

# ABILITIES DIGEST



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Winter / Spring 2024  BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA

## Awareness Events

### Spring 2024 Mini-Conference on Neurodiversity

- When: Friday-Saturday, April 26-27, 2024
- Where: Northern Star Leadership Center, Fort Snelling, MN



Join us at the National Special Needs & Disabilities Committee’s Spring Mini-Conference, where we’re diving deep into planning for neurodiversity in Scouting. This in-person training event is happening Friday-Saturday, April 26-27, 2024, at the Northern Star Leadership Center at Historic Fort Snelling in Minneapolis, MN.

[Registration is now open.](#)

Who should attend? Adult leaders, camp leaders, Scouting professionals, parents, caregivers, and anyone interested in creating inclusive Scouting experiences.

Learn how to make camping, advancement, and other Scouting activities enriching for Scouts with special needs or disabilities. Our sessions, organized and led by nationally-recognized experts, will cover crucial topics such as:

- Preparing neurodiverse Scouts for summer camp
- Getting summer camps ready for neurodiverse Scouts

## In This Issue

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- **Recognizing Abilities:** An Eagle Scout project for outdoor Mobility
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- **Adapting Events:** There is still time to register for special needs Scouting opportunities at Philmont this summer.
- **Adapting Activities:** 20 Questions for campers with disabilities or special needs; a way to find Success: wayfinding adapted for different abilities; positive communication with parents and Scouts.
- **Helpful Links:** Accessing special needs and disabilities materials.

- Exploring high adventure opportunities for neurodiverse Scouts
- Applying flexibility to advancement rules
- Hearing firsthand neurodivergent Scouting experiences
- Encouraging council support for Scouts with special needs and disabilities
- Recognizing Scouters who support Scouts with special needs



Join us at the Northern Star Leadership Center, conveniently located near the Minneapolis-St. Paul (MSP) airport, the Mall of America, and various hotels. Fort Snelling’s beautiful setting at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers provide a serene backdrop for this enlightening conference.

[Click here to register and secure your spot at this transformative event!](#)

## Philmont 2024 Adaptive Outdoor Conference



The **Adaptive Outdoor Conference** takes place the week of June 23-29, the same as the Zia experience. Participants spend the week learning best practices in outdoor and camping programs for special needs. The week will help volunteers and professionals learn how to mainstream special needs scouts into everyday outdoor/camping programs. Adults will also learn about the latest adaptive programs including shooting sports, horsemanship, Project COPE and hiking while working with the Scouts attending the Zia Experience. The conference will also include dietary and medication safety, program and facilities management, adaptive equipment, advancement, and program development for serving Scouts with special needs. Visit the Philmont Conferences’ webpage to register <https://www.philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/ptc-conferences/>

## Recognizing Abilities

### The Other Side of Scouting

*This article was written by Jim Agar, the Scout’s father, and Janet Kelly of **Abilities Digest**.*

Many of you have been on our son Oliver’s (“Olbie’s”) journey as he travels along the Scouting trail, never letting his superpowers of autism and intellectual disabilities hold him back. Many of you have shared words of encouragement as he attended the first Zia Family Adventure Experience at Philmont Training Center and was recognized with the national Medal of Merit for administering first aid to his grandmother when she fell. He went on to pursue an ambitious and meaningful Eagle project (to which many of you also provided financial support). Our family uses the term “superpowers.” Olbie’s personality and abilities cause everyone to double



down, pick up the slack jaw, and really look at things in the same way he does. Olbie is very charismatic. He can light up a room in an instant. Being very mobile and athletic, he is involved in Special Olympics, participating in soccer, swimming, bowling and snowshoeing. He has flourished in Scouting earning (as of this writing) 61 merit badges. He has endured units that were too loud and chaotic and has flourished in the ones that have accepted him where he is. He has social difficulties and doesn't always understand what is being said, but he loves Scouting. Even at the age of 17

and an Eagle Scout, he wants to continue in Scouting and earn more merit badges. Scouting has been very good for him and has helped him develop and grow into an amazing young man.

Let's put a little more light on the person Olbie has become. During the weekend of November 25, 2023, Olbie and two of his friends (one of whom is also "superpowered") had their Eagle Court of Honor. Undoubtedly this was a great event for all involved, but there is one very special aspect of this event we want to focus on, so it doesn't get lost in the mire of the concept of an Eagle Court of Honor, and all it entails.

Oliver and my mom, who is nearing 90, are very close. Until this past summer, there had never been a single moment in Oliver's life they didn't live under the same roof. They are really great buddies. Over the last few years, he has spent countless hours in her bedroom, visiting, cuddling, giggling, watching daily Mass, and just being pals. Mom's recent precipitous decline further into the world of dementia has been tough on him, as has our family's decision that Mom would be best taken care of in a long-term care residence.

Oliver dutifully visits her at least four times a week – often more – and has declared himself to be in charge of her laundry services. This is not because he's ever been asked to, but because he loves his Granny and simply wants to. He walks into her room, checks her laundry, gives her a kiss and strokes her hair. He asks how her day was and in turn she asks how his was. He tells her and they tell each other how much they love each other.

On Friday, after all the excitement of his Eagle Court of Honor, upon walking out the door of the school gym where the event was held, Oliver immediately declared, "I want to go see Gran." You see, the most important thing in the world for him at that moment was to share the joy with his Granny and present her with an Eagle grandparents pin. He walked into her room and yelled "I did it! I did it!" and she responded with "Wonderful!" "I got Eagle Scout, Gran!" "Oh, how wonderful!" "...and I got this badge and that badge (as he points to them on his sash) and gosh we missed you being there!" All the love and attention he could give her was there in that simple conversation. Respect and love and dignity. He didn't even know he was doing this, but we could see.

This is love. This is loyalty. This is kindness. This is service. This is what Oliver and Scouting are all about. This is why Scouting is for everyone and why Scouting is just as important today as it always has been.

Oh, and by the way, congratulations, Olbie! We are all proud of you!

## Enhancing Awareness

### Updates to the Inclusion Toolbox



Over the winter the National Special Needs and Disabilities (SND) Committee has updated the introductory articles in the [Inclusion Toolbox](#): modules A through F. An update to module G (Organizations that Support Those with Disabilities) will also be updated soon.



## Adapting Activities

### Twenty Questions for Campers with Disabilities

When we prepare to support a Scout with special needs or disabilities in a summer or long-term camp, we must know what to expect. The following questions cover the gamut of issues and topics that may affect the camper's success or even survival at camp.

1. If you answered "YES" for any of the conditions on the BSA Medical Form B1 or "Abnormal" on Medical Form C, please elaborate.
2. Will a parent, buddy, and/or personal care attendant attend with the participant?
3. Does any of the participant's medication require refrigeration or specialized storage?
4. Does the participant need to keep any medication with them at all times such as an inhaler, EpiPen<sup>®</sup>, etc?
5. Does the participant require assistance with any of the following?
  - Dressing
  - Toileting
  - Bathing
  - Eating
6. Does the participant depend on any adaptive mobility equipment? If yes, will the participant require accessible vehicles for transportation? If yes, please explain.
7. Does the participant depend on any adaptive communication devices? If yes, please explain.
8. Does the participant have language processing issues, and/or anxiety that would increase risk of wandering? If yes, please explain.

9. Does the participant depend on any medical equipment that must stay with them at all times? (i.e. suction machine, oxygen, etc) If yes, please explain.
10. Does the participant depend on any equipment that requires access to electricity? If yes, please explain.
11. Will accessible accommodations be needed? If yes, please explain.
12. Does the participant require 24-hour care and supervision?
13. Does the participant have any food allergies or sensitivities? If yes, please explain.
14. Does the participant require a special diet? If yes, please explain.
15. Does the participant have any sensitivities to high or low external temperatures? If yes, please explain.
16. Does the participant have any sensitivity or condition that is affected by high altitude >7000ft?
17. Will the participant need additional caregivers to help with care or participation in the camp experience? If yes, please explain.
18. Has the participant ever attended a BSA summer camp or high adventure camp before? If “yes” where, and how was that experience? If yes, please explain.
19. What are some of the most important things we should know about the participant in order to help them have a successful experience (please include medical, emotional or intellectual needs as well as special interests)
20. What are the participant’s expectations from the camp experience?

By sharing these questions with the Scout’s parents or guardians, and having them answered, troop leaders and camp staff can ensure a safe and successful experience.

## **A Way to Find Success**

“What?” I asked. “What is wayfinding?”

“Pretty much finding your way, orienting yourself, along a pathway or physical space to get from point A to point B and places in between,” came the answer.

“Oh,” I replied. Like I really understood what THAT meant. Ugh....

Wayfinding.

Imagine that YOU can’t see very well. Your vision is limited. It is cloudy, blurry, and when light hits the retina every particle of that light sprays out across your vision and distorts all that you’re looking at. In the dark, you pretty much can’t see anything.

Wayfinding.

You are on a trail with your Scout friends, and they have disappeared for what feels like insurmountable moments and you're trying to find which way they have headed. They have left you in the trees so to speak. "HEY!" you yell at the top of your lungs. "WHERE DID YOU GO?" "We're over here!" someone yells. The voice is farther away than you're comfortable with and all you have is your white cane to help you. Sounded like the voice came from your left. "We're west of you. Past the trees." West. End of the trees. Okay. You begin to walk in what you think is the westerly direction. Going slowly, you can feel the closeness of the trees. The branches brush against your sleeves. Your footsteps sound muted. As you move you suddenly can feel the sun full on your face and the air feels different. Not so closed in. The trees must be behind you now. You can hear rustling and giggling behind you. You let out the breath you have been holding in. Someone is also close by, just in case. Someone yells, "We can see you. Stay west! Twenty paces should do it!" Whew! The voice is closer. You're sweating, but you're doing it. You're going to find them without a map or compass that you can't see anyway. They are watching you and if there is a problem someone will come, but in the meantime, you are pretty close to victory and that Second Class Scout Rank.

Wayfinding.

How DOES a Scout find his/her way if he/she can't see very well? As illustrated above, listening, feeling, moving slowly and carefully is one way to do it. There are all kinds of ways to get there, but someone is watching. They really want you to get that Scout rank. This challenge, using no technology, has been a real mind stopper. How can you help someone see who can't see?

## 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.

**Unsubscribing by email.** To decline future issues please reply and enter "REMOVE" in the subject line. We will remove the subscription within the next two weeks.

**Receiving Multiple Email Copies.** If you receive *Abilities Digest* at more than one email address, choose the one to be removed and reply with "REMOVE" in the subject line. Include a message requesting that we re-move only that email address.

**Duplicate Email Copies.** If you receive more than one copy of *Abilities Digest* at the same email address, please reply to all but one of them with "DUPLICATE" in the subject line.

**Address Change.** If you want *Abilities Digest* sent to a different address, reply and enter "ADDRESS CHANGE" in the subject line. In your message, enter your council name and the email address you prefer.

**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.

What you have missed in this scenario is the prep and planning that went into this adventure. The patrol designed a way to help this Scout find his way without using GPS technology, compass, or maps. People were behind him and in front of him. Others were noisily setting up a campsite, so the Scout could hear rustling and movement in the direction he was headed. This Scout knew what he had to do, but it was a test of skill for him. Every sense was on high alert so he could find his way. The real test would be if he was alone. What could he do then to find his way? The Scouts were busy thinking this through as well. How do you find your way from East to North, from West to South? From over a hill to across a creek bed? If you're simply lost in a crowd at the shopping mall? These Scouts want to accept this challenge. They are all learning along with this Scout.

Critical thinking here. "Where there is a will there is a way," as the saying goes. You, the reader, may already be familiar with this scenario. Some of you will need to help figure out a way to satisfy the requirements of rank or merit badge. Each situation depends on "how" the Scout sees. Each situation depends on the willingness of others to help one in need.

A Scout learns MANY life skills throughout his/her Scouting career. The above gives you an inside look at how skill building helps with character building, self-advocacy, and awareness. What happened above affected those helping the Scout as well. They probably have a different way of looking at a situation now, because of this one Scout and their desire to help him achieve his goal. This young Scout wasn't sure he could accomplish the requirement. He had plenty of help hidden in the trees. There was always someone there to catch him if he fell, and that, in and of itself, gave him the courage to move forward. Scouting is like that. A little help from your friends. Sometimes that's all it takes.

Now think about how you can help a Scout who can't see well accomplish "seeing." You'll be surprised at what you can come up with.

Wayfinding. We all can do it.

## **Positive Communication with Parents and Scouts**

*This article is by Brittany K. Flather of the National Special Needs and Disabilities (SND) Committee, BSA.*

Since 1980, the Healthy People initiative has set measurable objectives to improve the health and well-being of people nationwide. At the beginning of every decade, a new set of objectives addressing the latest public health priorities and challenges is published. Healthy People 2030 has been published, and within it, a unique set of objectives can be found. One of which is focused on increasing the proportion of children and adolescents who communicate positively with their parents.

Positive communication between parents and children includes talking about beliefs, experiences, and feelings.

This type of communication is key to healthy relationships, and it can protect children from health risks and help them do better in school. Behavioral parenting and family interventions can increase positive communication between parents and children, including children with behavior disorders.

Fostering positive communication between Scouts and their parents aligns with the core values and principles of the BSA. Scouting emphasizes the development of character, leadership, and personal responsibility. One of the methods of Scouting includes association with adults. Positive communication with parents plays a vital role in supporting these aspects of a Scout's growth.

Encouraging active listening and providing opportunities for expression can help Scouts develop important communication skills that are essential for leadership and teamwork within the scouting community. By teaching conflict resolution skills and fostering trust and mutual respect, Scouts can learn to navigate challenges and build strong, supportive relationships with their peers and adult leaders.

Overall, promoting positive communication within the Scouting community not only strengthens the bond between children, adolescents, and their parents but also reinforces the values of respect, responsibility and collaboration that are fundamental to the Scouting experience.

To increase the proportion of children and adolescents who communicate positively with their parents, it's important to focus on fostering a supportive and open environment for communication. Here are some strategies that can be implemented:

1. **Encourage Active Listening:** Emphasize the importance of active listening when engaging in conversations with your Scouts' parents. This involves giving your full attention, reducing distractions, and showing empathy towards the others' perspectives.
2. **Model Positive Communication:** Leaders can model positive communication behaviors in their interactions with Scouts. By demonstrating respectful and constructive communication, adults can set an example for Scouts to emulate.
3. **Provide Opportunities for Expression:** Create safe spaces and strategies for Scouts to express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. This can be achieved through activities such as journaling, role play, and group discussions.
4. **Teach Conflict Resolution Skills:** Equip Scouts with the skills to navigate conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner. This includes teaching them how to express their viewpoints respectfully and seek mutually beneficial solutions.
5. **Foster Trust and Mutual Respect:** Emphasize the importance of trust and mutual respect in parent-



Child relationships. When children and adolescents feel valued and respected, they are more likely to engage in positive communication with their parents.

6. Utilize Technology Thoughtfully: Encourage the use of technology as a tool for positive communication, such as sharing positive experiences, expressing gratitude, and staying connected with parents in a meaningful way.

By implementing these strategies, leaders and parents can work together to create an environment that promotes positive communication between Scouts and their parents. If you need further assistance or additional strategies, visit <https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/browse-objectives/children/increase-proportion-children-and-adolescents-who-communicate-positively-their-parents-emc-01>

## Adapting Events

### Philmont 2024 Summer Special Needs Opportunities

June 29-July 6: Philmont Zia Adaptive Trek

June 23-29: Zia Family Experience



This summer, for the first time, Philmont is offering a 7-day **Zia Adaptive Trek** designed specifically for Scouts with special needs. This first trek will be limited to 6 Scouts, each accompanied by a parent or approved caregiver. The Trek experience will be customized to meet the Scout's abilities. Interested Scouts or parents are encouraged to fill out the interest form: <https://forms.gle/Wwmkg3onqe117RnV7>.

### Zia Family Experience

To parents and caregivers of Scouts with special needs...don't overlook this opportunity! The **Zia Family Experience** is a customized, highly supported, personalized experience for your Scout, you, and your family.

The Philmont staff and highly trained volunteers will work with a wide-range of functioning and abilities, from low-functioning to high-functioning. The range includes Scouts who have physical, intellectual, emotional, and/or hidden disabilities. Scouts who are verbal and nonverbal, as well as toilet-trained and untrained will be welcomed. The team will finalize program registration long before the experience begins, so that parents/caregivers and Scouts can meet in-person, via video conference, or phone call with the leadership team one or more times before arrival. The goal of these pre-experience conversations will be to understand the type of experience your Scout wants to have, as well as his or her abilities, special needs, special health care challenges, medications, allergies, diet restrictions, housing and personal care needs, transportation and mobility issues, advancement goals, and other associated risk management issues. The goal is to design experiences for Scouts ranging from a backcountry trek, to modified back

country day adventures, to a basic residential camp experience in base camp. To make sure they are able to give you and your family the best experience possible, families will apply to participate and staff will reach out to you to discuss what your specific needs will be and help create a positive Philmont experience with you. Visit the Philmont Conferences web page to register (<https://www.philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/ptc-conferences/special-needs/>).

## 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/>



Philmont Conferences: [philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/ptc-conferences/](https://philmontscoutranch.org/ptc/ptc-conferences/)

Philmont Special Needs Trek: <https://forms.gle/Wwmkg3onqe117RnV7>

## 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).