

Able Scouts

Articles on Scouting with special needs and disabilities

B: Basics of Scouting From a Special Needs Perspective

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Introduction

But the real way to get happiness is by giving out happiness to other people. Try and leave this world a little better than you found it and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate you have not wasted your time but have done your best. 'Be prepared' in this way to live happy and die happy—stick to your Scout Promise always—even after you have ceased to be a boy—and God help you do it.

FAREWELL LETTER TO SCOUTS OF THE WORLD, LORD BADEN-POWELL

This module is for parents and guardians who are new to the Scouting program and need to understand the big picture while helping their children with special needs and disabilities navigate the Scouting world. It borrows heavily from the *Scoutmaster's Handbook*, but applies to all of the Scouting programs.

The *Inclusion Toolbox* uses several terms and abbreviations that are specific to Scouting and the BSA; we label them "Scoutspeak." For example, the Toolbox uses the term "Scout" throughout. In this context, a Scout is any member of a Scouting program, including Cub Scouts, Scouts BSA, Venturing, Exploring, Sea Scouts, and other special opportunities. Unless there is a specific explanation, the term "Scouting" applies to all program levels and options. We introduce several important terms in Module A.

Scouting Ideals

At its core Scouting is a values-based program. Those values are summarized in a group of statements:

- **Scout Motto:** Be Prepared
- **Cub Scout Motto:** Do Your Best
- **Scout Slogan:** Do a Good Turn Daily
- **Scout Oath:** On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law; To help other people at all times; To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.
- **Scout Law:** A Scout is: Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, & Reverent
- **BSA Mission Statement:** The mission of the Boy Scouts of America is to prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the values of the Scout Oath and Law.

Inclusiveness is implicit in the Scouting values statements. The Scouting program is open to any youth within the program age ranges and to older people with disabilities who can benefit from Scouting's youth-oriented programs. While our history has not been perfect, it has been

our desire to let nothing stand in the way of a youth participating in Scouting. Special needs and disabilities should not exclude a youth from being a Scout.

Scouting is primarily an experiential learning environment. Scouts should always be trying new things, taking chances to learn, becoming more capable, learning how to work with others, and how to lead. The program has an emphasis on the outdoors largely because it strips living down to the basics and provides more opportunities to learn than everyday life. Even if a person has restrictions on outdoor activity, that doesn't mean he or she cannot benefit from the Scouting program or be a "good Scout". Scouting prepares young people to live a more productive and fulfilling life.

Unit Structure

Cub Scout Packs, Scout Troops, Venture Crews, Exploring Posts, and Sea Scout Ships are all "Scout units". A Scout unit is operated by a local organization in your community (in Scoutspeak: the "chartered organization"). The local organization commits to provide the Scout unit with good adult leaders, a meeting place, and other resources. Scout units are service-oriented and seek to pay their own way rather than rely heavily on their sponsoring organization for funding.

Each unit is governed by a volunteer committee. The unit committee does administrative work for the unit. The unit leaders (Den Leaders, Cubmasters, Scoutmasters, Advisors, Skippers, etc.) answer to the unit committee. If the unit leaders are not responding to your requests for appropriate accommodations for your Scout, approach the unit committee for additional resources.

Each unit should also have a Unit Commissioner. The commissioner is a seasoned Scout volunteer who helps one or more units accomplish goals for which a unit might not have the skill or knowledge on its own. A Unit Commissioner is a member of the district staff (explained below) and is well-networked within the Scouting community. If you run into a struggle and the unit committee hasn't been able to help, reach out to the Unit Commissioner to draw on more resources.

In Scoutspeak, every unit is part of a "district" within a "council." These are organizational subdivisions within Scouting just like states and counties are government subdivisions in the United States. A Scout council usually has its headquarters in a metropolitan area and serves several surrounding counties, sometimes across state lines. Each council will have several Scout districts. Districts can be geographically large or small and are usually sized to serve about the same number of Scouts and Scout units in each one.

Unit Leaders

Module C discusses the role of a unit leader, so you can find more information there. Scouting provides youth with an environment in which everyone can feel secure, both physically and emotionally. Adult leaders provide that sense of security for the youth in the unit. They set an example for others by living the Scout Oath and Law to the best of their abilities. They refuse to tolerate name-calling, put-downs, discrimination, or any form of physical aggression. They communicate their acceptance of youth by taking a real interest in each Scout. They use the Scouting programs to create a setting for learning and fun. They seek the best from each Scout and do all they can to allow him or her to achieve it.

The Patrol Method

Within the larger community of the troop or pack, the patrol or den is a Scout's "family circle." Often made up of kids who are close in age and experience level, each patrol helps its members develop a sense of pride and identity. The youth themselves elect their patrol leader, divide up the jobs to be done, and share in the satisfaction of accepting and fulfilling group responsibilities. Patrols and dens average around eight members. This size of group is ideal for collaboration and getting tasks done. In the vast majority of situations, a Scout with a disability should be a member of a patrol or den and participate alongside everyone else.

Within the "Patrol Method" is the notion that Scouts should be "youth led". This means that to the maximum extent possible, decision making is delegated to the Scouts themselves. While many Scouts are naturally accepting of others, there are times when a unit leader may have to help a Scout with a disability to crack through the social shell of an established patrol or den.

The Outdoors

Youth join Scouting for the challenge, the excitement, and the fun. Much of Scouting is designed to take place outdoors in settings where kids can find real adventure. Outdoor activities put the sizzle into Scouting. They keep kids coming back for more.

The outdoors is our classroom for many reasons, and youth with special needs and disabilities benefit from the outdoors too. While it is a natural tendency for us to compare those with disabilities to those "without", the truth of the matter is that everyone has differing abilities. Even those gifted in some ways will struggle in others. For example, a person with the physical ability to rock climb may lack the decision-making ability to do so safely. With that perspective, every youth will have something to challenge him or her in the outdoors and many of the challenges are not physical. In fact, youth who have lived with disabilities may have greater resilience and confidence to take on new challenges than most, because they have already learned to cope with so many other challenges.

For the parent or guardian of a child with a disability, the outdoors can be a scary place. It lacks the infrastructure of the home and the regular unit meeting location. It is inherently less

“groomed” to make physical movement easier. The point is to accept the challenges this presents. Scouting teaches people how to turn the outdoors into “home” by the skillful use of equipment and with group cooperation. Cleverly creating comfort in the outdoors is the hallmark of good campers.

Awards and Recognition (Advancement)

Advancement is Scoutspeak for the system of recognizing youth for their individual achievements. In Cub Scouts, Scouts BSA, and Sea Scouts, there are ranks to be earned as you go along, and there are optional awards that can be earned as well. The other BSA programs also have structured sets of award opportunities rather than ranks. These also offer a progressive challenge and are recognized with ceremonies and uniform attachments. The ranks and awards form a “curriculum” for these programs and a natural progression of skills development. In addition, advancement sets a pattern of setting positive goals and reaching them throughout life. In order to keep youth motivated to move forward we recognize them regularly to celebrate what they have already accomplished. Recognitions have two parts. One is a public ceremony within the unit so others can see and cheer on each Scout. The other is some sort of tangible item that is worn with the uniform as a lasting recognition; like a patch, pin, or bead.

One of the challenges of Scouting is balancing fairness to all Scouts with reasonable accommodation of a disability in the advancement requirements. Whether they are recognized as disabled or not, youth are all over the map in their innate abilities and advantages. The general approach is to keep the requirements the same for everyone as much as possible. It is normal for a youth to find some requirements harder than others and for requirements that are hard for some to be easy to others. By itself, this does not disadvantage youth with disabilities because many of them will also have innate advantages over some other Scouts.

Exceptions can be made when a Scout’s disabilities make it impossible to achieve ranks and awards by the normal rules. However, any system for exceptions risks being misused to benefit Scouts that don’t really need them. The BSA has rigorous procedures and paperwork to complete in order to get exceptions to the regular rules. Exceptions come in two forms. One type of exception is to allow more time for the youth to remain in the program and earn awards. In fact, it is possible for some people with disabilities to continue to participate as Scouts and continue to earn ranks and awards for their whole lives. The other type of exception is the substitution of an achievable requirement for an impossible one. Module E explains how to apply for and get an exception to advancement requirements.

Before leaving this topic, we should emphasize that “advancement” is a method of Scouting but it is not the mission of Scouting. Youth can benefit from the other opportunities of Scouting even if they never earn a rank. Many worthy and excellent Scouts never achieve the top rank of their program level, such as Eagle Scout.

Adult Mentoring

Many youth learn a great deal by watching how adults conduct themselves. Scout leaders can be positive role models for the members of their units. In many cases an adult leader who is willing to listen to kids, encourage them, and take a sincere interest in them can make a profound difference in their lives.

Adults in Scouting are teaching youth all kinds of skills, but more importantly they show them how to “do life”. We show how to honor and respect other people and we try to bring out the best in each individual Scout. Our activities set the stage for learning to be good to each other and handle aggravations, struggles, and conflicts in healthy ways.

A special feature of the Scouting movement is that our adult leaders are not trying to direct everything for the youth in our care. Rather, we seek to empower their decision making while providing enough boundaries to keep them healthy and safe.

While we encourage Scouts to help and take care of each other, there are some disabilities that need more assistance than a peer should give. In these instances, extra adults are needed. They may be parents or guardians, skilled professional caregivers, or other Scouting volunteers. These extra adults become part of the social mix of the Scout unit and provide extra opportunities to mentor all of the youth in the unit. Youth Protection Training (explained shortly below) is required before any adult has access to any youth other than their own children.

Personal Growth

Scouting-age youth are experiencing dramatic physical and emotional growth. Scouts with special needs are no different in this regard. Scouting offers them opportunities to channel much of that change into productive endeavors and to find the answers they are seeking for many of their questions. Through service projects and Good Turns, Scouts can discover their place in their community. (A Good Turn is a simple act of kindness or service to another person. Today we would call it paying it forward.) Many Scouting activities allow youth to associate with others from different backgrounds. The religious emblems program offers Scouts paths to more deeply understand their place in the world. The Scout unit itself provides each Scout with an arena in which to explore and try out new ideas. One can go on adventures with no purpose other than having fun.

Leadership Development

Leadership is a skill that is best learned by doing it. Every Scout in a patrol and unit will find that he or she is filling positions of increasing responsibility. From the first leadership experiences on, youth learn planning, organization, and decision making. For many kids, accepting the role of Denner or Patrol Leader is the first real leadership opportunity they have ever had. Discovering that they can do the job will go a long way toward giving them the confidence and ability to take on the next job and ultimately be leaders in adult society. In Scouting, youth learn to be effective leaders . . . and to be good followers.

Like other Scouts, people with special needs or disabilities can take on leadership roles and participate in specialized leadership training. Those with different abilities spend their lives getting things done in ways that are different from most. Their leadership styles can be innovative. There is nothing wrong with a Scout fulfilling a leadership role by getting help from other Scouts where needed.

The Uniform

Since the founding of the BSA in 1910, Scout uniforms have been a recognizable part of the American scene. Even today, Scouting programs use standardized uniforms for its members, though the uniform is more formal in some programs than in others and the uniform can be customized at the unit level in some programs. People seeing a youth in a Scout uniform expect someone of good character who is prepared to do his or her best to help others.

Wearing the uniform helps kids develop a sense of belonging and identify with their unit. It reinforces the fact that all members of the BSA are equal to one another and we are all “included”. No matter how diverse we are as individuals, we are all Scouts. This is true for Scouts with disabilities too because ability is just another axis of diversity. When Scouts and Scout leaders are in uniform, they are instantly reminded of what they stand for and tend to behave in a way that brings honor to themselves and to the Scouting community.

It is important for adult leaders to be in uniform at Scout events. They set a good example for members of their units and are also seen as community leaders fulfilling a very important role.

Protecting Against Abuse

The BSA seeks to be world-class in protecting our members against all forms of abuse, to include sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, cyberbullying, physical or emotional neglect,

exposure to violence or threat, or any form of sexual exploitation. We accomplish this through our Youth Protection Training (YPT) programs and rapid response to any situation that arises. Our training is multi-faceted in that we require every registered adult to be trained. **We strongly encourage every parent to take this training as well.** We also provide abuse recognition and reporting training to all our youth. The training in abuse prevention for the youth is age-appropriate, but thorough. We recognize that abuse can be either youth-on-youth or adult-on-youth.

There are two significant facets to abuse protection that relate to those with disabilities. The more obvious one is that youth with disabilities are a vulnerable population in general and make attractive targets for teasing, practical jokes, and other forms of mistreatment. This requires an extra level of vigilance from the adults at Scout events and activities to nip inappropriate behavior in the bud and create empathy in our youth so they see how an act would not be funny if you were on the receiving end.

The second aspect of abuse protection has to do with maintaining safety when a Scout needs adult help with something that ordinarily requires personal privacy. The BSA youth protection rules assume that parents and guardians are trustworthy in regards to their own children and they are allowed access that other adults are not allowed. The challenge is when a Scout needs assistance with dressing, bathing, toileting, feeding, or using medical devices. Parents and guardians are clearly allowed to assist, while other parents and adult leaders are not ordinarily allowed to have that kind of access to a youth, whether or not the youth or parent or guardian give permission. If a Scout has a professional caregiver other than a parent or guardian, special arrangements will need to be made, and those arrangements will need to be coordinated with the leaders of the unit and camp facility. Early planning and communication are important. This is discussed in greater detail in [Module C](#).

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