How to Be an Ally to Transgender People

1. Don’t assume you can tell what gender a person is, what bathroom they belong in or what pronoun they go by simply by appearance. Avoid assigning labels, identities or categories to people based on your perceptions or what you’ve heard from others.

2. Use pronouns that reflect people’s gender presentation, not their biological sex (e.g., use “he” for someone born female but who identifies and expresses himself as male). If you are uncertain which pronoun to use, ask in a respectful way. Be aware that some people prefer gender neutral pronouns (hir instead of his/her; sie or zi instead of he/she). Never call transgender people “it,” “he-she,” “she-male” or other insulting names.

3. Use gender-neutral language when possible, such as partner or spouse instead of boyfriend/girlfriend or husband/wife; and try to opt for terms like police officer or member of Congress rather than policeman or Congressman.

4. Be aware of evolving language around gender and try to use the most current and respectful terms. For example, cross-dresser (not transvestite), intersex (not hermaphrodite) and transition (not sex-change) are preferable.

5. Don’t ask transgender people their “real name,” birth-assigned name or ask to see photos of them as a boy (if they now identify as female) or a girl (if they now identify as male). Transgender people should not be expected to satisfy your curiosity about their past.

6. Don’t describe transgender people as trendy, exotic or cool, even if you mean it as a compliment. Transgender people are simply trying to live as their true selves. No person should ever be made to feel like a curiosity, freak or token.

7. Don’t assume that transgender people are gay or lesbian, or that they transition to become straight. Gender identity and sexual orientation are separate identities. Transgender people may be gay, bisexual or straight, just like anyone else.

8. Don’t assume anything about a transgender person’s transition process. Some people take hormones or get surgery as part of their process, but many don’t. In any case, transition is a personal subject, and information about anatomy and sexuality should be considered private.

9. Avoid questioning or policing other people’s restroom usage or choices. Since restrooms are often the site of harassment, challenge negative remarks from others and offer to escort a transgender friend to the bathroom if that will provide an extra level of safety.

10. Never gossip about or share the identity of a transgender person, even if you think their status is evident. Coming out is a personal process that should be determined by the individual rather than spread through rumor. If a friend comes out to you, be open, supportive and non-judgmental.

11. Challenge your own ideas about gender roles and expectations by reading, talking to others and educating yourself. Think expansively about gender and be open to new ideas and ways of thinking about the issue.

12. Don’t stand for jokes or rude remarks about transgender people. Challenge prejudice in yourself and others, and show friendship and support to those who are targeted by transphobia.

13. Work to change the policies and the environment in your school or community to be more transgender-friendly. Advocate for safe restrooms and locker rooms, inclusive language on forms and records, anti-bullying and other policies that include gender identity, and school traditions (e.g., yearbook, prom) that don’t discriminate on the basis of gender expression.