

## **S1 — Episode 1 — Living in the New Gender Culture**

*Goldstein, Tara and Audarson Gudmundson, Helgi. (Producers). (2018, October 17).*

Tara interviews Lee Airton from Queen's University about their new book *Gender Your Guide: What to Say, What to Know and What to Do in the New Gender Culture*.

Tara: Hello, and welcome to *Gender. Sexuality. School*. I'm Tara Goldstein and we're podcasting from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Two years ago, in 2016, my research team and I interviewed a mother named Dawn for our research on the experiences of LGBTQ families in Ontario schools. Dawn's younger daughter was eight and identified as a transgender girl. Her transition at school was difficult. When we asked Dawn what teachers can do to help students transition at school, this is what she said:

Dawn: There's a lot of things that people do without realizing that they're doing it that that make it unsafe for trans kids to come out. I think, like, just generally being aware about the language that you use, like using like "kids" or like "children", instead of saying like "boys" and "girls" and like not dividing things, not dividing the class like boys over here, girls over here, because that happened to my child. Like when I was on a field trip, it's like "Okay, boys line up here and girls line up here" and my child was like, literally standing between the two lines, like with this, like, kind of like frantic look, and then stood in the girls line. And this was like, the first year when when she was only six and, and everyone kind of just like laughed, but they didn't realize like, they didn't they didn't laugh at her, but they laughed like thinking that she was just being funny. Yeah. But I think that's a difficult situation, because not everybody identifies as a boy or girl. So, you know, dividing people in groups in different ways, like not having blue binders for the boys and pink like just being a little more like, just using gender neutral language when you have the chance.

Tara: Well, more and more students are coming out as transgender and choosing to transition to school. And while their parents, teachers and friends want to support them, it's often hard to know what to say and what to do. To help us figure that out. I've invited Lee Airton to come and talk about their new book, *Gender: Your Guide*, what to say what to know, and what to do in the new gender culture. Lee is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Lee's teaching, research and advocacy work focused on enabling individuals and institutions to welcome gender and sexual diversity. In 2012, Lee founded "They is my pronoun", the only QMA based blog about gender neutral pronoun usage, and user support. Through "They is my pronoun", Lee offers advice and resources to gender neutral pronoun users and allies, including youth, teachers, parents and co-workers. They are also the founder of No Big Deal campaign, a social media initiative that helps people show

support for transgender people's right to have their pronouns used in everyday life. Lee, welcome to Gender. Sexuality. School.

Lee: Thanks, Tara. I'm very happy to be here with you.

Tara: We're happy to have you here too. In the clip we just heard, Dawn talks about needing to be aware about the language we use in school, like using the words kids or children, instead of saying boys and girls. Why is using gender neutral language so important?

Lee: Well, there's a couple of reasons. The first reason is because it's always good for a teacher to assume that they don't know whether they have transgender students in their class, it's always a good practice to assume that they could, but actually that they already do. And it's a good practice to assume that you already have kids in your class who have queer and trans family members, whether that means parents or siblings or extended family members. And it's always a good thing to do. Because you actually, if you have it in your mind that you already have these folks with you, then you're more likely to: (A) be more welcoming, if you don't know. But also set every kid up for the future that you don't know they're gonna have. Right? I mean, you're, you might have queer and trans kids in your class, who don't – who haven't yet figured that out about themselves that might be questioning their gender, their sexuality, you might have students who are queer, trans, but they will never come out in your class. In fact, I always say that it's actually quite an honour when a student would come out and be who they are in your class because that's a profound gesture of trust. So, using gender neutral language, avoiding separating your students into sort of gender segregated categories, saying "hi everybody" instead of "boys and girls", using gender neutral pronouns, particularly they/them when you talk about people whose gender you don't know, like in a book or resource, all of these are ways to just keep that door open for whoever your students are. Because I often hear teachers and people talk about teachers' work in such a way like, "Oh, if I have a trans student, then I'll do X," right? Actually, it's a much better and more ethical practice to assume you already do, even if you don't know, because what that means is also always changing.

Tara: Right. In your book, *Gender: Your Guide*, you talk about the new gender culture. What is the new gender culture?

Lee: Well, the reason why I use that phrase in my book is because I'm trying to tie together two different things. So, what I noticed in my own field of education is that there's sort of a body of research on the kinds of stressors and mental health outcomes that students experience across the gender spectrum, things like anxiety and things about sort of role performance and fitting in, and then bullying and all that kind of research. And then over here, we have people who

focus on students who self-identify as queer, transgender in some way. And what I'm trying to do is talk about how rigid ways of thinking about and living and sort of enforcing gender on each other actually aren't good for everyone. So, in the – in the quote, unquote, new gender culture, what we see are a lot of trans people coming out and being out who don't fit into either of the binary boxes, including me. So, we've always been in here, but coming out and existing in public life is fairly recent, the possibility for some of us being able to do that. So, we're seeing an awareness that gender is not as simple as the gender binary. But we're also beginning to see an understanding that rigidly enforcing norms of femininity on women, or girls, and enforcing rigid norms of masculinity on men and boys is also not a good idea. So that's something that we've known in kind of the sociology of education for a very long time. But it's starting to actually inform education policy, that there are problems with assuming that girls and boys have particular interests, or particular abilities or skills or trajectories based on their gender. So, all of this, for me, is the new gender culture, like the idea that it's not– that it's actually better for everyone, if we chill! If we chill, if we recognize the ways that we, that we participate in making these categories very rigid and separate, in everyday life, with how we react and respond to each other. And the book has a lot of content on how we do that. And also, how to recognize when you are and how to stop participating in keeping the two categories rigid and intact and separate. But recognizing that that's important to do for all of us. I mean, the ways that women get called out or what I say in the book "called into question" for not belonging properly in the category of "woman", like if they don't have kids, or if their body shape is a certain way. Or if they aren't presenting themselves in a way other people think a woman should, like getting called out and experiencing consequences for that is based on a rigid gender system. And so are the kinds of everyday discrimination that many trans people face. Right. So, let's, let's get in there together.

Tara: Wonderful. If I were to ask you to name three things that are important for teachers and parents to know and do in the new gender culture, what would they be?

Lee: Teachers and parents. In terms of teachers and parents, can I do one? Sure. Okay. I'll do one first, maybe? What's good for parents to do in the new gender culture. And just to recap, what I mean by that is keeping gender as open as possible, and not making everyone beige and not making everyone androgynous, but just opening the door for however, boys would like to do boy, and girls would like to do girl, and for also for trans youth too. So, three things parents can do. You can ask questions about your kids' friends, and your kids' dates and their interest in their crushes using gender neutral language. You can use – that's one– 'cause that indicates that actually, you're open to whoever these people are, whether they're your kids, or they're your kids' friends, and you're just letting your kids know right away that no matter who they find interesting, and who they want to spend time with, all those people are welcome in your

home, right? You're already putting out that message. You can use gender neutral pronouns, you can do singular they as a gender-neutral pronoun to talk about people whose gender you don't know, you can and then you can also model that sometimes we don't know what someone's gender is, we don't know whether someone might like X based on their gender, right? So, it could be an open question what you're going to bring to Sylvia's birthday party, because you don't know what Sylvia might like, right? So, we're not gonna – we're not going to go down the pink aisle. We're going to actually ask some questions and think about something that Sylvia might like for her birthday. And not just something that is the thing that you bring a girl at a birthday party. So, I think that just, that is all, those three things are sort of very easy ways to welcome in whoever may come and the different ways of gender, doing gender, that are with us all the time. So that's my three things for parents. Great. And my three things for teachers, and again, I just want to say there's a lot in the book. Yes, there's a lot. So, this is kind of just the crib notes version. But the three things teachers can do, I think, is share your own pronouns, right. And it cannot--depending on your school climate, it's not always a safe, it's not always a safe bet to invite students to share their pronouns in a public way. Many – I'm sorry to say but it's true – many of our school environments can't support that kind of demand of disclosure from a student and they can't hold those students safe in the aftermath of that disclosure if their pronoun doesn't match other people's expectations. So, I'm not all about let's have a pronoun go around all the time in a public school. Instead, what a teacher can do is just say, "Hi, I'm Mr. Smith, my pronouns are he/him" at the beginning of the year, right, and then move through and maybe reiterate at the end of the first class, like I said, "these are my pronouns, and if you have questions about that, or you want to talk to me about that come on down", right. So, what that does is it provides--I kind of like, do this little gesture like an antenna's going up, it's like *rrrrrrRRupe!* The kids for whom that matters will take note. And they'll perhaps feel just a little bit more seen and supported, right. And then the kids who don't know what's going on, will perhaps have the occasion to learn more, and to wonder why Mr. Smith said that and why it's important. So that does all kinds of really cool work that doesn't require that students sort of step into that space and expose themselves, which I think can be a problem of some sort of gender and sexual diversity advocacy efforts in schools, they can be quite exposing, right, so that's one thing. The second thing I'd say, is to have– is to know what your minimum responsibility is. And because a lot of people think, "Oh, I don't know what to say, like, if a student is having trouble or comes out to me" or whatever, I think the minimum responsibility is that you, you use your gut and your professional judgment to figure out who in your school is more qualified than you to be a good support or resource for this young person. Right. And you just you, you whether you have like cultural or religious or political or any other, you know, views about anything to do gender, sexuality in your own private time, that your minimum duty is to say, "Cool, thanks for sharing that with me. I'm, I'm grateful, I'm grateful. And I appreciate that. And I need you to know that I'm learning. And here is a much better

person", and then you walk, you walk them down, and you make sure they get that support, right. But you know where to take somebody, right, and you know, on your staff where to go and find someone who can help you to connect this person with someone else. Right. So, there's just never like a void, right? There's never a person experiences—a student experiences something, they share something with you, something happens in class, and then we have no word, they get brought -- they get brought nowhere, and they get offered nothing. So just at the minimum, get to your school, figure out what the local resources are, and figure out who those one or two people in your school are, who are supportive and are able to step into that role. That's number two.

Lee: And number three, number three, I'd say that, I'd say the third thing that teachers can do is they can help their students to, I guess, learn to tolerate not knowing about someone's gender, right, or how gender is working in a particular circumstance. And they can help their students get used to having their gender expectations confounded. Because that kind of builds some mental and social muscles. So, when that does happen, and it actually impacts another person, they can respond generously, or more generously. So, an example I like to give is, if you're a PJ, and you're reading a story, you -- maybe there's somebody in the background and for all the world, we would apply he/him pronouns, to that person apply a she/her pronoun. And then if that is something that the students are interested in and take up, or they correct you? You just say, "Oh, well, I don't, I don't know why I would!" I mean, you know, just, just problematize that effort to kind of discipline you into calling someone the quote, unquote, right pronouns based on their gender expression. And just again, this is a character where there are no pronouns given, right? So, to seize those little opportunities, like when you're giving an example of someone, of someone in traditionally sort of woman's occupation, just offer a man's name, right? Right. Just do these kinds of little things all the time. Like, don't let your students rope you into disciplining another student for playing in the wrong spot. Like, "oh, I don't get it, actually, why can't he play with you?" Right. Refuse to participate in that and just find these little moments to sort of disrupt what they think is going to happen. And if we do this often enough, then we create the possibility that when it comes in the form of a peer, or a peer's family member that they might be able to actually go with that and respond well. So yeah, that's what I got. There's much more in the book.

Tara: Lee, thanks so much for joining us. I've learned a lot and I hope you come back to visit us. Lee Airton is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. Lee's latest book out this fall from Simon and Schuster is called *Gender: Your Guide, what to say, what to know and what to do in the new gender culture*. You can find a link to pre-order these books on their website. Lee Airton l-e-e a-i-r-t-o-n (one word).com. All right. That's our first podcast. If you have any burning questions about gender, sexuality and school, send an email to

info@LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca with the subject line, Ask Gender Sexuality School. In future podcasts, I'll take listeners' questions about issues of gender and sexuality at school and try to answer them with the help of some amazing folks who've been thinking about gender and sexuality for a while. You can find this podcast at [WWW.LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca](http://WWW.LGBTQfamiliespeakout.ca). This episode was produced with support of the New College Initiative Fund and from Helgi Audarson Gudmundson, who is a Master's of Education student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Thanks to LGBTQ Families Speak Out team member Kate Reid, who composed the music for the podcast. I'm Tara Goldstein, all the best.