

Loaded Language: Changing How We Talk About Gender

Below, we look at some commonly used phrases that re-inscribe binary gender and offer alternative phrases that support gender diversity. However, there is no “quick fix” or shortcut to having meaningful conversations about gender.

Remember to *listen to your child*, ask questions to find out what they’re really saying or asking, answer questions honestly yet at their level, question or offer information that contradicts stereotypes, and state your values (“in our family, we believe...”).*

INSTEAD OF...		TRY...	
Boys and girls, ladies and gentlemen, you guys	>>	Children, students, kids, comrades, everyone, everybody, folks, you all, y’all (use if authentic to you)	
“Look at that woman over there. She has a cool hat.”	>>	“Look at that person over there. They have a cool hat.” [Not assigning gender to strangers.]	
“He’s a hungry little caterpillar!”	>>	“It’s a hungry little caterpillar!” [or she, or they; resist defaulting to male gender on every animal and inanimate object you encounter]	
“Boys have penises, girls have vaginas”	>>	“Many boys have penises, and some others do too. Many girls have vaginas and vulvas and some others do too.” or “Many boys have penises, some don’t; many girls have vaginas and vulvas, some don’t.”	
“You were born a girl” “He was born a girl”	>>	“When you were born we guessed you were a girl. You get to decide if that is true.” “He has a body that made grownups guess he was a girl when he was born.” [body parts ≠ gender]	
“You’re a boy because you have a penis.”	>>	“You get to decide if you’re a boy, girl, both, or something else.” [child has agency]	
Always giving compliments that reinforce stereotypes-- i.e. telling boys they’re strong, good builders, praising their actions while we tell girls they’re pretty, have nice clothes, are kind	>>	Purposely switch gendered comments. ex: tell boys how pretty or kind they are; tell girls how strong or tough they are.	

This handout originally prepared for talk at Children's Community Center, 2/28/2018 by Gender Justice in Early Childhood and Auden Smith.

*See *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves: 2nd Edition* (forthcoming from NAEYC) for more on having "clarifying conversations" with children.



Staying silent

Notice out loud disparities and omissions when you encounter them.

>> **ex:** when at the store getting clothes, "Hmm, I wonder why all the kids' clothes get separated?" This can open up a discussion about other folks who may want to wear a dress.

Staying silent/ disengaged with media consumption

When (/if) your kid watches TV, youtube videos, etc, watch along with them and question stereotypes you encounter.

>> **ex:** In Paw Patrol, there are a lot more dynamic male characters. "There's something I'm noticing about this show. There seem to be a lot of fast, strong boy characters and not many girl characters. I wonder why that is?"

Avoid sharing your personal gender biases. Even if you're not able to give them up, don't pass on the bias. For example, not "Boys don't wear ponytails in our family"

>> Instead, "I don't want you to wear a ponytail because it can pull your hair tight when you play."

Be open about how our understanding of gender is changing.

ex: "some people are learning that there are more than boys and girls."
>> "Some people still think there is only one way to be a boy or a girl."
"Some people think you can only be a boy or a girl, but I know folks that are both or neither."

When kids ask things- "is that a boy or a girl?"

>> "I don't know. If they were a friend of ours, we could ask."

[this list is incomplete-- add your own!]