

# ABILITIES DIGEST

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## Adapting Activities Special Purpose Scouting Units

In general, Scouts with special needs or disabilities are encouraged to join a typical local unit in their community. But some units are more willing to make accommodations for special needs than others. For example, a Scout with autism might flourish in a particular troop as long as the Scouts and leaders can make adjustments to prevent anxiety triggers or other problems. A different scoutmaster might lack the experience or patience to understand and enact such accommodations.

One solution is to start or join a special purpose unit dedicated to youth with a particular disability. For example, a special purpose unit could be a troop containing many members with intellectual disabilities, or a crew containing many members on the autism spectrum, or a pack with all members being deaf or blind. The units have the special purpose of providing the Scouting program in many of its forms while focusing on the particular needs of those members. The unit can modify activities more effectively to match the Scouts' special needs than in typical units. units are established by a group of parents who want to provide Scouting to their children with special needs. In some cases the units were started by an organization that serves youth with special needs. For example, the South Carolina School for



### In This Issue

- **Enhancing Abilities:** Toolbox Updates.
- **Adapting Activities:** Special-purpose units versus typical units; success at adapting shooting sports.
- **Awareness Events:** National Outdoor Conference; mini-conference in October on communicating with leaders; quarterly online SND roundtables; review of April's Behavior and Mental Health Conference in Texas.
- **Recognizing Abilities:** SND Scouting Service Award.
- **Helpful Links:** Accessing special needs and disabilities materials

for the Deaf and the Blind sponsored a Scout troop for over 60 years. More recently the school's students have joined a pack and troop sponsored by a local chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Many other specialized schools across the nation have sponsored local units.



As part of its outreach program, the Northern Star Council has supported units in group homes for developmentally disabled adults and in special needs classrooms across school districts. Units have also been organized in social clubs for young people with developmental disabilities. The program is funded through special endowments and grants.

Your Council may be able to help in finding these units. However, not everyone can find a special purpose unit. If one exists, it might require too much travel to participate.

If you can't find a unit to join, maybe the neighborhood contains a core group of friends interested in Scouting, and they can start their own unit. For example, groups of friends with Down syndrome, aided by their parents, have started troops in Minnesota. The Scouts were all over 18, so they all registered beyond the age of eligibility (RBAE, [see Module V](#)). The troop and its members stayed together for decades camping out and working on advancement. A few have earned the Eagle rank. A similar troop is based out of Dallas, Texas. These members have been a "family" for many, many years; their pace is geared more to the needs of each individual.

Special purpose units seem to work well for Scouts with a specific disability or special need. Consideration in forming a special purpose unit is based upon comparable age and ability. For many units, advancement drives the program for most members even though advancement is only one part of [the eight Methods of Scouting](#). In special purpose units, the goal may simply be to learn social skills, learn to camp or just have fun fishing and canoeing. Scouting can accommodate all of these things, but sometimes it's best to have a unit that focuses more on one thing rather than all things at once.

## Success at Adapting Shooting Sports

*This is Dawn Kotalik's story of how her son, a Scout with cerebral palsy, participated in shooting sports in the Sam Houston Area Council (SHAC) and earned shooting sports merit badges. This was originally published in the Spring 2023 issue of the **NRA Club Connection**. The story has been lightly edited.*

Our youngest son, Reed Kotalik, is a Star Scout with Troop 777. He will soon be 12 years old. Since he was a toddler, Reed looked forward to being a Boy Scout. His older brothers are all Eagle Scouts, along with dad John.



When Reed was 4 years old, he was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy (CP) after extensive medical intervention

as a baby. He was born with laryngomalacia, lacking cartilage in his throat to keep it structurally sound. During his critical first year, his brain was deprived of oxygen as a result of this condition. Soon after his 1st birthday, specialists at Texas Children's performed surgery to create a functioning throat for Reed. Extensive feeding, speech, and other therapy followed.

We "lone scouted" Reed through Cub Scouts and Webelos because for years he had regular EEGs, cardiac monitoring, sleep studies, MRIs, therapy and invasive intervention. Reed realized (and embraced) through the years that most things would be a challenge for him and that rising to those occasions is necessary to have some sense of normalcy. Before his 5th birthday, we were offered (and declined) a handicap parking pass for him. Perseverance has become a way of life.

When Reed bridged from Webelos to Boy Scouts, we knew he would do his best, but we worried that he would be limited on some of the adventures that were possible (that his older brothers and dad have experienced).

Just last year, he was diagnosed with Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI) after his optical issues became more apparent. The area of his brain that is most impacted by Cerebral Palsy houses important vision function. CVI isn't an eye issue that can be corrected with glasses. It is a decreased visual response due to a neurological condition and involves disrupted messages between Reed's eyes and brain that interprets what he sees and then how his brain directs the reaction. Coupled with leg inversion and muscle weakness from CP, we knew that we would need to provide adequate support to keep Scouting fun and safe for him. While John and older brother Rafe have committed themselves to that task, we knew that we would need others to "become a Scouting village" for Reed. As a family, we deeply value the importance of Scouts learning to work within patrols, troops, and with other adult leadership as part of their journey.

Reed has found ways to adapt in his other pursuits. In lacrosse, he uses the green field as a backdrop to scoop up the white blur of a ball. On the track, the white lines are thicker and skewed, so Reed works to stay in the thin color of the lanes. White is a difficult color for Reed to work with. It easily reflects light and casts an immediate glare for him. It shuts down critical visual response from his brain. We were confident that he would do his best to adapt in Scouting, but knew that support from other Scouters would be as valuable.

When we asked Reed (at the start of his Scouts BSA journey) what merit badges he wanted to take, he chose several that concerned us including the shooting sports ones. We knew that some of his selections had higher physical demands, but we were determined to give him the opportunities for those too. We respected that this was his journey and not our own.

### **Getting started with Shooting Sports**

Because John and Rafe were familiar with the qualification guidelines for shotgun, rifle, and archery, there was a concern that Reed may feel extremely defeated if he was unable to visualize the target and find a way to adapt to be

Successful.

We offered Reed the opportunity to work in a smaller group setting as an introduction to the Shooting Sports merit badges. We believe that provided a smooth and comfortable start for Reed. He enjoyed the small session of shotgun basics and a Hunter's Education course with his troop at a unit level camp.



As summer merit badge workshops became available last summer, we allowed Reed to register for rifle shooting. When he reported for class that day, he did not want to alert instructors as to his unique needs. We respected that he wanted to try and adapt on his own. He spent the first half of the day trying to qualify on the usual white-based target. As the afternoon continued, we could see that he was straining to visualize the targets and knew that type of strain usually results in further eye deterioration.

At that point, we shared information with Chip Locke and other shooting instructors for SHAC. They quickly began to explore a way to make a custom, adaptive target from their available materials that was blue-based (a shop towel) with orange round stickers. Reed (and we) were so touched that they found a solution to provide a target that was not on white paper. He qualified using the adaptive target and earned his first shooting sports merit badge that day!

Since that time, Reed has continued to work with the range's wonderfully supportive shooting sports staff. He has earned the Shotgun and Archery badges now. The orange clays worked well for him against a backdrop of the sky. Our family deeply appreciates the understanding provided to Reed to explore an adaptive solution that satisfied the same qualification standards so that he could find success with his peers.

Reed now has a passion for shooting sports. While he continues to work to qualify on the shooting badges, I am confident he will have continued support from his team. They are clearly setting a standard of being considerate and inclusive of those with various challenges.



## Awareness Events

### 2023 National Outdoor Conference

- Where: Philmont Scout Ranch
- Preconference Workshops: Sep 24-Sep 26, 2023
- Conference: Sep 27-Oct 1, 2023





The National Outdoor Conference will feature over 70 different sessions: keynote events led by distinguished industry experts, peer-to-peer informal discussion groups, and many other learning opportunities will be offered. Plus all participants will enjoy the chance to experience a small part of the outdoor adventures Philmont offers. The Conference itself begins Wednesday afternoon September 27 and concludes Sunday morning, October 1. Pre-conference training workshops begin Sunday, September 24. A variety of housing options are available.

Experts from the National SND Committee will present sessions on a variety of topics , including:

- Designating a camp as special needs accessible
- Simple camp adaptations to support special needs
- Outdoor programs for adult Scouts with intellectual disabilities

The planned schedule for SND sessions will allow participants to attend any or all of them and still have time to participate in other sessions.

There will also be a 3-day preconference workshop on Mental Health First Aid.

Click here for further information or to register: [scouting.org/outdoor-programs/noc2023/](https://scouting.org/outdoor-programs/noc2023/)

## October Mini-Conference on Communicating with Leaders

**Communicating for Inclusion: how to help leadership more effectively support Scouts with Special Needs and Disabilities.**

- Where: Golden Gate Area Council, Pleasanton, CA
- When: Friday-Saturday, Oct 27– Oct 28, 2023

The mini-conference is open to anyone; registration information will be distributed soon and published on the [AbleScouts.org](https://AbleScouts.org) web site and on SND-related discussion groups on Facebook, particularly “No Scout Left Behind” and “Abilities Digest.”



## SND Online Roundtables



The National SND Committee sponsors a quarterly online roundtable about Scouting for youth with special needs and disabilities.

These will usually occur on the third Monday in February, May, August, and November.

The Fall roundtable is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, November 21, 2023.

Roundtable registration is open to all. Registration information for the next roundtable, will be posted as soon as it is available via the Able Scouts site and on SND-related discussion groups on Facebook, particularly “No Scout Left Behind” and “Abilities Digest.”

## Review of the Behaviors & Mental Health in Scouting Mini-Conference

*A report on the Mini-Conference held April 21-22 of this year in Houston, TX, by Abilities Digest writer Janet Kelly.*

In quiet conversations, you could hear several of the participants sharing thoughts and ideas in regard to many of the things they were learning at the National Special Needs and Disabilities Conference, ***Understanding Behavior and Mental Health in Scouting*** in Houston, Texas, April 21 and 22. The conference was put on by some of the members of the National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee and hosted by Sam Houston Area Council.

Swee Ng, District Commissioner from Iron Horse District, Sam Houston Area Council voiced some of her feelings after attending the conference:

*“Oh my goodness! For those of you who are Wood Badgers, do you remember the feelings you had after you walked out at the end of each Wood Badge weekend? You just kept doing the Wood Badge talk? I have had similar feelings and for two days couldn’t stop talking to my husband on my way home from the National Special Needs and Disabilities Conference.*

### Managing Subscriptions to *Abilities Digest*

*Abilities Digest* is designed for any leader who would offer a Scouting program to youth who have special needs. Any Scouting volunteer or professional may subscribe.

**Subscribing by email.** Send a message to [specialneedschair@scouting.org](mailto:specialneedschair@scouting.org), with “SUBSCRIBE” in the subject line. Indicate your name, email address, and council in the message text.

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**Subscribing online.** Visit the web site [ablescouts.org](http://ablescouts.org). The page's lower left corner displays a small gray rectangle with the word “Follow” and three dots. Click on the word “Follow” and enter your email address. You will receive an email whenever a new *Abilities Digest* appears, plus an email when articles are republished.

*“This was a very informative, intense workshop. There was never a dull moment, just like at Wood Badge! I had not been sleeping much right around conference time. In fact, I had only gotten 4 hours of rest on that Friday night. Yet Saturday, I never lost my focus, because every session was so interactive and interesting. I had many WOW and WHOA moments. To be honest, I needed to wipe away my tears a few times.*

*“I walked in without knowing anything about how to approach my daughter’s recent unusual, intense anxiety. Now I have materials to read so that I can better educate myself. The resources I received from the presenters at the conference shed much light on how I can help my daughter cope. I never thought nor imagined I would get such amazing support from all who attended.”*

Sparked by some very well-spoken youth from the City of Houston’s Office of Education Youth Council, the sidebar conversations expressed amazement at how well these young people explained mental health issues regarding the youth in the city. They spoke about suicide, bullying, societal pressures, depression, anxiety, and self-isolation. One of the speakers said, *“We put expectations on self and others. This causes undue chaos leading up to a breaking point. If your body and mind aren’t doing well, you need to be taking time for yourself. You need to get the support from others to see you through.”* Yep....that’s it in a nutshell.

Dr. Ken Montfort from Montfort Psychology Associates: *“ALL behavior is communication.”* We may wonder why a youth is behaving the way they do. There is always a reason behind the behavior. You could try these suggestions:

- Slow down your speech. You would be surprised to see what happens when you give a Scout time to process information.
- Give your Scout a sense of independence simply by keeping a schedule board that they participate in developing. Color coded sticky notes can be moved easily around the board.
- Give socialization opportunities throughout the week.
- Include opportunities to practice social skills such a turn-taking. Find socially appropriate ways to fit them into the environment.
- Provide a bit of structure that fosters the dynamics of interacting well with others.
- Turn their uniqueness into their strengths!

Dr. Josh Rotenberg, board certified in child neurology and certified in sleep medicine (among other disciplines): *“Sleep should be a priority in Scouting! Speak to it from a safety perspective.”* In this day and age with so many electronic distractions, sleep doesn’t come easily to those who play electronic games into the night. Neither does sleep come easily to those who are anxious, upset, or unhappy about camp, about those they are in the tent with,

or any myriad of issues that come on in the nighttime. Sleeplessness can cause disorientation and poor judgment more often than not. Sleep is essential for all of us to function well during the daytime hours. Planning time to sleep and making sure that is happening is critical.

Gayle Fisher, M Ed, advocate mom of a son on the spectrum: *“Breathing exercises will help the jitters and anxiety.”* Using apps online can help with calming. There is a great need for enough sleep time in order to get rid of cellular debris. Intrinsic rewards are better than extrinsic rewards, but sometimes both need to be used. Empowerment comes through responsibility. Create ways and reasons for youth to practice this. Guide and role model. Play with them and encourage them. Love them most of all.

One of the participants, Laura Sawgle commented: *“We are here to give each other confidence. We are here for scared parents.”* Her son now has the skills to live on his own because of his Scouting journey. Your child can be where my son is at, too. Give them a lot of love and understanding.

Another participant, Connie Oubre said: *“Behavior and mental health speaks to all youth and leaders and we need to ask ourselves, ‘How are we modeling to our youth?’”* No other explanation is needed.

There were many other takeaways from this conference that are now at work across the country building a stronger nation one Scout at a time.

## Enhancing Awareness

### Revised Toolbox Modules

The Toolbox team has revised two modules, which are now online:

- [A: How to Use the Inclusion Toolbox](#)
- [B: Basics of Scouting From a Special Needs Perspective](#)



## Recognizing Abilities

### Special Needs Scouting Service Award

Scouters who support Scouting with special needs through service to units, youth training, leader training, or organization, may be nominated for the Torch of Gold or Woods Services Award. Both of these require nomination. The Torch is presented by each council once a year, and the Woods Services is presented nationally every year.



The Special Needs Scouting Service Award (SNSSA) does not require nomination, and may be presented to any adult who earns it. The SNSSA recognizes either adult volunteers or Scouting professionals who actively support Scouting with special needs and disabilities.



The SNSSA is similar to the Scouter's Key in that the individual earns it through tenure, training, and service requirements. Here are some frequently asked questions about the award:

- **Must recipients be nominated?**

No. This is an *earned* award similar to the Scouter's Key. Both volunteer Scouters and BSA professionals may earn the award.

- **Is there an application to fill out?**

The latest information has been posted to [Awards Central](#) at Scouting.org.

- **Who approves the award application?**

This award is approved at the council level, by the Scout Executive or designee.

## Helpful Links

Scouting with Disabilities landing page: [scouting.org/resources/disabilities-awareness/](https://scouting.org/resources/disabilities-awareness/)

AbleScouts: *Abilities Digest* articles posted online: [ablescouts.org](https://ablescouts.org)

## Links in Articles

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

Methods of Cub Scouting: [scouting.org/programs/cub-scouts/aims-and-methods/](https://scouting.org/programs/cub-scouts/aims-and-methods/)

National Outdoor Conference: [scouting.org/outdoor-programs/noc2023/](https://scouting.org/outdoor-programs/noc2023/)

Special Needs Service Award: [scouting.org/awards/awards-central/special-needs/](https://scouting.org/awards/awards-central/special-needs/)

## Social Media



Facebook *Abilities Digest*: [www.facebook.com/pages/Abilities-Digest/824105334298165](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Abilities-Digest/824105334298165)

Facebook *No Scout Left Behind*: [www.facebook.com/groups/1967878213431320](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1967878213431320)

Email your comments and questions to [specialneedschair@scouting.org](mailto:specialneedschair@scouting.org).