

ABILITIES DIGEST

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Winter 2023  BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

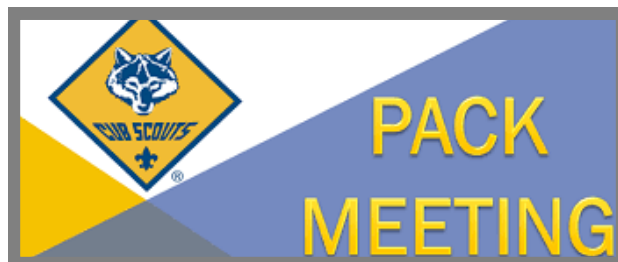
Adapting Activities A Pack Meeting Highlighting Special Needs



Have you planned a pack meeting about special needs? Here is how one pack planned and executed a pack meeting where abilities became the key element.

The pack meeting was opened by a Cub Scout leading the Pledge of Allegiance in American Sign Language (ASL). Scouts and others who were familiar with ASL, signed the Scout Law. After this intriguing opening ceremony, an older Scouts BSA youth spoke about what life is like for him having Autism.

The leader asked the Cub Scouts if this Scout looked like he had a disability. They all answered “No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o.” They then began peppering the speaker with questions and a discussion ensued with the Cub Scouts sharing what they knew about autism.



The young man shared how his constant struggles with acute awareness pertaining to sight, touch and smell taught him how to cope better with all of it. He relayed the great efforts it takes to have to have better control of himself and shared how autism is his “super power.” He explained that his autism helps him see and think

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about things in different ways. At one point, he shared that he struggles with writing and one of the Tiger Scouts shared that he also struggles with writing and uses an orthotic to help him in that process. Thus a connection was made.

A representative from a local adaptive sports group (the Adaptive Sports Foundation of Windham, NY) talked with the Scouts about being in a wheelchair. The speaker had been injured and, as an adult, had to learn

how to navigate life using a wheelchair. The leadership asked the Scouts to name a sport they thought this person couldn't do. They went through a whole list... swimming, golf, baseball, football, biking, etc. The speaker shared with them how those sports have been adapted so people who use wheelchairs can play them. A sibling of one of the Scouts showed their sports wheelchair. The Cub Scouts then could ask other questions like "How do you drive a car?" and "How do you dry yourself off after a bath or shower?" Questions that were raised were answered and the Scouts were excited to hear the answers. They began to discover that people with disabilities CAN do things others can do. Just in different ways!

At this point in the pack meeting, the Scouts were broken into smaller groups and had the experience of facing varied challenges.

- Both crutches and a wheelchair were available so that the Scouts could experience mobility challenges.
- Noise canceling headphones were provided so the Scouts experienced auditory challenges with someone speaking to them.
- Dexterity issues were demonstrated by trying to pick up beans or trying to tie a knot while wearing gloves.
- Lastly, Scouts attempted to assemble a 25-piece puzzle while wearing goggles whose lenses had been smeared with petroleum jelly.



Throughout the experiences, talk centered on how disabilities are really different abilities and specifically at what a person "can" do instead of "can't" do.

When presenting challenges to illustrate disabilities, it is easy to mislead the participants. Some challenges may be harder for someone trying this for the first time than for the individuals who actually live with these challenges. Alternately, a brief simulation might seem easy, but it never has the same impact as the day-to-day experience of

(photo above from [disAbilities Awareness Challenge at 2017 National Jamboree gives Scouts, Venturers a new perspective](#))

having the disability. Be sure to have the Scouts reflect on the simulation experiences and how they might compare to a disability's day-to-day reality.

The Ethics of Disability Simulations

Being inclusive means showing respect for individuals and promoting mutual understanding. Sometimes it's hard to do both at the same time. The Framingham Special Education Parent Advisory Council (www.f-sepac.org) has an excellent summary entitled *Disability Awareness Fair Ideas* that includes several points to keep in mind. If you do plan to conduct a disability simulation exercise, they recommend observing these ethical considerations:



- Respect a participant's right to refuse a particular activity. This allows participants to choose which type of disability simulations they are comfortable with.
- Encourage those who seem scared. These simulations may pose a whole new perspective and with careful planning will be a learning experience for all.
- Offer alternatives to disability simulation activities (see next page).
- Avoid turning an impairment into part of a game. Draw a clear distinction between a game that is for

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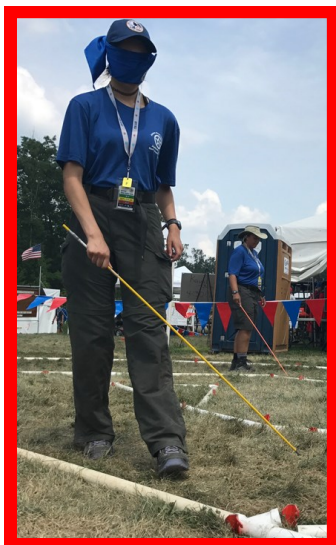
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fun and a disability awareness simulation that is for learning.

- Ask permission before you simulate a disability that a participant lives with. Try to simulate a disability that no one in the group has.
- Pair participants with buddies to assist them if needed.
- Emphasize the physical, psychological, and societal barriers in various settings, rather than the perceived limitations of the disability.
- Discuss the importance of adaptation and accommodation strategies.
- Show assistive technology and adaptive equipment.
- Supplement simulation activities with stories of people with disabilities successfully addressing barriers and challenges in real life situations.



There are many activities that can increase disability awareness without attempting to simulate the experience of having a disability. Consider the following alternatives to simulations. (You will recognize a few merit badge requirements in this list.)



- Invite people with disabilities to talk about their experiences.
- Discuss the ways that people with disabilities are similar to and have similar experiences to other people.
- Read a book or watch a video about a person with a disability. Talk about how the person was portrayed in the book or video and the similarities and differences they demonstrate. Preview videos to make sure they don't bend reality too far to give a fair impression.
- Conduct an informal accessibility survey in the community. Identify and discuss architectural barriers such as steps, curbs, steep inclines, narrow aisles, heavy doors, etc. Identify accessible entrances, curb cuts, ramps, etc.
- Visit a local hotel and ask to see accessible guest rooms. Look for bathroom features like accessible sinks, roll-in showers, and shower chairs. Check the path from the parking lot to the guest room for barriers. Look for vibrating or flashing alarm systems and room doorbell systems.

[photo above from disAbilities Awareness Challenge at 2017 National Jamboree gives Scouts, Venturers a new perspective](#))

- Play an adapted sport where people with and without disabilities compete on an even footing.
- Visit a durable medical equipment company to see adaptive devices for various disabilities.

Inclusion Toolbox Gems: Scouts That Do Not Speak

Have you gotten into the Inclusion Toolbox to ferret out information on a particular special needs issue? The Toolbox is chock full of information and tips to help you and your family and fellow Scouters understand disabilities and how to work through or around situations more effectively.



Many folks on the No Scout Left Behind Facebook page have been asking about communication boards to help Scouts who have trouble speaking or communicating. [Module S: Understanding Speech and Language Disorders](#) would be the perfect information source to answer questions for many of the folks reading this type of post. Reading this module will shed some light on the whys and wherefores of speech and language disorders.

In Module S, you will find an explanation regarding those who find it difficult or impossible to speak. Below is an excerpt:

Some Scouts are not able to use verbal speech and language to communicate. Speech and language professionals usually refer to these youth as “nonverbal” or “nonoral.” Some others find themselves unable to speak in certain situations. The formal name for this condition is “selective mutism.” A Scout that does not speak may or may not have a hearing problem. The Scout may or may not have difficulty understanding what you are saying.



These Scouts may be able to say some words, but they do not use enough spoken words or sentences to express themselves fully. They may use other means of communication. These include gestures, sign language, facial expressions and specialized tablets or computers with special software that allow them to speak through the device. These specialized devices are called AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices. There is additional information above alternative communication technology in [Module](#)

[N](#) which addresses hearing difficulties. Some families call them talkers, speech devices, communication devices, or VODs (voice output devices).

The Scout unit does not need to provide this equipment but should make use of the technology the Scout already has available. Using AAC, these Scouts are communicating using words but not with their natural

voice. It is good to ask the family of the Scout what accommodations are made at home or school to assist Scout and do likewise.

Tips for working with a Scout who does not speak, in addition to tips recommended by the family:

- *Allow the Scout to present information in other forms – written, drawing, pictures, photos or posters.*
- *Use a small whiteboard to communicate in the outdoors or other locations where electronics are not practical.*
- *Be very patient with the Scout when he or she is communicating. It takes much longer to communicate via gestures or a communication device than with spoken words.*

If a Scout is using a communication device, talk with the family about the need to add any Scouting vocabulary to the device. For example: Scoutmaster, merit badge, camporee, names of knots, or types of camping equipment.



Reading over this information sets you in a better, more receptive frame of mind for helping those with speech and language disorders. As noted, [Module N: Understanding Deaf and Hard of Hearing](#) also discusses, in part, information on alternative communication technology.



In summary, it would be helpful to you, the Scouter and/or family member, to start reading through some of the Modules in the Inclusion Toolbox. The Toolbox will most definitely help you to “brain storm” and who knows where that will lead for our Scouts with special needs and disabilities!

Awareness Events

Understanding Behaviors & Mental Health in Scouting

When: Friday, April 21 – Saturday, April 22, 2023

Where: Cockrell Scout Center, Houston, TX

The Boy Scouts of America (BSA) is committed to making Scouting accessible and enjoyable to all Scouts, regardless of their abilities. BSA's National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee is hosting a two-day

conference on Understanding and Navigating Behaviors and Mental Health in Scouting. The conference is designed for Scouters in leadership positions at all levels (pack, troop, crew, ship, district, council, camp staff), BSA professionals, parents/guardians, caregivers, and anyone interested in learning more about supporting Scouts with special needs or disabilities. Rooms are available at several local hotels. Visit this page for more information and registration: <https://www.samhoustonbsa.org/special-needs-and-disabilities-conference>.

Forums on Inclusion from San Diego

The [San Diego Imperial Council](#) has scheduled a series of Zoom events focusing on inclusion. Here are the dates:

April 19: Camp is for All

October 18: Tools for Leaders

Visit the Council website for further information.

Special Needs & Disabilities Track @ U of Scouting

The [Northern Star Council's](#) SN/D Committee has an entire training track at the University of Scouting: April 15, 2023. From Intro to SN/D, Food Allergies, Advancement for SN/D, weekend to Jamboree, and More.

Visit: <https://scoutingevent.com/250-UOSSpring2023>, check out General and Cub College.

Service Opportunities at the 2023 Jamboree

The National Jamboree is looking for staff members who can help with transportation of Special Needs Scouts. They currently are in need of 3 staff members. The vans will be provided; we just need volunteers to drive Scouts to programs. If you are interested in this particular opportunity, please reach out to

SpecialNeedsChair@scouting.org.



Transport is one of many Jamboree service opportunities available. We also need volunteers in the program area to support Special Needs and Disabilities Challenge events. To join the **2023 Jamboree Service Team**, visit jamboree.scouting.org/jamboree-service-team/. Rumors suggest that it will be possible to sign up through April 2023. However, be sure to check before making non-refundable reservations!

Summer SND Activities at Philmont

Attention! The dates have changed!

The 2023 Zia Experience and the Adaptive Special Needs Conference have both been re-scheduled to take place **June 25 through July 1**.

The **Adaptive Special Needs Conference** spends a week learning best practices in outdoor and camping programs for special needs. The week will help volunteers and professionals learn how to mainstream special needs scouts into everyday outdoor/camping programs. Adults will also learn about the latest adaptive programs including shooting sports, horsemanship, Project COPE and hiking while working with the Scouts attending the Zia Experience. The conference will also include: dietary and medication safety, program and facilities management, adaptive equipment, advancement, and program development for serving special needs Scouts.

Register for Philmont by visiting <https://www.philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/ptc-conferences/>.

The **Zia Experience** is a customized, highly supported, personalized experience for your Scout, you and even your family!



Our team of Philmont staff and highly trained volunteers will work with a wide-range of functioning and abilities, from low-functioning to high-functioning. The range includes Scouts who have physical, intellectual, emotional, and/or hidden disabilities. Scouts who are verbal and nonverbal, as well as toilet-trained and untrained will be welcomed. Our team will finalize

program registration long before the experience begins, so that parents/caregivers and Scouts can meet in-person, via video conference, or phone call with our leadership team one or more times before arrival. The goal of these pre-experience conversations will be to understand the type of experience your Scout wants to have, as well as his or her abilities, special needs, special health care challenges, medications, allergies, diet restrictions, housing and personal care needs, transportation and mobility issues, advancement goals, and other associated risk management issues. The goal is to design experiences for Scouts ranging from a backcountry trek, to modified backcountry day adventures, to a basic residential camp experience in base camp.

The Zia Experience has an application process to attend. To make sure we are able to give you and your family the best experience possible, families will apply to participate and we will reach out to you to discuss what your specific



will be and help create a positive Philmont experience with you and your Scout.

Scholarships are available to attend these Philmont events. Visit the [Rates and Scholarships](#) page for further information. There are separate applications for adult and youth scholarships.

Review of the October 2022 Neurodiversity Conference

Participant Debra Hall writes about her take-away from the fall National Special Needs and Disabilities Conference in New Jersey.

Last October, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee Neurodiversity Conference in Patriot's Path Council, New Jersey. As a District Representative on our Council Gaps Committee (and a Commissioner), I had hoped to further my knowledge of program accommodations and resources for our Council's Scouts with Special Needs and volunteers. However, I was pleasantly surprised at just how much this conference exceeded my expectations. Not only was each class taught by incredibly qualified instructors (both volunteers on the National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee and seasoned industry professionals), but the instructors were incredibly interactive and engaging with their classes offering opportunities to role play with immediate feedback. There was such a strong emphasis on networking that, by the end of the weekend, I felt both comfortable sharing experiences, and equipped with additional valuable resources and a can-do attitude!



Our District began the month of October with a Special Needs Forum at Roundtable. Based upon this discussion, I was able to come to the conference well prepared with some challenges that some of our units are currently encountering with their Scouts with special needs. With assisting these particular units in the forefront of my mind, I was able to return with strategies to assist these Scouts. In fact, some of the scenarios that were

roleplayed during the sessions closely mirrored some of these situations. This allowed me not only to bring back suggestions and strategies, but to be more confident in my knowledge of the processes to identify individual strengths and utilize are in need of some them when evaluating various accommodations or modifications for Scouts on a case-by-case basis.



Another important skill that I was able to bring back to our Council from this conference was a knowledge of how to most effectively use the Inclusion Toolbox (<https://ablescouts.org/toolbox/>) to assist leaders and families. Understanding the organization of this tool is key to assisting Scouts with multiple disabilities or impairments. All-in-all, attending the Neurodiversity Conference was an incredible opportunity that left me much more able to assist Scouts with Special Needs, their families, and the leaders that serve our youth. I very much look forward to attending the [Understanding Behaviors & Mental Health in Scouting Conference](#) scheduled for April 21 – 22 in Houston, Texas!

Recognizing Abilities

Recognizing Abilities

Include the Torch of Gold in Spring Council Recognitions

The Torch of Gold is a council-level distinguished award of the Boy Scouts of America to recognize adults for exceptional service and leadership in working with Scouts who have disabilities. Each council may recognize one Scouter per year with the award. Details are listed on the nomination form, [available online](#).

The nominee must be a registered Scouter with at least three years of volunteer service supporting Scouting with disabilities. The service may be in any Scouting leadership capacity related to Cub Scouts, Scouts BSA, and Venturers with disabilities, including educating other Scouters about disabilities and working with youth who have disabilities.

Recipients may be presented with the medal shown here, along with a lapel pin and certificate. The medal is item #645007 and the associated pin is item #645008. Councils that award the Torch of Gold Award should also consider nominating the winner for the national Woods Services Award.



An Eagle and his LEGOs®



This article was lovingly written by Marcus's mom, Crystal Bueno. Marcus, who is on the autism spectrum, is a member of Troop 187 out of Brooklyn, NY, Greater New York Council.

On January 13, my 16-year old son, Marcus, passed his Eagle Board of Review. He's the first Eagle Scout in our family and we are ridiculously proud! His idea for an Eagle Scout project was to collect used LEGOs. The Troop cleaned and sorted about 200+ pounds of these tiny little plastic bricks. He also led his Troop mates in building wheeled IKEA carts

with pull-out drawers for the LEGOs, and he donated the completed LEGO carts to 2 Brooklyn public schools with a very special program, the ASD-Nest, that works with autistic kids. He is a lifelong, passionate LEGO fan, and he's been enrolled in the ASD-Nest since 6th grade. It was the perfect Eagle Project for him!

I want to share what worked for us to support him on his road to Eagle:

- 1) JOIN SCOUTING AS A FAMILY: Marcus started as a 6-year old Tiger in 2012. My dad, who was a longtime Beaver and Wolf Cub leader in Canada, was the one who suggested Scouts could be a good activity for Marcus. It turns out it was an amazing activity for the whole family. My younger son, Adam, joined as one of the first 5-year olds in the pilot Lions program, and today, Adam is the SPL of the Troop. I became the Wolf leader, and then the Webelos leader. Ten years later, I'm still the Webelos leader, and I am also the Advancement Chair in the Troop. Scouting is not what we do, it's who we are.



- 2) GO CAMPING & HIKING AS MUCH AS YOU CAN! Marcus discovered he really loves camping and hiking. We joke that being in nature resets his buttons to their factory setting. But I think that's true for a lot of people, not just those on the autism spectrum. Unplugging, relaxing, breathing fresh air, exploring trails, sitting by the campfire -- it's so good for the soul. Yes, it's sometimes difficult, cold, and uncomfortable. But these are the experiences that teach us how to be flexible, to adapt to changing circumstances, to overcome challenges.

- 3) LEARN TO SWIM: We knew that the Second and First Class Swimming requirements would be very, very hard, so we started lessons when he was still in Cubs. It took many years of weekly lessons, every Sunday afternoon at the neighborhood high school pool. We started slowly until he was comfortable with splashing in his face, the noise, the smell of the pool, the temperature of the water. So many times, I hear from parents that the swimming requirement is too hard. And yes, it IS hard. But our kids can do hard things! We didn't just spring this on him suddenly at a Scout summer camp, in a high-pressure "do-or-fail" situation. This was slow, steady, consistent work for many, many years. Many young kids with autism are drawn to water for its calming, sensory experience, but that also brings a real



risk of drowning. Please, please, please, if at all possible, teach your kids to swim. It could one day save their life.



4) EMPHASIZE THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: Marcus loves going deep on the Merit Badge topics. He currently has 65 badges, and still a few more queued up that he'd like to do. For example, when he read in the merit badge booklet about the oldest fingerprints in the world carved in rock in Nova Scotia, we just had to go see them. For the Architecture Merit Badge, we all went to the top of the World Trade Center. He jumped into the Genealogy merit badge at the start of the pandemic, in March 2020. One of the requirements was to keep a 6-week journal; almost 3 years later, his "Pandemic Diaries" are up to volume 4. (Last night, earning Eagle was a "journal-worthy occasion.") Every merit badge is an opportunity to see and do something new and make a memorable learning experience.

5) FIND YOUR PEOPLE: Not all Packs or Troops will work for your kid. It takes a lot of effort and advocacy to get to the right level of support. Some Troops might not be willing or able to put in the work. Unfortunately, some Scout leaders are stuck in the mode of, "this is how we've done it since 1947 and we won't change." It makes me so disappointed when I read stories of unsupportive adults in the program. We need to do better. Study the Guide to Advancement and become an expert in all the gnarly rules and sometimes seemingly conflicting policies. Know your kid's rights and unleash the mama bear when you need to. And



About *Abilities Digest*

Abilities Digest is the official e-letter of the Boy Scouts of America National Disabilities Awareness Committee. Its mission is to expand membership through helping parents and Scouting volunteers to improve their understanding, knowledge, and skills related to including and serving the special needs population. Therefore, districts and councils may reprint articles from this publication. Our plan is to distribute four issues of *Abilities Digest* annually, but special editions may go out whenever there is important information to share. Feedback, suggestions, and letters to the editor are welcome at disabilities.awareness@scouting.org.

Helpful Links

Scouting with Disabilities landing page: scouting.org/resources/disabilities-awareness/

AbleScouts: *Abilities Digest* articles posted online: ablescouts.org

Links in Articles

2023 Jamboree Service Team: jamboree.scouting.org/jamboree-service-team/

Adaptive Sports Foundation: <https://www.adaptivesportsfoundation.org/>

Inclusion Toolbox: <https://ablescouts.org/toolbox/>

Philmont Training Center:

- Registration: philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/ptc-conferences/
- Rates and Scholarships: <https://www.philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/rates/>

Torch of Gold Award: filestore.scouting.org/filestore/pdf/512-945.pdf

Understanding Behavior and Mental Health in Scouting Conference:
<https://www.samhoustonbsa.org/special-needs-and-disabilities-conference-2023-04-21>

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