Autism Spectrum Scouting: Facts for Parents

Since its founding in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America has supported full participation by members with physical, mental, and emotional challenges. By building awareness in all of our members of the special needs of other members and by creating inclusion opportunities, we can maximize the experience of every youth member.

Overview
Scouting is uniquely positioned among youth programs to meet the needs of autism spectrum youth. The Scouting program provides broad exposure to the full diversity of interests and abilities of young people, which helps expose autism spectrum youth to experiences beyond their special interests.

Scouting provides a socially rich environment where youth learn to interact effectively with age-group peers, with older and younger youth, and with adults. This interaction takes place in large groups, small groups, and personal interactions.

Program
Basic aims of the Scouting program are character development, citizenship training, and mental and physical fitness. These aims are accomplished uniquely by each Scout because everyone grows in his own way.

Program opportunities cover the breadth of human existence. More than 130 merit badges are available, from Art to Backpacking to Personal Fitness to Programming. It doesn’t matter if a youth is an artist, an outdoorsman, an athlete, or a geek; everyone has a place in Scouting. Autism spectrum youth are provided both a comfort zone in which to pursue interests they enjoy and the opportunity to stretch and grow by trying new things.

Scouting uses the outdoors as a classroom and laboratory. Young people learn a great deal about teamwork, cooperation, and personal leadership by confronting the simple challenges of eating, sleeping, cleaning, and living with others in the outdoors. Autism spectrum youth get to try out real-life social experiences in a safe, adult-guided, youth-led environment.

Scouting is committed to maximizing access to outdoor experiences and matching the intensity of the experience with the ability of the youth. Rigorous safety protocols are continuously updated, and our volunteer adult and youth leaders receive extensive training. Age- and ability-appropriate limits are in place to ensure that everyone stays safe and has fun.

Mainstreaming and Specialty Units
When possible, we seek to include autism spectrum youth in regular Scout units (packs, troops, teams, and crews) to offer special needs youth and everyone else the richest possible experience. We also offer specialized units that serve youth with more profound special needs to provide safe and fulfilling Scouting experiences for all concerned.

Advancement
Advancement is a system of challenges designed to support the aims of Scouting, and the advancement program provides recognition for overcoming those challenges. A “core curriculum” at each program level supports family values, spiritual growth, emergency preparedness, respect for the natural world, love of country, and service to others.

Youth are honored for real accomplishments during regularly scheduled ceremonies during which tangible items such as patches are presented that can be worn on the uniform. Autism spectrum youth appreciate that recognition is “real” and is not given simply for attendance.

At Scouting’s younger age levels, a youth is asked to “Do Your Best” in attempting each advancement challenge. It is not hard to see when a special needs Scout has done his best, even if he was unable to finish a task. He is rewarded for trying and making a genuine effort.
At Scouting's older age levels, a youth is asked to complete the requirement as written. This challenge is achievable for autism spectrum youth because there is no limit on how many attempts a youth can make. Each Scout gets all the coaching and encouragement he needs to meet the standard, even if it takes him a little longer than other Scouts.

While some advancement challenges are more difficult for an autism spectrum youth than for other Scouts, ASD Scouts may have a natural advantage over neurotypical Scouts in other kinds of challenges. For example, some requirements require memorizing, categorizing, and analyzing complex information. An autism spectrum Scout may blaze through those kinds of tasks as well as those that relate to his special interests.

Though autism spectrum Scouts rarely need a great deal of accommodation, systems are in place to modify or adapt any component of our advancement system that is beyond an individual Scout's ability to accomplish it. Substitution of an appropriately challenging task or merit badge for one that would ordinarily be required is one example of an accommodation that can be made. We can and do waive maximum age limits to allow special needs Scouts to benefit fully from the program.

Uniforms
Uniforms are important to Scouting culture and provide one method of accomplishing the aims of Scouting. Uniforms promote a sense of belonging and reinforce the facts that all members of Scouting are equal to one another and that we share a bond of mutual respect and goodwill. Although our uniforms are, well, “uniform,” BSA Supply offers uniforms in a variety of natural and synthetic fabrics and with a range of fits, sleeve lengths, and pants lengths. If a youth has strong sensory stressors relating to clothing, a uniform fabric or style can likely be found to meet his needs.

Parental Involvement
As a parent, you can attend any Scout event. While we have rituals, there are no secret rituals that you cannot observe. If you need or want to be present to support your autism spectrum Scout, you are always welcome.

We also invite parents of autism spectrum youth, like any other parent, to join us as a volunteer leader. You can be a positive influence on other youth while you support your own child.

We also understand that parents of autism spectrum youth may need time to recharge or give attention to their other children. As long as an autism spectrum Scout can be safe in our care without a parent present, we are happy to serve that Scout and his family.