

Able Scouts

Articles on Scouting with special needs and disabilities

A: How to Use the Inclusion Toolbox

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How to Use This Toolbox

The *Inclusion Toolbox for Special Needs and Disabilities* is a printable website that keeps special needs and disability information accessible 24/7/365 to the BSA community. The Toolbox does not read like a novel or textbook. The modules cross reference each other, but each one can stand alone and you can read them out of order. It was designed to allow you to jump to the topics of greatest interest and then read other sections later. Use the Table of Contents and search feature to jump to what you need. You can also print out individual modules to use as handouts, pass-alongs, or training material.

The Toolbox is organized into four parts. The first few modules were written for BSA unit leaders[1] that deal directly with youth and for the parents and guardians of Scouts[2] with special needs and

disabilities. These target audiences were combined because communication and understanding between parents/guardians and leaders is important for providing the best program and because each group needs to understand what it's like to be in the other's shoes. Leaders may want to reproduce parts of the Toolbox, especially Modules B and D, as handouts for families that are new to Scouting.

The second group of modules offers a deeper look at different classes of disabilities and special needs, to offer more insight and more specific advice for serving youth and adults with these disabilities. While the emphasis in these modules is on serving youth, please be aware that "inclusion" includes supporting adult Scouting volunteers and family members of Scouts. This group of modules should be useful to Scouting volunteers and professionals at all levels that need more specific information. Please understand that an individual may have more than one special need or diagnosis. It was impractical to deal with the specifics of every possible combination of needs in this Toolbox. To assist a particular Scout or adult you may have to refer to a few different modules to address each facet of her or his disability.

The third group of modules covers topics of interest to volunteers and professionals operating above the unit level. While they may not have much direct contact with youth with special needs and disabilities, they are responsible for organizing large events, building and operating camp facilities, and recruiting and training event and camp staff. They are also the ones that have to make the difficult decisions when exceptions may be needed to support a youth or adult with a disability or special need.

The fourth group of modules is designed for program area leaders that are providing experiences at Scout camps. They may not have the luxury of focusing on a single Scout's needs, but do need to understand how to adapt their specific activities for greater inclusion.

Example Roadmaps Through the Toolbox

If you are a...

- **PARENT** – Read Modules B & D, and whichever modules between H and S that describe your child. If your child is 11 years or older, add Module E to the reading list.
- **UNIT LEADER** – Read Modules C & F. Have a Joining Conference with the family. Then read the Modules between H and S that relate to that Scout's needs.
- **SPECIAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES ADVOCATE** that helps others with these issues – Read Modules C, E, F, and V. Then skim the rest of the modules between B and S so you know generally what is in them.
- **RECRUITER OR YOU HELP ONBOARD NEW FAMILIES** – Read Modules, B, D, and F. Then coordinate Joining Conferences for the unit and communicate the Scout's needs to the unit leadership.
- **COMMISSIONER** – Read Modules C, D, and W. Then skim the rest of the modules between B and S so you know generally what is in them.
- **A COUNCIL COMMITTEE MEMBER FOR ADVANCEMENT OR REGISTRATION BEYOND THE AGE OF ELIGIBILITY** – Read Module V and the request for alternative advancement or registration. Read the Modules between H and S that relate to that Scout's needs.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this *Inclusion Toolbox for Special Needs and Disabilities* is to provide a single comprehensive reference source for disabilities information for the BSA Scouting community. The National Special Needs & Disabilities Committee developed this Toolbox to bridge the gap between more general sources of disabilities information and the Methods of Scouting. We expect that the information provided here will become the basis for other shorter publications to raise awareness of special needs and the foundation for training courses for Scout volunteers, professionals, and family members.

Suggestions for improvements can be directed to the National Special Needs & Disabilities Committee, BSA National Service Center, 1325 W. Walnut Hill Lane, P.O. Box 152079, Irving, Texas 75015-2079 or by email to SpecialNeedsChair@scouting.org.

This document is a reference for good practice and is not intended to create rigid rules to be followed, standards to be maintained, or standard operating procedures to abide by. It should be taken as good advice and it does not supersede other authoritative BSA publications.

Another aspiration for this Toolbox is that it will provide timely information for decision-making and allow any “issues” that come up at the unit or local level to be resolved at the unit or local level. In our experience, most “problems” trace back to a lack of understanding and ineffective communication between the people involved.

SCOPE

This *Inclusion Toolbox for Special Needs and Disabilities* builds on many historical BSA documents and has kept the best from the past while also keeping up with the times. The editors deeply appreciate the contributions of past generations of volunteers. This Toolbox replaces and expands upon BSA 34059 – *Scouting for Youth with Disabilities Manual, 2007*.

The information in this Toolbox is presented in lay language, with enough detail to allow you to provide a good experience for Scouts and their families. It will not train you to be a full-time caregiver or how to provide skilled therapy such as physical, speech, occupational, psychological, or medical. The descriptive information about specific types of disabilities focuses on their effects, not their causes, and is intended to help you understand and have empathy for a person with that disability.

You will find two modules about advancement. Module E is for parents, guardians, and unit leaders. Module V is for Council and District advancement volunteers. This material expands on information in the *Guide to Advancement* to show how the requirements for advancement can be met in innovative ways. We reference the 2021 edition of *Guide to Advancement* in this Toolbox. The *Guide to Advancement* is regularly updated by the National Advancement Program Team and this Toolbox defers to the mandated procedures in the *Guide to Advancement*. While we plan to regularly update this Toolbox as well, it is wise to consult the latest edition of the *Guide to Advancement* before making any critical decisions in a plan for alternative advancement.

Other than suggesting ways to provide support for a Scout with a disability while meeting BSA Youth Protection policies, health, and safety are not directly addressed in this Toolbox. However, health and safety need to be considered in designing adaptations, accommodations, and accessibility features. The *Guide to Safe Scouting* outlines current BSA policies that have been adopted to keep youth safe in our program and this Toolbox defers to the *Guide to Safe Scouting*. The *Guide to Safe Scouting* is regularly updated by the National Health & Safety Committee. We encourage you to become familiar with it as well.

The writers and editors of this Toolbox have used terminology that is reasonably current at this time. Cutting edge insider terminology would leave many readers behind. Person first language^[3] has been used to a maximum extent to underscore the importance of the person over the disability. We beg your understanding and forgiveness if any particular choice of words bothers you. As a practical matter, the language used to discuss special needs is continually changing in our culture. In our experience different terminology is used for the same thing in different parts of the country, and in different professional fields. It would be impossible to satisfy everyone's sensibilities, but we did try.

BSA INCLUSION PHILOSOPHY

Since its founding in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America has included fully participating members with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities. The Boy Scout Handbook has developed Braille editions. Merit badge pamphlets have been recorded on audio for Scouts who are blind. Closed caption training videos have been produced for Scouts who are deaf. In 1965, registration of overage Scouts with intellectual or developmental disabilities became possible—a privilege now extended to many Scouts with disabilities.

The basic premise of Scouting for youth with special needs and disabilities is full participation. Youth with special needs are to be treated and respected like every other member of their unit. They want to participate like other youth—and Scouting provides that opportunity. Providing the Scouting program to those with disabilities means that we have an ongoing process to educate unit leaders how to adapt their methods and how to create healthy, safe, empathetic environments for all of their Scouts, both with and without special needs. It also means actively encouraging inclusion of Scouts with special needs and disabilities into “mainstream” or “traditional” Scout units like Cub Packs, Scout Troops, Venturing Crews, STEM Scouts, Sea Scout Ships, and Exploring Posts.

While it is usually best to include Scouts in regular units, there are situations where that is not the best solution for a Scout with a disability. BSA also supports Scout units where all the members have a similar disability—such as a Scout troop for Scouts who are blind or a Cub Scout pack for Scouts who are deaf. Many of these disability-specific Scouting units are chartered to schools or centers for youth with a particular type of disability that make the Scouting program part of their curriculum. These Scout units are encouraged to participate in Scouting activities at the district, council, area, regional, and national levels along with other traditional units.

When it comes to specific activities, our goal is to allow a youth with a disability to participate to the maximum extent possible in the same way, place, and time as everyone else. Even when adaptations or accommodations are needed, we want to have everyone sharing the experience together. In our experience, youth are often able to do more than is expected of them, when they are given a chance.

In order to encourage positive, inclusive experiences for all youth in Scouting, especially those with different abilities or challenges it is necessary to define “inclusion”. It is almost as if the Scout Oath and Law created the concept of inclusion. There are several definitions of inclusion, but one that truly resonates is *“An attitude and approach that seeks to ensure every person, regardless of ability or background, can meaningfully participate in all aspects of life.”* [4] Inclusion is an approach, not a program. It is an attitude, not an activity.

HOW SCOUTING BENEFITS YOUTH WITH SPECIAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES

By definition, a disability is an impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. A special need makes a life activity substantially harder than it is for most people. When a major life activity is impaired, a youth is at risk of being left out or isolated from our society. Some special needs make it hard to communicate or interact with others. Others create odd behavior that doesn’t easily mesh with the social order. Other disabilities require equipment or assistance that makes one move slower or fall behind the group. A few disabilities make one look odd to others.

For most youth with disabilities, their primary opportunity to interact with their peers is at school. Even then, their special needs can entail many hours outside the regular classroom to give them their needed therapies and educational supports. Outside of school, there are few extracurricular opportunities for youth with special needs or disabilities to participate like everyone else. Scouting is a somewhat rare exception. In Scouting a youth with a special need can participate on an equal (or near equal) footing with everyone else.

For the most part, individuals with special needs or disabilities learn good social and life skills when they’re able to bond with peers their own age. Their friends become role models of good behaviors. Their self-esteem and confidence begins to build when they feel a sense of belonging. Tasks they once felt were difficult or impossible become manageable. In Scouting, positive results can be seen as a youth with a disability starts to advance in rank and take on leadership positions. Genuine praise given to a Scout who has a special need can be very powerful.

While Scouting was not invented specifically for those with different abilities, from its founding it has been an inclusive movement and based on a belief that no matter what culture or economic class a boy came from, he had similar needs to mature into a good citizen, and that people from all classes and culture should be part of one brotherhood. Obviously as the decades have passed, our language has changed and the Scouting movement has broadened its perspective to include many other aspects of diversity. Though it was not called that in the language of the day, ability diversity was one of the earliest initiatives in this regard, though we now include gender, ethnic, economic, and orientation diversity as well.

The Scouting program provides experiences and opportunities for youth, including those with a disability, to try and experience things outside their normal life routines. They also encounter people they would not otherwise know in person. We know from experience that this builds confident, resourceful, good-hearted adults. The program is flexible enough to allow Scouts to attempt a challenge when they are ready, rather than on a fixed timetable. It also allows them to take as many tries as they need to in order to succeed. The truth is that all of us as human beings have a varying set of abilities and

are stronger in some than in others. A Scout with a “diagnosed” disability could easily have an “undiagnosed” super ability as well.

Every youth should have a chance to become his or her best self. Scouting is committed to this ideal and seeks to have every youth have the opportunity to be a Scout.

HOW YOUTH WITH SPECIAL NEEDS BENEFIT OTHER YOUTH

“Man’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.” – Oliver Wendell Holmes

It is as important for typically developing youth to experience friendships with those with special needs or disabilities as the other way around. It is simply impossible to see a person with a “label” or a difference in the same way when you have walked in each other’s shoes and shared the same challenges. The presence of those with special needs provides an opportunity for others to practice serving. Service is like a muscle. If it is exercised, it grows stronger. While Scouting is fun and games for our youth, our higher purpose is to make better people out of them when they are adults. We want that culture of cheerful service to be ingrained in them from now on. Exposing them to people who are different from themselves is part of the process.

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[1] In this Toolbox a “unit” is a Scouting unit at any program level; Pack, Troop, Crew, Ship, or Post. “Unit Leaders” are registered adults at all program levels (Cub Scouts, Scouts BSA, STEM Scouts, Sea Scouts, Venturing, and Exploring) that interact directly with youth.

[2] In this Toolbox a “Scout” is a registered youth participant at any program level and includes Cub Scouts, Scouts, Venturers, Sea Scouts, and Explorers. It also includes older people with disabilities that are allowed to participate in Scouting on a youth basis.

[3] Person first language usually takes the form “person with X” rather than “X person”. However, there are certain communities of people that consider their condition to not be a disability, but rather an element of their core identity. In those instances, the editors have honored the traditions of those communities.

[4] *Paths to Inclusion: A Resource Toolbox for Fully Including Youth of ALL Abilities in Community Life*

