

Ask Matt: Correcting Pronouns on Someone Else's Behalf

By mkailey

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Abstract

A reader writes: "Our good friends have a daughter, Linda (I changed the name that the reader sent in, because I didn't know if it was real or fictional). "Linda dresses and carries herself in a very masculine way. She has done this for as long as we've known her - five years or so. [...]"

Article

A reader writes:

"Our good friends have a daughter, Linda (I changed the name that the reader sent in, because I didn't know if it was real or fictional).

"Linda dresses and carries herself in a very masculine way. She has done this for as long as we've known her - five years or so. She shops in the men's section of clothing stores and seems to identify more with being a male.

"Several times we have all been out for dinner and the server will refer to Linda as 'he.' It's not surprising and I can see why they mistake her for a man. However, what confuses me is why no one speaks up. My husband and I want to say something to correct the server. We feel like we should defend Linda, but we don't say a word. Linda doesn't either - and doesn't seem fussed by the mistake. And her parents don't acknowledge it in the moment or afterwards. We all just go one as if nothing has happened.

"I feel like we are not being honest. I want Linda to know we love and accept her. She may be perfectly okay with being mistaken for a man. Still, I wonder if it is best to keep quiet and say nothing. Her parents seem to be in denial. I am most concerned about Linda and want her to be able to express herself fully.

"She still lives at home and seems to be pretty isolated from people. I want to be supportive, but it feels like we're all silently dancing around the situation. Maybe it's none of my business. Bottom line, I care about Linda and want the best for her. Her parents may have difficulty, so I don't feel comfortable saying anything to them.

"I wanted to get your input on how/if I should say anything to Linda or her parents."

First of all, thank you for your concern in this situation. It sounds as if you care a great deal for Linda and her parents.

Second, the short answer is: No, you should not say anything to Linda (at least not at the time) or her parents, and no, you should not correct the server on Linda's behalf.

There could be so many things going on here that it's impossible to list them all, but I will throw a few out there, and, in all of these cases, you are better off keeping your mouth shut:

1. Linda does not like being referred to by male pronouns, and her parents don't like it, either, but they are all too embarrassed to correct strangers and so they let it go. They don't want to make what they might consider to be a scene. In that case, you correcting the server would be, in their estimation, making a scene, and this is what they are hoping to avoid.
2. Linda doesn't care one way or the other what pronouns are used to refer to her, and her parents don't care, either, because they know it doesn't bother her. If it doesn't bother her, and it doesn't bother her parents, then it shouldn't bother you.
3. Linda likes being referred to by male pronouns. Her parents either know she likes it and are supportive of this, or they know she likes it and are not happy about it, but either way, they let it go. If they don't like it, they might hope that their friends won't notice or that their friends will forget, so bringing it up will just make it things worse, in the sense that now they are embarrassed in front of their friends, which they could end up taking out on Linda.
4. Linda identifies as male or as a man, and her parents are aware of this, but none of them quite knows how to come out to their friends, or they just aren't ready to come out yet. Either way, you bringing it up or correcting the server will force the issue, and that is not a good thing for anyone. They need to come out about this in their own time, if and when they decide to do so.

You are obviously a good friend to have these concerns. You want what's best for Linda. And because of that, you probably also want to use the pronoun that Linda prefers. So one thing you might consider doing is this: The next time you are all out for dinner and this happens, if you have the chance to speak to Linda alone somewhere - maybe at home, if you all go to someone's house afterward, or in the restroom or parking lot - say, "Linda, I noticed that the server used a male pronoun for you, and you didn't correct him/her. Is that the pronoun you would prefer?"

Be very casual about this, and only do it if there's a way to just "happen" to be alone with Linda. Don't invent some excuse or make a production of hauling Linda off so you can talk to her privately. If the opportunity arises, take it. If not, take it next time. And then, however Linda responds, that's what you do.

If she says, "No, I really hate it," you can say, "Is there something you would like me to do about it next time?"

If she says, "I don't care one way or the other," then just keep doing what you're doing.

If she says, "Yes, I would like you to use male pronouns for me," then say, "Okay, I will do that from now on. I might make a mistake here and there, but I will get it."

Then start using male pronouns for her all the time. If her parents get upset, that's between them and Linda. This is what she requested of you, and she is an adult. They might be very relieved, because they might want to ask you to do this, but they are afraid of what you might think.

Regardless, do not correct the server - unless, after your conversation with Linda, she asks you to do so. In addition, if you find out that Linda does prefer male pronouns and wants you to use them, start using them, but don't ask any more questions.

Don't ask her if she's going to transition or if she's going to change her name or what her parents think or whatever. Just agree to use those pronouns and let it go. Again, Linda and/or her parents will come out to you when and if they decide to - if there's something to come out to you about.

In the meantime, enjoy your meals with Linda and her parents, and whenever you are tempted to correct the server, take a bite of food or a drink of water and let things take their course.

P.S. I would also say to anyone who is tempted to correct pronoun usage on someone else's behalf, don't do it unless that person has asked you to do so. That person can speak up for him/her/hirself, and that person might have decided that this is not a situation in which he/she/ze wants a pronoun corrected. Always take your direction from the person who is affected by the pronoun usage. If you want to know what to do, ask that person in private before you do anything publicly.

Readers, what do you think?



Figure 1. matt

Cross-posted from Tranifesto

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