

Serving Scouts with Special Needs and Disabilities

Vision Statement of the BSA

The Boy Scouts of America will prepare every eligible youth to become a responsible, participating citizen and leader who is guided by the Scout Oath and Law.

In Scouting, we seek to create an environment where everyone feels respected and valued.

All Scouts should have the opportunity to participate in activities to their full ability.

What is a Disability?

A physical or mental impairment that limits a major life activity. Major life activities include (but are not limited to) caring for oneself; speaking, hearing, seeing, walking, learning, working, performing manual tasks.

Some disabilities are physical disabilities which are visible (e.g., Down syndrome, a wheelchair user); other disabilities are hidden (e.g., learning disabilities, dyslexia, color-blindness).

“Oh my gosh, I have a new Scout in my den who has a disability; what should I do?”

Take a deep breath.

Re-read the two sentences below the vision statement; those are our goals.

Observe the Scout at a den meeting. Observe the Scout's *possible* limitations. Also observe the Scout's strengths.

Scouts who have been born with a disability may be very adept at completing tasks in a different way. Don't assume the Scout can't do the task.

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Engaging the Parents

Unlike at school, Scouting is more like a work environment. As leaders, we can discuss with the parents and Scouts what we **observe**. However, we do not have the *right* to ask for the child's IEP, or even to know their exact diagnosis. We *can* ask that the parents share as much information as they feel comfortable doing.

Some parents are working with their child to ensure their child reaches their full potential. These parents will probably be present, and they willing to assist as needed.

If you have a new activity planned, speak to the parent in advance, asking how the Scout will complete the activity. For example, perhaps you have a craft planned that will utilize scissors. Because of a Scout's physical disability, you are not sure how the Scout will be able to use scissors. ASK the parent how the Scout will accomplish the task (for Webelos and AOL Scouts, ask the Scout.) Perhaps the family has special scissors that help the Scout accomplish the task.

Other parents may be in denial of their child's disability. You can approach the parent by saying, "I noticed that your child participates much better when you are present."

If the Scout with the disability really doesn't need the assistance of the parent during a meeting, ask the parent to help another Scout. This helps the Scout with the disability to become more independent, and it helps the other Scout who needs assistance.

Physical Disabilities

Is your meeting location accessible? How about the stairs, bathroom, etc.? When you plan outings, be sure to consider the accessibility for Scouts (or parents!) with mobility challenges.

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Service Animals

A service animal is an animal specially trained to assist a person with a disability. While there are a variety of service animals, only service dogs are universally recognized, and are allowed to accompany their master anywhere. Service dogs must always be under the control of their master.

Some service dogs need to be off-leash to perform their duties; for example, some dogs sense low blood sugar or imminent seizure, and they need to be close to their master.

This is a teaching opportunity for the den. This service dog is NOT a pet. While the dog may be cute, and they want to give the dog attention, they should learn service dogs are “working”. Perhaps the family can host the den when the dog is not “working”, so they can play with the dog.

While the Scout with a disability may have their service dog at the meeting, that does not mean another family may bring their pet, “Fluffy,” to the meeting.

Special Dietary Needs

Parents should advise leaders of any special dietary needs of their child. For some simple things, let parents who volunteer to provide refreshments know that there is a Scout who has an allergy; for example, a child is allergic to chocolate.

For more complicated dietary needs, you can politely suggest that the parent bring something that meets the needs of their Scout.

Also, you can point out to the Scout which foods meet their dietary needs, but you cannot be expected to “police” that Scout.

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Cub Scout Advancement

Discuss with the Scout and the parent the advancement tasks. They can work on accomplishing these tasks.

Cub Scout motto is “Do Your Best”

For Arrow of Light Scouts, if the Scout will probably need reasonable accommodation in order to fully participate and advance in the Scouts BSA program, Scout and parents should discuss this with potential Scoutmasters before bridging. Actually, a pre-joining conversation is a good idea for *all* Scouts.

Resources

<https://www.scouting.org/resources/disabilities-awareness/>

<https://ablescouts.org/>

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

<https://www.vhcbsa.org/accessiblescouting>

About Maureen Brown, Cub Scout Roundtable Commissioner

I retired in 2018 as the Equal Opportunity Compliance Officer for the City of Los Angeles Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Program. The City of Los Angeles received federal grants and subcontracted with community-based organizations to deliver workforce development services. My job was to ensure that all services were provided in a non-discriminatory manner. I was in the office for just over 20 years, and in that time, we did a lot of training on serving persons with disabilities, as well as other minority populations. I also did accessibility inspections at our various subcontractors.

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