

ABILITIES DIGEST

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Adapting Advancement Joining Conferences



Special needs and disabilities are all around us. There are many of us who have disabilities, but by looking at us, one cannot tell. In the next few months, we all will be either recruiting or joining a new unit. With that in mind, one of your personal goals should be getting to know each Scout, each family and the leadership better. You especially need to better understand, from either side of the table, when a Scout has a disability that presents the need for extra support. If so, after a Scout joins a unit, follow up with a joining conference!

Joining conferences are at the crux of a successful tenure in the Scouting program.

Here's how it works:

Rationale: A joining conference builds trust and rapport among the leadership and the parents as partners in delivering the Scouting program. Every Scout has unique attributes. The joining conference can help the unit play to the strengths of the youth, provide for his/her special needs, and help prevent conflicts with other members of the unit. The joining conference should take place within the first month after the Scout joins the unit. Keep in mind this conference is not a "job interview." Each young person has nothing to prove before joining a unit.

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Attendees: One or both parents, preferably someone who is disabilities awareness trained who will have direct contact with the youth; in Cub Scouting the den leader should be included; in Scouts BSA, the youth could be included—but let common sense prevail.

Where: This is a candid, private conversation, so it should be held 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 the leaders need to know. Assume confidentiality unless a parent gives permission for you to share with other key leadership. Ask if you are not sure what the parent wants. If you believe the youth will benefit from other key adult and youth leaders being brought into the loop, ask for permission.

Topics: The joining conference should be a friendly, informative, get-to-know you meeting. While listening and asking questions, it is critical to understand what is being said. The expertise of someone who has worked in the field of special needs can be very beneficial. Your council's Disabilities Awareness Committee could be a resource for you at the time of the conference. Generally, parents want the leadership to know and understand the youth. Listen and ask questions. The parents will tell you what you need to know. Ultimately, the goal is to form a team with the parents, in order to provide a growth oriented program for the young person. Keeping the lines of communication open should definitely be another goal. Begin with asking about strengths and then the struggles. Find out how the youth manages them. As a parent, find out how the leadership could help in specific circumstances. As a leader, find out how the parents handle and work with the youth. Work together to come up with doable solutions. Understanding a specific diagnosis can be helpful, but not a necessary component. The main goal should be for the leadership and the parents to work together for the success of the youth with special needs and disabilities.



Ask questions such as:

1. What are the youth's unique strengths? Struggles?
2. How are the struggles managed at home? At school?
3. Does anything trigger emotional outbursts? How can this be prevented? What strategies can be used to deescalate?
4. Are there warning signals for overwhelming situations? Meltdowns? Anxiety?
5. Are there any concerns with reading, writing, comprehension?
6. What strategies can be used within small or large groups to help the youth participate?

7. What different strategies are used at school or at home to facilitate learning?
8. What could the parent/leadership need to work out in order to ensure success?

Don't stop with just this one conference. Keep an open door policy. Building relationships with the Scout and his/her family is critical. Communication is paramount. Scouting is for everyone. Together we can all be successful!

Say Good-bye to Board of Review Anxiety

Many Scouts get nervous before a Board of Review. They feel like they're going to the dentist or something equally anxiety provoking. A knee bounces up and down between "Yes, Ma'am" and "No, Sir" abbreviated nervous answers. Hands fidget and you might notice a muscle twitch here and there. As a leader you try to do what you can to alleviate the nervousness. The trick is to put your Scout at ease and have this young person tell you stories about his/her Scouting experience.



Be aware that Scouts with special needs and disabilities may experience even more increased anxiety than usual. They may have a harder time focusing on questions or discussion that would otherwise have a calming effect. They might view the BoR as "test taking" which produces tense

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moments and inability to give the “right” answers. To the Scout, this may mean total failure and the inability to face up to impending doom. How can we create an atmosphere of peace and calming?

What are some strategies to help your Scout get through these “trials and tribulations?”

1. It has been suggested that BoRs should be around 15 to 20 minutes.
2. Before the BoR, educate the members concerning your Scout, especially if they are not familiar with him/her. They will need to know information that will help them provide a stress free and non-threatening environment for this Scout with special needs and disabilities. They will also be aware that for this particular Scout, different methods of communication may be necessary in order for the BoR to be successful.
3. The Scout could utilize a photo book or slideshow of memories to help to stay focused on events during the meeting. Focus on a photo with the Scout and ask questions about certain areas of interest in the photo or where a learning point occurred. This may help stimulate responses.
4. Have the Scout work with a parent to do a video before the BoR. The parent can encourage and prompt responses, chunking the activity (breaking it up into segments) so that the Scout can manage sensory overload. Have the Scout present it to the BoR members. Questions can be derived from the video.
5. Utilize a “schedule board.” The items on the board could be organized into an agenda, such as greeting, introductions, questions, answers, thanks, and closing; moving a clothespin down the agenda board as the conversation proceeds.
6. A panel of unfamiliar faces may also distress the Scout. While a parent observing a BOR is generally discouraged, it is not forbidden. The simple presence of a parent may be all it takes to calm the Scout’s anxiety by providing a visual touchstone. Consult the Guide to Advancement, sections 8.0.1.0 and 10.2.2.0, for specifics of who may be included in a BOR.
7. Ask questions that are more specific, than broad, in nature. This will help the Scout think more concretely. Sometimes a broad question such as “What did you like about the last camping trip?” is too abstract for a Scout to answer.
8. If the Scout’s speech is difficult to understand, have someone who is familiar with the Scout “interpret.” Allow the Scout to use his/her own means of communication, if speech or expressive speech is limited. This may include more visual artifacts or reenactment of an idea or concept.

These are only a few strategies to try. They may be enough to work as a springboard towards ideas of your own. With some creative thinking, you may be saying good-bye to board of review anxiety!

Enhancing Awareness

The Experience of Blindness

While updating ability-specific guidance provided by the National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee (NSNDC), we reached out to the National Federation of the Blind.

With the help of Christopher S. Danielson, its Director of Public Relations, we have developed the following guidance for “Building Empathy with Activities.” The best way to help the sighted members of the Scout unit understand what life is like for the blind is to talk with blind people in the community and watch while do ordinary tasks. Local blindness support agencies can help you with this. The Scouts will probably be amazed at what those with blindness can do, not what they can’t do. A leader may think that any blindfolded game or activity would promote empathy and understanding, but it takes a careful and nuanced approach to succeed at this. Asking a sighted person to perform a task while blindfolded does not give the same experience as not being able to see. A blind person has had plenty of time to become comfortable working without vision and to find ways to adapt. A blindfolded exercise will make being blind seem



harder than it actually is. Another risk is that the exercise will unintentionally make light of the disability or make it seem worse than it is. This can encourage ableist attitudes. If you are thinking of including a blindfolded activity at an event to build empathy for a blind Scout in the unit, discuss this first with the Scout and the family to get their perspective on whether to proceed and, if so, how to present the activity so that it is not offensive. At a minimum, plan on an age-appropriate interpretation talk before the exercise to **focus the Scouts’ attention on what they CAN do while blindfolded**, and plan on completing the activity with an introspective reflection discussion about how their beliefs and attitudes have changed. While we want Scouts to be caring and relate to one another’s life experience, we don’t want them to “feel sorry” for others and treat them as anything less because of a disability.

Adapting Activities

Choosing a Unit for a Scout with Special Needs

When a group of young friends reach Scouting age, there is often a discussion of whether to join a pack or troop, and then which one to join. Parents get involved, and careful parents will try to identify the best unit for their own child to join. The choice can be tricky for youth with special needs or disabilities. Youth and parents often face the first three choices:

1. Join a typical unit already existing in the community.
2. Locate and join an existing unit that addresses particular special needs or disabilities.
3. Start their own unit that specifically addresses particular special needs or disabilities.
4. Join as a “Lone Scout.”

Most Scouters recommend the first choice. Established packs and troops often have seasoned leaders and added resources to benefit the Scouting experience. Typical Scouts will learn valuable lessons about special needs and disabilities as they accommodate those with different abilities.

Every unit (pack, troop, or crew) is different. Some are more flexible and more willing to make accommodations for special needs. Others are less flexible. 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 with such accommodations. Try to match the youth to the unit, and seek a different unit if they don't fit together comfortably.

Some communities have disability-specific units. For example, the South Carolina School 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 Scout outreach program, the Northern Star Council has supported units in group homes for developmentally disabled adults and in special needs classrooms. Another unit was organized in a social club for young people with developmental disabilities.

Not everyone can find a disability-specific unit. If one exists, it might require too much travel to participate. If the neighborhood contains a core group of friends interested in Scouting, they could start their own unit. For example, a group of friends with Down syndrome in a Minnesota community started their



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 specialneedschair@scouting.org

own troop. The Scouts were all over 18, so they all registered beyond the age of eligibility. The troop, and its members, stayed together for decades, camping out and working on advancement.

A final option is to register as a Lone Scout. Originally the program was developed for youth in rural areas where distances prevent young people from attending regular meetings. Many councils also allow Lone Scout registration if the youth has special needs or disabilities that prevent regular participation in a community unit.

Young people with disabilities, and older people with developmental disabilities, can benefit from the Scouting program. Units, districts, and councils have many options to bring them in and help them participate.

When Unit Leaders Reject an Accommodation

The following was a response to a problem encountered by a Scout parent.



Here is the dilemma: *The Scout has immunization problems and the Scout's physician suggests the Scout be isolated while camping. The unit leadership does not agree.*

Having a special needs child requires information and help from friends and professionals. What you do not need is for people to make decisions when they do not understand your child, or to make assumptions that they think are correct.

Joining a troop, crew or unit takes some questioning on your part to decide if the unit members are willing to work with you and your child. Talk to them and ask members what they think. Most units are more than willing to have a special needs youth as a member.

However, what does a parent do when you ask for a unique condition for your child and the unit leader ignores or refuses to go along with it. As an example: The family doctor or specialist says that because of immunization problems, the youth needs to be isolated when sleeping at night. The child needs to be in a single occupant tent only. You inform the Scoutmaster and Troop Committee Chairperson and they say no.

First, remain calm. Remember that not everyone understands the issues of special needs. Losing your temper or threatening does not help anyone.

Second, ask what their concerns are and see what can be done. Do they need a note from the physician or to contact the physician directly? Perhaps a commissioner or a special needs advocate in the district or council can help.

The unit can also contact the National Special Needs and Disabilities Committee (NSNDC) for ideas or guidance. The NSNDC is more than willing to talk to the leadership and help come to a workable solution. The NSNDC has as its members, people that have years of working with the special needs. We can bring together all sides and work for a possible result.

Unfortunately, the preconceptions that people have can sometimes be insurmountable. If a solution that you feel is acceptable cannot be found, looking for another unit that is more amenable may be needed. One solution may be tried, but another one may lead to resolution.

Advance previews are a great tool. Five minutes of looking at something is better than five hours of talking about it. See if there is a way for the Scout and family to go out to the location in advance of an event to spot the problem areas. In some instances, a simple item brought from home will address a lot of challenges. For summer camp or day camp, see if you can go out during the staff training and set-up days for the camp. Not only can you address the physical obstacles of the camp, the Scout can make friends with some staff members and you can talk to staff about how to include the Scout in the camp's activities. These conversations go so much better when the staff is not in the mad swirl of holding camp with large numbers of Scouts.

Awareness Events

Disabilities Awareness Challenge at the Next Jamboree



The Disabilities Awareness Challenge (DAC) has been at every National Scout Jamboree since 1979. DAC will also take place at the next jamboree, now scheduled for 2022, but in a different reincarnation! The Jamboree planners have followed the same approach used during the World Scout Jamboree at the Summit in 2019. There will be five focus areas spread across the Summit Center, and the DAC will be present in each one. This has the benefit of making disabilities awareness much more visible and accessible to participants and visitors. The focus areas define character traits needed to “Face the Challenge” (the upcoming NSJ catch phrase). Here are the character traits:

Innovative, Persistent, Purposeful, Resilient and Resourceful

These traits are much less restrictive for bringing DAC activities (which we are calling “DACTivities”) to the five traits or focus areas. There will be at least five activities in each trait. For those who have experienced or staffed the DAC in the past, you can imagine how each of the activities can readily fit into one or more of the character traits.

Staff for this jamboree are called “Jamboree Service Team” or JST. Registration to serve as JST has been open since last November and there are still openings to serve on JST supporting the DACTivities. We encourage anyone with previous experience or a passion to spread the word about disabilities awareness to sign up as JST.

Tony Mei (email tonymeinovato@gmail.com) is the Special Needs & Disabilities Facilitator who is coordinating the staffing of the DACTivities. He would appreciate you contacting him to let him know you are interested in participating in 2022 and which DACTivities that you would prefer to staff and whether you have prior experience doing so. Once you have registered, please let him know what your registration code is so he can ensure that you get assigned to the correct trait. When you register as JST, the job assignments that you should select are those identified as: "**Character XXXXXXXX General Staff**" where "XXXXXXX" is the single word identifying the character trait of interest, e.g. "Innovative".

Recognizing Abilities



Earning the 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 once a 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.

To be eligible, the adult must actively participate in activities with youth who have special needs or disabilities at the unit, district, council, area, regional, or national level for at least three years. The adult must also complete six activities from the following list:

- Attend a training seminar or conference on disabilities and special needs sponsored and conducted by the BSA or through an organization that serves youth or adults with disabilities and special needs (e.g., The Arc, blind associations, independent living resource centers, autism societies, Special Olympics).

- Serve as a staff member at a district, council, area, regional, or national event on the theme of youth with disabilities or special needs in Scouting.
- Create and organize a unit (pack, troop, or crew) that primarily serves youth with disabilities or special needs, but is open for membership by youth without disabilities or special needs.
- Serve as a mentor for a Scout who has a disability or special need for six months.
- Recruit and register two adults to volunteer in providing Scouting opportunities to youth with disabilities or special needs, or recruit two youth with disabilities or special needs to join Scouting and remain members for one year.
- Assist the district or council in forming a partnership with an organization that serves individuals with disabilities or special needs.
- For two years, actively serve on a district, council, area, regional, or national committee on Scouting with disabilities/special needs.
- Assist the local council in efforts to raise funds for Scouts with disabilities or special needs to participate in activities within the Scouting program.
- Assist the local council in a public awareness campaign to heighten knowledge of Scouting with disabilities and special needs.



The candidate should fill out the [SNSSA Application Form #512-067](#). Provide enough detail to clearly show that requirements were completed. Sign the form and turn it in to the local council for approval. Councils who have a Special Needs and Disabilities Committee may delegate the review of such applications to the committee.

Recipients of the SNSSA may wear the Scouting Service Award square knot (item #625334) with the special needs and disabilities device (item #641462). They may also receive the SNSSA medal shown in the photo (item #641463) with its blue and white neck ribbon, and an award certificate (item #649736).

Register for 2021 Philmont Events!

Philmont Zia Experience for Youth with Special Needs

Philmont Training Center, June 27 to July 3



The Zia Experience is designed to work alongside other Philmont programs, including Training Center Conferences, NAYLE, PLC, Philmont Sneak Peak, and some trek arrival and departure dates.

An application is available online: reservations.scouting.org/profile/133324

Adaptive Special Needs Conference at Philmont

Philmont Training Center, June 27 to July 3

This national training teaches best practices in outdoor and camping programs for Scouts with special needs. Volunteers and professionals alike will learn how to integrate Scouts with special needs into everyday outdoor/camping programs. Adults will also learn about the latest adaptive programs including field sports, Project COPE and fishing. The conference includes discussion on risk management, program and facilities management, health and safety and program development for serving Scouts with special needs. Finally, this course will also share how you can use your camp properties for outside special needs groups including schools and special needs agencies.



An application is available online: reservations.scouting.org/profile/133780

Helpful Links

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

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

Guide to Advancement, section 10: scouting.org/resources/guide-to-advancement/special-needs/

Philmont Training Center: philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/

#ScoutingAtHome: scouting.org/scoutingathome/

Special Needs Scouting Service Award: scouting.org/awards/awards-central/special-needs/

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Facebook No Scout Left Behind: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1967878213431320>

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