

Introduction to Inclusion

This resource will briefly outline what inclusion is, how we approach inclusion in Girl Scouting and offer a variety of resources you can explore when you need them.

When you find yourself as a leader faced with an inclusion need based on girls' situation, the first and most important step is; Girls Scouts has been an inclusive organization for over 100 years. Girl Scouts embrace girls of every ability level, background and heritage, with specific and positive philosophy of inclusion that benefits everyone. Each girl, without regard to socio-economic status, race, physical or cognitive ability, ethnicity, primary language or religion, is an equal and valued member of the group

What is inclusion?

Inclusion is an attitude or approach that seeks to ensure that EVERY person, regardless of ability or back ground, can meaningfully participate in all aspects of life. Girl Scouts embraces inclusion as a core part of who we are as an organization. By embracing others and diversity, our Girls Scouts learn how to deal with diversity in their lives, however it may come.

How to be inclusive in Girl Scouts

As a member of Girl Scouts, you have agreed to embrace inclusion in your Girl Scout troop. You and your troop are being accepting and inclusive when you;

1. Treat everyone with dignity & respect

As a volunteer, your interactions present an opportunity to improve the way society views girls (and their parents/guardians) with disabilities. Place the focus on girl's abilities and on what she can do rather than what she cannot. Focus on the individual as a person first, regardless of ability background, race, ethnicity or culture.

2. Welcome every girl

Provide a welcoming attitude. Children of all ages can sense whether they are welcome or not. Teach your girls to share their unique gifts and share aspects of their lives that are appropriate. Plan an activity to explore the diversity and culture that may exist in your own troop.

3. **Practice Flexibility**

Acknowledge individual differences of the girls by considering the various energy levels, interests, skills and plan activities accordingly.

4. **Gather information**

Understand the needs of your girls and their families. Identify area of inclusion through information gathering on a health history form or intake form. If you want to find out what a girl with a disability needs to make her Girl Scout experience successful, simply ask her or her parent/guardian. If you are frank and accessible, it's likely they will respond in kind, creating an atmosphere that enriches everyone.

5. **Emphasize cooperation**

Focus on cooperation instead of competition, as girl leadership stems from working together. Plan troop activities to engage the girl's problem solving skills vs games that only result in winning or losing. In addition, when planning activities, include the girls in the planning process about how to make the activity accessible to EVERYONE in the troop. Encouraging an 'All for One' attitude will empower your Girl Scouts to innately accommodate for everyone in their troop. Fostering a sense of belonging to the group can make a girl feel like a respected and valued peer.

6. **Provide a safe environment**

Provide a safe and socially comfortable environment for all girls. As you think about where, when and how often to meet, consider the needs, resources, safety and beliefs of all members and potentials member. As you do this, include the accommodation needs of any members who may have physical disabilities, or whose parents or guardians have disabilities. But please don't rely on visual cues to inform you of a disability—approximately 20 percent of U.S. population has a disability.

How to approach a girl/parent regarding a disability?

When interacting with a girl (or parent/ guardian) with a disability, consider these final tips:

1. When talking to a girl with a disability, speak directly to her, not through a parent/ guardian.

2. It's okay to offer assistance to a girl with disability, but wait until your offer is accepted before you begin to help. Listen closely to any instructions the person may have.
3. Leaning on a girl's wheel chair is invading her space and is considered annoying and rude.
4. When speaking for more than a few moments to a girl who uses a wheelchair, place yourself at eye level.
5. When greeting a girl with a visual disability, always identify yourself and others. You might say, "Hi, it's Sheryl. Tara is on my right and Chris is on my left."
6. When speaking to a girl who is deaf and using an interpreter, speak to the girl, not to her interpreter.
7. Always note that people-first language puts the person before the disability.

How to Modify Activities & Reward Best Efforts

It's important for all girls to be rewarded based on their best efforts and not on the completion of a task. Give any girl the opportunity to do her best and she will. Sometimes that means changing a few rules or approaching an activity in a more creative way. Here are some examples of ways to modify activities:

- Invite a girl to complete an activity after she has observed others doing it.
- If you are visiting a museum to view sculptures, find out if a girl who has limited vision might be given permission to touch the pieces.
- If an activity requires running, a girl who is unable to run could be asked to walk or do another physical movement.
- If you feel a family is not participating in the Cookie Sale because of socio-economic reasons, arrange for the girl to still participate in the sale through troop booth activities, troop door to door selling and troop goal setting. For example, the Girl Scouts can send out invitations to friends and family to visit their booth to purchase cookies from her troop and help create booth signs and decorations.

"When you have an environment that is truly inclusive, individuals feel comfortable being themselves. They feel more comfortable sharing ideas, and it's through all these different perspectives that you come up with innovation."