



11 ways leaders can make non-binary youth feel welcome at church

Introduction

Having two LGBTQ+ children makes me hyper aware of the challenges they face growing up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Growing up gay in the LDS church is problematic enough. Identifying as a gender outside of the conventional binary of either male or female adds even further complexity to the challenges queer youth face in the church.

The LDS church strongly adheres to the typical gender binary. It's reflected in their scripture stories, in their temples, in how they approach parenting, in leadership responsibilities, and so on. Segregation of the sexes begins at 8 years old, with boys being shipped off to weekly Cub pack meetings and girls being shuffled to biweekly Activity Days. This segregation continues into adulthood, right to the day one dies.

This is problematic for people who don't identify as

male or female. They feel out of place when forced to segregate, and the discomfort (to put it mildly) can lead them out of the church ultimately.

Few resources are provided to youth leaders to help them address the unique experiences of the non-binary youth they are asked to lead. This goes not only for young men and young women leaders, but bishops and stake presidents, too. So, it's not surprising, then, that leaders do little to accommodate their non-binary youth.

I reached out to our gender-fluid child, Ash, who will be entering the youth programme next month, and we worked together to compile these 11 tips on how LDS leaders can make non-binary youth feel welcome at church.

Some changes that could go a long way require institutional change (such as a universal priesthood, for exam-

1. Use preferred pronouns

Often, non-binary individuals will identify with pronouns different from those they were assigned at birth. For example, when Ash came out to us earlier this year as gender-fluid, they told us they were using the “they/them/their” pronouns from now on.

If non-binary youth no longer identify as the gender they were assigned at birth, it can be distressing if others do. Using the pronouns you were used to using after you have been asked not to is called misgendering. If done purposefully, it can be seen as abusive.

By using your youth’s preferred pronouns, you show them that you care about them, that you value their comfort more than you value your own, and that you are willing to do what you can to make them feel more comfortable.

2. Use preferred name

Similar to pronouns, non-binary persons will sometimes choose a name other than their birth name. They may think their birth name is too gendered or want a new name to correspond to their newly discovered identity.

For example, when Ash came out to us, they chose Ash as the name they wanted to be known by. It took some getting used to, and we had many times when we've had to correct ourselves, but we keep trying.

Using the preferred name of your non-binary youth shows them that you value an important part of their identity. They will feel respected, which will go a long way to helping them feel included.

3. Use positive language

When speaking about their gender identity, use affirming language. Try developing sincere interest so you can learn more. Never treat it as a phase, a disease, or a sin. *The Family Proclamation* states that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” If gender identity is essential to who we are, we should remember that when interacting with our non-binary youth.

4. Dedicate a class to educating

If your non-binary youth is publicly out of the closet, consider collaborating with them on planning a class to educate the rest of your youth on gender issues, and how we can make non-binary youth feel welcomed.

Remember, just because one of your youth has come out, doesn't mean they are the only ones. Our own ward has had 7 LGBTQ people that I know of, only 3 of whom have come out publicly.

Holding a class will not only help make your non-binary youth feel welcome, but it might encourage other closeted LGBTQ youth to trust you with a secret they have been holding inside. It's important to create a welcoming, loving environment.

5. Don't out them without consent

On that note, if one of your youth has come out to you, don't tell anyone else without their explicit consent.

They trust you, and if you tell someone else without permission, you will destroy that trust. Don't tell their parents, don't tell your counsellors, don't tell your spouse, don't even tell the bishop.

Honour the trust they have placed in you. Respect their privacy. Help them develop trust in others and focus on ensuring they feel welcome in your meetings.

6. Provide gender neutral washroom

This tip probably better applies to bishops and stake presidents. Being able to choose between only a male washroom and female washroom can be distressing for non-binary youth. Try to provide gender neutral (or all gender) washrooms.

In our building, we have two single-use, gender neutral washrooms. One doubles as an accessible washroom, so it can be problematic for disabled people who can't use it when it's occupied by able-bodied people. The other one isn't accessible, and people can use it regardless of gender.

Related to this, point out where all the washrooms are (including gender neutral ones if you have them), and let the youth decide which ones to use. Don't tell people which washroom to use.

7. Don't do boys vs. girls activities

Avoid joint activities that are boys against the girls. This can be uncomfortable for non-binary youth because it forces them to choose a gender. When you need to create teams, try numbering the youth off or assigning team captains to fill the team roster.

8. Don't police clothing

If your non-binary youth don't wear typical gendered clothing, don't make a big deal about it. If someone in your young women class, for example, typically wears slacks, don't comment on how pretty they look when they wear a dress.

9. More co-ed activities

Even though third-block classes are segregated, it's no reason to continue having segregated activities all the time.

Try to plan co-ed activities more than once a month. Creating more non-segregated activities can help your non-binary youth to feel more comfortable.

On that note, try to avoid decorations and themes that perpetuate gender stereotypes (for example, pink for girls and blue for boys).

10. Avoid reinforcing gender roles

It's easy to focus on stereotypical gender roles in the church. Try to avoid it though.

Encourage youth in your young women classes, for example, to serve missions. Talk to the youth in your young men classes about being a stay at home parent as a legitimate choice. Avoid such things as trying on bridal gowns for a young women activity or shooting guns for a young men activity.

Related to this, try to avoid gendered language. Use youth instead of young women or young men. Use parent instead of mother or father. Use spouse instead of husband or wife. Use child instead of son or daughter. And so on.

11. Include them in activities and

Include your non-binary youth in your activities. Invite them out. Plan the activities to be inclusive. Invite them to help plan the activities.

Call your non-binary youth into leadership positions. This will show them that their gender identity does not make them sinful or bad, and it may provide them opportunities to plan activities and reach out to other youth.

Do you have experience with being a leader of non-binary youth?

Visit our page at bit.ly/11waysleaders to let us know things that you have found useful in making those youth feel comfortable at church.

Please email this PDF to your friends, your ward members, your presidency, your bishop, and your stake president.

Let others know how important it is to you that non-binary youth feel comfortable at church.