutely, they’ve been working really hard.

Afterwards, follow up with the misgendered student. Their comfort is first and foremost: Ask if they’re alright with you giving other students reminders of their pronouns. If you feel it’s appropriate, talk with the student who made a mistake one-on-one — not in front of the group — to give them a kind reminder.

Language in the Classroom.

In all introductions, check in with pronouns:

“My name is Ellie, I use she/her pronouns,
and my favorite food is blueberries.”



If you forget someone’s pronouns, the simplest way to ask is:

“Can you please remind me of your
pronouns?”

To normalize pronoun check-ins, and to give space for people to switch pronouns, consider starting every week with a quick check-in.

Gendered Praise.

It's easy to fall into complimenting students based on traits typically associated with their genders.

Often associated with "female":

- BEAUTIFUL
- GRACEFUL
- GORGEOUS
- FLEXIBLE
- ELEGANT

Often associated with "male":

- SOLID
- EXPLOSIVE
- STRONG
- POWERFUL
- HANDSOME

We don't want to perpetuate the idea that only boys are "strong" and only girls are "beautiful." Strive to actively invert and mix these stereotypes, or avoid them entirely.

Addressing the Group.

AVOID gendered phrases like:

"Hey **guys!** Nice work, **ladies.** Good morning, **gentlemen.** Bye, **girls!**"



BETTER alternatives include:

"Hi, **everyone!** Great work, **folks.** What would **you all** like to do next? Bye, **friends!**"

Shifting to gender-inclusive language removes assumption. This also applies to families and caretakers. Instead of telling students to "Make sure your **mom** packs your water bottle," say "**parent**" or "**grown-up**".



The Difference Between
Gender & Sex
Assigned at Birth

Gender Identity.

Gender identity (what gender you feel describes you) and the sex (typically male or female) which you were assigned at birth, defined by your physical anatomy, **are not the same thing**. Anatomy itself is not always perfectly straightforward either; some people have features of both “male” and “female” anatomy – this person will be typically referred to as **intersex**, and this may or may not factor into their gender identity.

A person whose gender identity matches their assigned-at-birth sex is called **cisgender**, a **cis woman/cis man** for short. Someone whose gender identity differs from their assigned-at-birth sex might identify as **transgender**, **genderqueer**, **agender**, or **non-binary**.

Gender Expression.

Gender expression is the term for how one presents oneself to the world: Choices of what to wear, what name and pronouns to use, and how to behave. Many trans people will physically transition (i.e., undergo surgery and hormone changes), but many trans people also choose not to. **Don't assume that someone's appearance thoroughly represents their identity. Gender expression is also separate from sexual orientation.**



Acknowledging &
Subverting
Stereotypes in Disciplines

Bathrooms



Acknowledge that bodies are constructed differently and lend themselves to different disciplines for physical reasons. People are naturally flexible or naturally strong without regard to their assigned sex – it has to do with their genetics.

Many of us fall back onto stereotypical male/female performance narratives; recognize that your students may not feel comfortable with these.

Have a conversation with your students about circus stereotypes and why they exist, considering tradition, aesthetics, physicality, sexism, homophobia, and the historical development of different disciplines.

Take special initiative to encourage students to try, and not give up on, disciplines outside the stereotypes of their genders.

Give your students some choice in their costumes for performances rather than assigning “male” and “female” costumes according to assigned-at-birth sex. Even better, consider non-gendered options.



Most bathrooms are separated and labeled male/female. This can be uncomfortable for trans people, gender non-conforming people, or anyone! An easy fix is to label them all as gender neutral. If you don't have control of your school's bathrooms, be sure to make it clear to your students that they may use whichever bathroom makes them most comfortable.

Helpful Terms.

AGENDER

Not identifying with any gender (male, female, or anywhere in between).

ASEXUAL

Not sexually attracted to anyone.

AFAB

Assigned female at birth.

AMAB

Assigned male at birth.

BISEXUAL

Sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of more than one sex or gender (not to be confused with pansexual).

CISGENDER

A person whose gender matches the sex assigned to them at birth. Associated terms: Cis man; cis woman.

GCS

Gender confirmation surgery, also known as sex reassignment surgery. Many transgender people choose to have surgery so that their physical body more closely matches their gender identity. **Not all transgender people choose to have surgery.**

GENDER IDENTITY

“One’s internal, deeply held sense of one’s gender.”

GENDER EXPRESSION

How a person chooses to present their gender identity, through actions, attire, and demeanor.

HETEROSEXUAL

Sexually and/or romantically attracted to the “opposite” sex, when gender is viewed through a binary lens (e.g., men attracted to women).

HOMOSEXUAL

Sexually and/or romantically attracted to to the same sex, when gender is viewed through a binary lens (e.g., men attracted to men).

HRT

Hormone replacement therapy. Many transgender people choose to have HRT (e.g. taking synthetic testosterone, or T) so that their physical body more closely matches their gender identity. **Not all transgender people choose to have HRT.**

NON-BINARY

Not identifying with either “male” or “female” as a gender identity.

PANSEXUAL

Sexually and/or romantically attracted to any sex or gender (not to be confused with bisexual).

SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH

The sex/gender marker assigned to a person at birth, typically based on physical anatomy and/or chromosomes.

QUEER

An umbrella term to define non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, sexual orientations, and/or gender presentations. This word is accepted in many communities, but not all.

TRANSGENDER

“An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.”

TRANSITIONING

Refers to a period of time in which someone is taking steps to live as the gender they identify with, rather than the gender they had been presenting as before.



AMERICAN CIRCUS
EDUCATORS
ACE