

Autism Spectrum Scouting: Facts for Scout Leaders

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 by providing diverse program and social experiences.

One in 54 boys in the United States is on the autism spectrum (U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 2012). The BSA's own statistics have shown that these boys are more concentrated in Scouting than in the general population. This concentration means that most units have autism spectrum boys whether or not they have been identified as such to the leaders.

You, your unit, and your autism spectrum Scout will have a better Scouting experience if you understand the unique characteristics of autism.

What is Autism?

Autism is a neurological condition in which the “wiring” in the brain develops less evenly than in a neurotypical person, forming wide highways between some parts of the brain and narrower lanes between others. The effects of these differences can result in autism. People with autism absorb and relay information in atypical ways. They are stronger than most at rote learning and weaker than most at emotional and social engagement.

Causes of autism are being actively researched, and no definitive explanation exists at present. Current consensus is that autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are influenced strongly by genetics and possibly magnified by certain environmental factors during gestation and early childhood. A number of genes appear to be involved in autism, so the severity of the disorder varies widely, and it manifests itself differently in different people. That is why it is referred to as the autism “spectrum.”

People with ASDs will struggle to some degree for their entire lives. With caring people in their lives, they can learn many of the essential skills needed to live happily and independently, and they can learn to compensate for their “uniqueness” well enough to function in society. Scouting can be a valuable positive influence in this regard.

Common Features of Autism Spectrum Disorders

Special Interests—ASD boys often have intense but odd intellectual interests that absorb much of their mental energy. An ASD boy will talk at length to others about his favorite topic, even when listeners are not interested. The topic may change from time to time, or it may be very consistent. He often prefers learning from reading or television rather than from a person.

Literal Understanding and Use of Language—ASD boys do not pick up on the social aspects of spoken language, such as tone of voice, volume, or emotional content. They do not understand metaphors or idioms without explanations, which makes it hard for leaders to use certain instructional techniques.

Order, Predictability, and Logic—An ASD boy expects the world around him to operate in an orderly, consistent, repeatable, and logical fashion. He gets frustrated when people do not do what they have promised or don't follow the rules, or when events do not go as he has been told they will.

Difficulty Making Transitions—ASD boys are somewhat like computers: They prefer completing their current “program” before starting another task. If an ASD boy is working on a craft or project, it will be hard to get him to shift cheerfully over to a new activity. If you change the sequence of your meeting on the fly, he will not want to deviate from the original plan.



Difficulty Making Friends—ASD boys have difficulty making friends with other boys because they are viewed as “different.” They don’t learn social rules by watching others, so they have to be taught these rules directly. They don’t understand intuitively the social consequences of their actions and can be offensive without meaning to be.

Sensory Issues—A common side effect of ASDs is an unusual sensitivity to one or more senses. Stressors can include loud noises, visual clutter, the touch of certain fabrics on the skin, food smells, flavors, and other stimuli. The boy may become agitated if he experiences sensory stress, or he may shut down. Sensory issues can make it hard for certain boys to participate in meetings or to function on campouts. Regrettably, he may have to leave a challenging environment for a while to regroup.

Outbursts and Meltdowns—An ASD boy uses his intellect to manage cultural and social rules, to resist his natural reactions to sensory challenges, and to process what is to him an illogical world. He is under chronic mental stress that the rest of us don’t experience. He is more vulnerable to being overwhelmed and then to acting out in an angry and perhaps physical fashion or breaking down in tears (melting down).

Common Misunderstandings About ASD Scouts

As a Scout leader, you will have to work with parents and boys who are neurotypical and may not understand what you are doing for your ASD Scout. Some people may mistake an ASD boy as one with Attention Deficit Disorder because he doesn’t always pay attention to what is going on at the moment. While medications can help with ADD, no medication exists for autism. ASD boys also may be mistaken as obsessive-compulsive because they cling so strongly to their special interests. Parents of other boys might assume that the ASD boy is merely spoiled or not being disciplined by his parents, when quite the opposite is true. If you speak more bluntly to your ASD Scout than to other Scouts, you may be perceived as harsh. If you take steps to accommodate your ASD Scout, you may be perceived as playing favorites. The best antidote to such misunderstandings is good and open communication with everyone.

How to Be His Leader

Be Organized—You and your boy leaders should have a plan for each meeting and communicate the plan from the very start of the meeting. This planning allows the ASD Scout to anticipate and prepare for transitions.

Be Flexible—Encourage and guide your ASD Scout to be flexible and accommodating when your plan doesn’t work out. Encourage him to be cooperative with your plan, but don’t make him or yourself miserable by pushing him over the edge. There is always another day to learn that skill or accomplish that goal.

Be Explicit—You and your boy leaders need to give very specific instructions to ASD Scouts for nearly everything. Break down tasks into smaller steps than you would for other boys. Do not assume he will learn by watching others. Do not assume that he can turn a general instruction, such as “pack your gear,” into a series of steps or an action plan on his own.

Be Blunt—An ASD Scout needs your direct instruction on social etiquette, not just Scout skills. You can and should be very blunt and specific about what he is doing, how that affects or offends others around him, and behaviors he needs to adopt.

Be Empathetic—Encourage empathy in all your Scouts, including the ASD Scout, and model empathy yourself. Build a safe culture in your unit where differences are well tolerated and where mutual trust and goodwill exist among boys, parents, and leaders.