

# Girl Scouts - a Place for Girls of All Abilities

Imagine ... A girl with a hearing impairment would like to join a youth group. She discovers that she cannot join because there are no leaders who will take a girl with a disability into their group. Maybe the leaders feel they are not trained to work with her or they are concerned about perceived safety issues. They may feel that it would be too much work to make adaptations so that she can participate in the group. Some leaders would not know where to go for support or resources.

Imagine this girl is Juliette Gordon Low, Founder of Girl Scouts, who was hearing impaired. Would she have been welcomed into the group? Fortunately, because of Juliette Gordon Low's vision, there is a place for all girls within Girl Scouting.

Juliette Gordon Low founded Girl Scouts as an organization to serve ALL girls. A Girl Scout leader quickly learns the unique qualities of each girl in her troop. All girls have abilities, skills and talents that they can develop in Girl Scouting. Many girls also have disabilities or other conditions, some more obvious than others. Regardless of their ability or disability, all girls have similar needs, concerns and interests and want to participate in the same activities as their friends. The key to a successful Girl Scout program is to focus on the abilities, not the disabilities. By adapting program activities when needed, we do not just include, but embrace all girls and enrich the program for everyone.

It is understandable that leaders might be concerned about including a girl with a disability in their troop when many leaders already feel overwhelmed with their responsibility for the troop. Feelings of not knowing what to do, fear of providing adequate safety and supervision, and feeling overwhelmed are understandable. To welcome a girl with a disability to your troop, activities, field trips, patches, badges, crafts, and meetings may need to be adapted. Fortunately GSCNC does have resources and support to help you, including the support of the GSCNC Inclusion Task Force.

Imagine...the girl you welcome into your troop who has attention deficit disorder, is in a wheelchair, has a medical concern, has a developmental delay or a hearing impairment has the potential to follow in the footsteps of Juliette Gordon Low and make a difference for 100 years to come! When you welcome her into the Girl Scout family, you open doors to new opportunities for her and all girls and show that the Girl Scout program really is for every girl everywhere!

# Things Leaders Need to Know

At some point almost every troop leader encounters a girl with a mental, physical, or emotional disability. Girls may have developmental delays, learning disabilities, attention deficit concerns, hearing impairments, autism, cognitive delays, physical disabilities, or vision impairments. Or, they may have health conditions that impact their daily habits and routines such as allergies, diabetes, epilepsy, cystic fibrosis, acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), leukemia, cancer, and asthma.

Girl Scouts with disabilities, just like all Girl Scouts, are individuals and should be treated as individuals. Accept the Girl Scout as one of the troop, and encourage her to share and participate in the activities and responsibilities of the troop alongside her troop mates.

When planning troop activities, focus on adapting your regular program, not in developing a separate activity or program. Try some of the following strategies:

1. **Ask the Parents!** Parents & Caregivers are the most knowledgeable about resources, care, and support for their child. Parents and leaders can work together toward providing a safe and positive program for all girls.
2. **Ask the Girl!** Include the girl in planning *how* she can participate - not *if* she can participate. Most girls know their abilities and limitations.
3. **Ask for help!** Girl Scout leaders are not expected to automatically know how to support girls with disabilities. Contact your Service Unit Manager, Council Trainer, or Field Director or the GSCNC Inclusion Task Group. Knowing when to ask for help is the key!
4. **Prepare girls** in the troop to welcome a new Girl Scout. Based on the needs of the girl and discussions with her and her parents, decide what to tell other girls in the troop. Enlist girls to help when appropriate, but be sure to ask first if help is needed rather than assume it is needed.
5. **Consider the needs of all girls** when planning meeting places, field trip destinations, and transportation.
6. **Adapt the troop program** as the needs change and girls grow.
7. **Have procedures in place for emergencies**, just as you do for all girls.

**You have the opportunity to be a role model of acceptance, support, and success for all girls!**

# Adapting Programs and Recognitions

- ☺ Remember that it is the intent or purpose of the activity or requirement that is important, NOT the details. Adapt to meet the intent.
- ☺ Let girls be involved in planning adaptations. The Girl Adult Partnership - GAP- can help promote the development of leadership and self advocacy.
- ☺ Be Creative and be flexible!

Here are some creative adaptations:

***Q: How can a girl in a wheelchair participate in building a fire and cooking?***

A: Have her use a tabletop charcoal or propane grill; use a box oven; supervise the fire circle; be in charge of the marshmallows, chocolate and graham crackers.

***Q: A troop is planning a trip to go rock climbing. One of the girls is taking medication that thins her blood and makes her bruise easily. Her doctor says she cannot climb. How might she participate?***

A: This girl could work with the instructor and help to teach the other girls in the troop the safety rules to follow. She can show the equipment, how it is worn, and the correct clothing to wear. During the climb, she documents the activity through pictures. Ask the instructor to take along a walkie talkie headset so that she can talk with girls or the instructor as they climb. Have her interview them! Have her submit the pictures and article to the local paper for community events!

These are just 2 examples. Adaptations are individualized for each girl and her needs. The possibilities are endless!

Information about a variety of disabilities and other examples of adaptations can be found in *Focus on Ability*, available at the GSCNC shop.

GSUSA has also produced a *Directory of Disabilities Organizations* as a reference guide to support the inclusion of girls with disabilities. The directory provides a list of national organizations that can provide information, technical assistance and local referrals and support. The Directory is available on line at [www.girlscouts.org](http://www.girlscouts.org). Type "disability directory" in the search box. The Marilyn Carr Information Center can also provide you with contact information for organizations listed in the directory.

# 12 Things Girl Scouts With ADD/ADHD Would Like Their Leaders to Know

For many troop leaders their first encounter with a girl with a disability is a girl with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The following list was adapted from one found in various sources with different titles, so we cannot give credit to the original author.

1. I really do forget things. I am not trying to be smart or sassy. The myth that if it is important enough I will remember it is just that, a myth.
2. I am not stupid.
3. It is easy for me to lose permission slips, leave them at home and otherwise not be able to find them at the proper time. Loose papers are difficult for me to keep track of so a notebook might be helpful.
4. If I ask the same question over or ask many questions, it's not to be annoying. I am trying hard to understand and remember what you have said. Please be patient and help me.
5. I want to do good. My goal is to do my best.
6. ADD is not an excuse. ADD really does exist and it does affect my thinking process. I would like to be "normal" and be able to remember and process information quickly, I do not enjoy being "different" and made fun of for my differences.
7. I need your help to succeed. It isn't always easy for me to ask for help and sometimes asking makes me feel stupid. Please be patient and offer your help.
8. Please be sure to talk with me in private about behaviors or actions that may not be appropriate. Please do not humiliate me, insult me, or call attention to my weaknesses in front of the group.
9. I do better with a detailed plan and knowing what you expect. If plans in the middle of something, please help me to adapt. It may take me longer to adjust to the changes. Structure and guidance are my best allies.
10. I don't like having "special accommodations" that draw attention to my ADD. If you are going to adapt a requirement, please do so for the whole troop and not just me.
11. Learn about ADD/ADHD. Read information and find out all you can on how kids with ADD learn and what can make it easier for them. Ask my parents for suggestions.
12. Always remember that I am a person with feelings, needs and goals. These are as important to me as yours are to you.