NEWSLETTER OF THE NATIONAL DISABILITIES AWARENESS COMMITTEE

ABILITIES DIGEST

Prepared. For Life.

BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

Adaptive Options and Ideas for Assisting Scouts with Disabilities

Accessibility - Make sure routes are easily accessible for all. You can find trails using internet searches for "wheelchair accessible trails." Most state park departments maintain lists of accessible trails. The Rails to Trails Conservancy has a searchable web page with many accessible trails. You can also find a list on the Working with Scouts with disAbilities website at wwswd.org.

Time and Place: Many challenges can be addressed simply by adjusting the setting of the activity to be less distracting, allowing more time or more frequent breaks, or switching the teaching method between tactile, visual, and auditory approaches.

Here are some other ideas to think about:

Materials Adaptations

Example: A Cub Scout has little hand strength and is trying to carve.
Solution: Substitute a bar of soap or balsa wood.
Example: Boy Scout has poor fine motor skills and is learning knots.
Solution: Use thick, flexible, braided rope.

Architectural Adaptation

Example: A Scout in a wheelchair is unable to go hiking because the trail is inaccessible.
Solution: Substitute "trip" for "hike" or select alternative route.

Leisure Companion (Buddy) Adaptation

Example: A Cub Scout cannot stay on task and runs around.
Solution: An adult or older youth can become a buddy for the Cub Scout.

Cooperative Group Adaptation

Example: A Cub Scout has difficulty remembering the steps in a project.
Solution: Work in cooperative groups to ensure completion for everyone.

Environmental Adaptations

Example: The meeting area is in an area with bright lights or florescent lights.
Solution: Try dimming the lights or provide sunglasses.
Example: The meeting room walls are cluttered with memorabilia.
Solution: Relocate the stuff to clear the wall that the group faces.
Example: The meeting room is loud with chattering Scouts.
Solution: Move the activity outdoors where voices can carry.

Appropriate Peer and Adult Supports

Parents as partners - Our goal is to work with parents to promote independence. Do not let the need for a parent at meetings or outings to become a crutch in dealing with the Scout. This may appear to convey the impression that instead of addressing the concern, you want the parent to handle it. There may be times when a parent or caregiver needs to attend meetings and outings. This will need to be addressed on an individual basis. It will be important to watch this process closely to avoid hindering the Scouts development of independence.

Examples of appropriate supports from parents or caregivers:

- Signing (ASL), assistance with communication devices, food allergies, personal care assistance (hygiene), making suggestions for accommodations or adaptations.

Parent or caregiver support is NOT:

- Doing things a peer can do, like pushing a wheelchair, being a buddy, transcribing, or doing things youth can do independently if given enough time or adaptations, etc.

Peers as partners - At the leader's discretion, Scouts may earn credit for leadership positions when being a peer buddy. Peer buddies should attend PLC meetings with other Scouts in leadership positions. Their role is to help facilitate or anticipate things for their buddies during PLC. For example, if a youth with disabilities is a current patrol leader, but has a significant writing disability, the peer can take meeting notes for him.

Units may find it helpful if designated peer buddies first have earned the Disability Awareness merit badge. Otherwise, a short training or orientation can be held to set the expectations and parameters for the program. An agenda might resemble this:

Sample Peer Buddy Training Agenda

I. Overview
   a. Purpose of peer buddies program
   b. What is inclusion? What is it not?
   c. Discussion of individual roles for peers, Scouts with disabilities, parents, and leaders across various Scouting settings.

II. Expectations
   a. Learn about "ability awareness"
   b. Roles: friendship, help develop independence, be helpful only when needed.
   c. Provide models
   d. Attitude: encouraging, positive, and accepting
   e. Confidentiality (privacy)
   f. Behaviors
   g. How to act and react

III. Peer Relationships
   a. Appropriate friendships
   b. "Hanging out" with peers
   d. Inappropriate relationships
   e. Advocacy to rest of Scouting unit and society at large

HOW TO HAVE A JOINING CONFERENCE WITH A NEW FAMILY

What - A joining conference is a lot like a parent-teacher conference at the beginning of a school year. The den leader should have a joining meeting for every Scout. About 15% of Scouts have an acknowledged disability[1] and most disabilities don't change one's appearance, so "you can't judge a book by its cover." Keep the tone of the conference relaxed and friendly.

Why - A joining conference builds trust and rapport with the parents as partners in delivering the Scouting program. It provides useful information about the unique attributes of the youth that will help you play to each youth's strengths, provide for each youth's special needs, and prevent conflict between the members of your unit.

When - A joining conference should take place soon (first month?) after a youth joins the unit. Remember, Scouting is open to all youth, so the conference happens **after** the youth has been accepted. It is not a "job interview". The youth has nothing to prove before joining the unit.

Attendees - One or both of the youth's parents and preferably at least one responsible, disability awareness trained leaders who will have direct contact with the youth should attend. In Cub Scouting, the den Leader should be included. In Boy Scouting, the youth is often included in the meeting, but common sense should prevail when deciding whether or not to include him.

Where - This is a candid and private conversation with the family, so the meeting should be out-of-earshot of others. It is OK to do this at a regular unit meeting, but you might have to hold the conference at a different place or time in order to insure privacy.

Confidentiality - Parents decide what leaders may know. Assume confidentiality until the parent gives permission to share with others. If one believes the youth will benefit from other key adult and youth leaders being brought into the loop, one may ask permission to brief them.

Topics - During the joining conference you want to learn:
(1) What are unique strengths and struggles?
(2) What accommodations/adaptations are being made at home and at school?
(3) Does anything trigger emotional or behavioral struggles?
(4) How does he/she act when situations are about to be overwhelming?
(5) What concerns do the parents have about putting their child in Scouting?
– Never press for a diagnosis. Practically speaking, you don't need to know what the condition is called as long as you know what to watch out for and what to do.
A SAMPLE SCRIPT – Hi. I'm *name* and I'm the *leader position* of *unit type* ###. I'm glad you and *youth name* have joined our *unit*. The other leaders and I want to give your child the best experience possible. I know we have told you what our unit is like, and it will help if you can tell us what makes your child unique. Can we have a few minutes? To start with, is there anything you are concerned about? What are his or her strengths? Is anything harder for your child than for others? Is there anything that helps him or her be successful at home or at school? Is there anything I need to watch out for or avoid doing with your child? Is there anything your son or daughter needs me to do? When he or she is struggling, how can we best help your child?

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[1] The numbers are almost certainly higher as many moderate disabilities are not formally diagnosed by professionals and others are kept secret by the family.

Planning Successful Outings for Scouts with Disabilities

All youth should explore their limits and learn that some are more difficult than they imagined. Leaders new to working with Scouts who have disabilities must prepare for unexpected situations and have contingency plans to minimize the level of risk. For example, he should ensure a Scout with a mobility limitation attends outings in areas with accessible facilities. Scouts with invisible disabilities like those with severe allergies or experience anxiety or panic attacks can be challenging to plan. A leader's contingency plan may include Plans B, C, or D.

- **Expect the Unexpected** – Weather changes unexpectedly. A Scout gets ill midway. Routes are harder than the map indicates. The point: planning for contingencies is important for all Scout outings, with or without Scouts with disabilities.

- **Ability Levels** – When planning outings to challenge Scouts of varying ages and skills, it makes sense to divide Scouts into groups of similar ability levels, provided one has enough leaders to monitor the groups' safety. The Scouts with disabilities group obviously should have the least challenging yet reachable types of activities according to each Scout's abilities. It is important not to isolate Scouts with disabilities from other Scouts. Even if caregivers must accompany a Scout, at least two other youth should go along too. Consider these examples:
  - **Canoeing** – Start the advanced level paddlers at a drop-off point upstream of the beginners and then have them all rendezvous at the pull-out point. A mobility-restricted youth rides with others paddling. (Cycling is similar)
  - **Rock Climbing** – Give beginners more instructions and have them boulder before attempting roped-up climbing. A youth with limited strength should climb with rope tension assistance. (Note: zip lining is exciting and accessible for Scouts.)
  - **Hiking** – Find two routes between the start and finish points, with the advanced group going further with more elevation change. The easier route should be wheel chair accessible. (Cross-country skiing is similar)
  - **Figure Eight Routes** – Plan on making a Figure Eight route with the base camp, start, and finish points in the middle of the loop. That way, it's easier for participants opting out of the second half of the route or dropping off gear at the mid-point to allow successful completion.
  - **Bail-out Points** – Consider a stopping point of your planned route if the need arises. This becomes important in dealing with both injuries and disabilities. On a water route, identify the locations of vehicle accessible points such as bridges and riverfront houses. On land routes, identify the trail shortcuts, crossings, those closest to roads, trail heads, and parking areas along the way.
  - **Communication and Support Vehicles** – Determine how members can send a message to a designated leader or group at a rendezvous point if they cannot finish the route and need to be picked up. On longer routes, designate a leader to drive ahead to identify the bail-out points through the day for those needing assistance.

Conversation Starters

Asking these questions will enable open communication with the Scout and his or her family.

Communication Hints:

- Remember to follow Youth Protection guidelines while being respectful of trust, confidentiality, and privacy.
- If one needs to talk to a parent or youth about a specific situation, avoid blaming the person which may put him or her on the defensive. Help them understand their best interest is at heart. For example ask the parent, "We are having difficulty managing your child's _____ (specific behavior), and we want to make sure he or she is experiencing all that Scouting has to offer. What do you suggest we do to get a better handle when your child displays this type of behavior?"
- Focus on fostering Scout-like behavior. A leader should not suggest in any way either through tone of voice or body language he or she thinks the Scout has character flaw or his or her caregiver lacks parenting skills. Be mindful the parent knows their child best.
- Involve the Scout in problem solving discussions. The more one includes the Scout in the process, the more the Scout takes ownership in his experience. Encourage all Scouts to ask for help or speak up if they don't understand something. Some Scouts may need to approach a leader individually asking to advocate for him or her.
- Ask follow up questions probing for more details and clarity: "Why?", "How?" "Tell me more …" etc. Keep voice calm, with a positive demeanor, and one's emotions neutral.

Sample Conversation Starters:

- What is the best way for me to _____ (support, encourage, help) you?
- What roles make you feel most successful?
- If we could just drop what we're doing to do something fun, what would it be?
- What do you think makes a great Scouting unit?
- Describe the perfect outing.
- What can Scouting do for you? What are your goals for this year? Next year, and so on?
- Which of our pack (or troop) activities did you enjoy most last year? Which did you enjoy the least? What made them enjoyable or difficult? How can we improve those activities or make them more inclusive?
- What were some expectations you had of our pack (or troop) that we didn't meet?
- What can our leaders do to improve communication, program planning, or awareness?
- Would you be willing to help us improve these areas?

Self-Removals and Slowing Down Activities

- Self-removal is a good tactic to use when a Scout is feeling too overwhelmed, building up anger, or just needs to pull himself together.
- Self-removal needs to be Scout initiated. Have a designated isolation area like a tent set up at camp with coping tools like a book or playing cards to help settle him down.
- Ask a leader to give a visual cue both he and the Scout agree upon such as holding up four fingers or placing one's hand on the left side of the chest. This minimizes the self-removed Scout feeling singled-out without other Scouts knowing what you are doing.
- Use an agreed-upon sound such as a mobile device ring tone, clicker, bell, or, cue.

How to slow down activities.

- Give a verbal warning such as: "You have five minutes left!" then repeat at two minutes, and again at thirty seconds. Give a visual cue for time remaining.
- Give a noise warning with a whistle or bell.
- When one sees an activity getting out of control, stop all action before it escalates. For example, tell Scouts they need a water break or a two-minute recess before resuming.
- If Scouts need to quiet down quickly, tell them to breathe through their noses. This makes them close their mouths, and affords leaders time to think about the next step.