

Scouts Australia

Factsheet: Supporting Neurodiverse Youth Members

Introduction

In Scouts, we celebrate diversity and all neurodiverse adults and youth members are welcome in our Scout Groups. This factsheet provides some practical strategies for supporting inclusion and participation of neurodiverse youth members. Many of these will be useful for the Unit as a whole to encourage all members to participate.

Remember that every neurodiverse person is different, so it is critical to get to know the individual and tailor inclusion strategies to what works for the individual – this factsheet is designed as a starting point.

For a general introduction to neurodiversity, see the Factsheet: Understanding Neurodiversity.

Practical strategies¹

1. Be positive, calm and caring

- You don't have to be an expert to support a neurodiverse person, but you do need to be willing to see things from a different perspective and to care.
- Remember that everyone's different; neurodiverse people bring many positive skills and attributes to a Scout Group.
- Praise or reward appropriate behaviour. Using specific praise is best, so you need to tell the person exactly what it is that they've done well, such as 'Thomas, well done for waiting for your turn.'
- Take a positive approach to reducing any challenging behaviours - do some detective work using your knowledge of neurodiversity, to figure out what may have caused the behaviour and how you can prevent this next time.
- Be patient.

2. Work in partnership with the youth member, their parents or carers

- When supporting youth members, it's important to develop a good relationship with them and their parents or carers. The youth member and the people they live with will be a valuable source of information about the young person's needs and any strategies that work well at school or home.

¹ These strategies are adapted with permission from resources developed by Scouts UK.



- Make sure you know whether the neurodiverse person knows about their diagnosis, and whether they're happy to talk about it. It's also important to check how they feel about other people in the Unit knowing about their diagnosis. They may not want anyone else to know, or they may want to tell others about it. This all depends on the individual, and their wishes must be respected.
- Use the parent/carer framework as a tool to support you in conversations with parents or carers.

3. Be prepared and plan ahead

- Discuss with the youth member and their parent or carer how to best introduce them to the Unit. Would it be helpful for them to visit a meeting before they start attending? Would some written information or even some photographs be useful, so they know what to expect?
- Work with the youth member, parent or carer to make program activities accessible to all members. This may involve making some adaptations, such as adapting the way instructions are given, being aware of the level of noise, and knowing when additional support will be required, such as activities involving teamwork.
- Remember, you can adapt Achievement Pathway requirements or activities as part of making reasonable adjustments. See guidance on Reasonable Adjustments for the Achievement Pathways for more information.
- If the person is prone to running away, make sure that your meeting place is safe and include this information in their support plan.

4. Use clear and simple communication

- Ensure you have the neurodiverse person's attention before you speak. It may be useful to use their name first.
- Remember the neurodiverse person might not look at you. This doesn't mean they're not listening. Eye contact can be painful or stressful for some neurodiverse people and shouldn't be forced.
- Be clear and literal, so say what you actually mean and avoid sarcasm or sayings. Try to avoid metaphors and colloquialisms, such as 'it's raining cats and dogs', as these can be confusing.
- Check for understanding by asking questions, such as 'What do you need to do first?' or having a practice round of a game.
- Avoid shouting. The neurodiverse person may not understand why you're shouting and could find this distressing, particularly if they're hypersensitive to noise.

- Many neurodiverse people often understand and learn best visually. You could be creative and use pictures, symbols, actions, written lists or practical demonstrations to convey information.

5. Give clear rules and expectations

- Try to keep instructions simple. For example, you could say 'bring a rain jacket' rather than 'it might rain later so it would be good if you can remember to bring a rain jacket so you don't get wet'.
- Give time for the neurodiverse person to process information. Wait 5-10 seconds before repeating an instruction. If you do need to repeat an instruction, don't rephrase it, just keep it simple and repeat the same instruction again.
- Explain rules and expected behaviour clearly and discuss when a rule can be broken. For example, if there is a rule to not leave the hall during Scouts, be clear that in the event of a fire, they're allowed to leave the hall.
- Be specific about any tasks you ask a neurodiverse person to complete and be realistic about how much they can complete in the time available. It can be very difficult for some neurodiverse people to move on if they don't feel they've managed to finish a task.

6. Model social communication and be aware that neurodiverse people may find it more difficult to make and maintain friendships

- Remember that neurodiverse youth members might need more support to make friends within the Unit. Consider gently helping them to start a conversation or activity with other members of the group.
- You might be able to find a kind and reliable youth member to be their 'buddy'.
- Remember that a neurodiverse youth member may not realise if what they're doing appears to be rude or inappropriate. They need understanding from supportive adults and peers.

7. Managing the environment and having a quiet space

- Consider the decor, lighting and sound in your meeting place. Are there features that might be distracting, or make the space uncomfortable for individuals with sensory differences?
- Have a calm and quiet space for youth member to go to if they become anxious, frustrated or overwhelmed. This could be a separate room if one is available and safe or could be a corridor or cordoned off area in the hall.
- Be aware of sensitivity to loud noises. Some neurodiverse people may want to wear noise cancelling headphones.

- If the person is sensitive to sounds, try to avoid loud noises at your meetings, such as music, party poppers, fireworks, Christmas crackers, sparklers or busy places on day trips.
- The person may find some games that involve loud noises, such as Musical Chairs overwhelming. Your group may choose to play a different game or activity instead.

8. Provide structure, routine and predictability

- Your meetings may already have some sort of routine. Try to make sure you stick to the same format as much as practically possible. A visual plan of your Unit routine might be helpful.
- Let the neurodiverse youth member know in advance what you'll be doing at each meeting. It might be helpful to provide more detail than what you'd usually provide to other members.
- A timetable or calendar can help to prepare for upcoming changes, such as trips or special events, or to understand what's happening when a routine is different, such as on camps.
- Give as much notice as possible if there's a change to routine or changes between activities – e.g. give a 5-minute warning or use a timer.
- Explain what is happening first and next- consider seeking additional adult volunteers to provide some extra guidance and reassurance.

9. Prepare in advance for outings and overnight camps

- If you are going somewhere new (for example, on a camp or outing) help the neurodiverse youth member to prepare in advance. Work with the youth member and their parents or carers to decide how to do this. For example, would looking at photos of where you're going help? Would it be best to visit with a parent or carer before the trip? Do they need extra support to help them manage the change?
- If you're planning an overnight camping trip, work with the youth member and their parents or carers on how they can be best supported. It might help to give clear information about the timetable for the camp and the routine for each day. Check what food the youth member would be most comfortable with, as many neurodiverse people like to eat the same food each day. Check if they have any particular bedtime routines that they'll need to follow, and find out if there are any familiar objects they'd like to bring from home to help them feel more comfortable.

10. Help other people understand neurodiversity

- Be prepared to sensitively answer questions from other members about the neurodiverse person's behaviours or communication style. In doing so, check whether the youth member is comfortable with sharing their diagnosis or whether they would prefer you should speak more generally about their behaviour.
- Remember, neurodiverse people may be more vulnerable to teasing and bullying, and it's important that Scouts provides a supportive environment.

11. Providing additional support or supervision

- It's important to discuss with the parent or carer how much supervision the youth member will need in different contexts. You should risk assess the youth member's inclusion in Scouts, putting measures in place to reduce any risk to the young person as soon as they start in your section or group.
- Depending on the youth members support needs, it may be useful to consider providing extra support or supervision with some activities. Having extra adult volunteers could provide some additional support and this could be especially helpful at unstructured times, such as breaks. This could be achieved through a parent helper roster for example.
- Some young neurodiverse people with higher support needs may need a dedicated support person to help them participate in program activities. This could be a parent or other family member, or a paid support person organised by the family. Branches have different regulations about the inclusion of support people – contact your Branch D&I lead for further information.
- It's also good to remember that all youth members in the section should be supporting each other. Our Scout structures (patrols, patrol leaders and assistant patrol leaders) support this. However, another young person should never be the designated support person.

12. Moving between units

- Remember, a youth member is not just joining your Unit, so ensuring they can successfully move between the Units is important.
- Remember to plan ahead for their transition into the next Unit. You could discuss with the youth member, parent or carer how to best manage this transition and if they are happy for you to discuss support strategies with the new Unit leaders.
- Ask if it'd be helpful for them to visit a meeting to observe or meet the new leaders before they start attending. You could see if some written information, or even some photographs, would be useful, too.

Further information and support

Scouts Australia Resources

Scouts Australia has developed a range of resources to support inclusion of neurodiverse youth and adults in Scouting. Other resources available include:

- Factsheet: Understanding Neurodiversity
- Factsheet: Practical Tips for Supporting Neurodiverse Adult volunteers
- Parent and Carer Conversation Framework – Initial Conversation
- Parent and Carer Conversation Framework – Ready to Scout Conversation
- Template – Ready to Scout Plan
- Template – Supporting Youth Plan

These resources are available [<https://scouts.com.au/members/key-resources/>]

Other resources

Scouts UK Resources – Supporting People with Additional Needs

<https://www.scouts.org.uk/volunteers/equity-diversity-and-inclusion/supporting-people-with-additional-needs/>

Autism Awareness Australia website - <https://www.autismawareness.com.au/>

Raising Children Network Australia (has a range of factsheets and resources on types of neurodiversity (<https://raisingchildren.net.au>))

Feedback and further support

To provide feedback on this resource, please email d&i@scouts.org.au

If you need further support, contact your Group Leader or District Commissioner (or equivalent). They can also help link you with your Branch Diversity and Inclusion lead.