Able Scouts

Articles on Scouting with special needs and disabilities

BB-3: Guns

MODULE BB-3 – CAMP PROGRAM FOR SCOUTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES – SHOOTING SPORTS – GUNS

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OVERVIEW

This module is for Range Officers responsible for shooting activities involving gas and spring propelled projectiles; including BB gun, chalk ball, airsoft (plastic BB), rifle, black powder, shotgun, and pistol. (Activities with low velocity projectiles; such as arrows, sporting arrows, slingshots, tomahawks, and knives are addressed in Module BB-4 (https://ablescouts.org/toolbox/bb-4).) The goal is to provide a concise guide that focuses on the including various types of disabilities in gun range programming. This module focuses on things that are within the control of the range staff rather than permanent improvements to the facilities. It also incorporates the coach-pupil model of range operation, with Scouts paired up at the firing line, with one shooting and one coaching at any given time.

In this module, the **range officer** is the person in charge of a particular shooting range while it is open and active. Additional staff members at a shooting range are called **range aides**. Range aides are under the supervision of the range officer. Participants may be used to using the term "Rangemaster" for one or the other of these roles, but avoid confusion in this module that title is not used. Range aides have shooting skills and might teach in the shooting activity. Later, we will introduce the term "**assistant**". An assistant is a person who supports a person with a disability on an individual basis, but has no special shooting knowledge or skill. There may be times when a range aide serves as an assistant for a person with a disability, but a typical assistant would not be qualified as a range aide.

Every willing Scout should have the opportunity to learn to shoot safely, have fun, and enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes from making contact with the target. BSA shooting sports are subject to age restrictions that correspond to the BSA program levels. However, the underlying reasoning is not spelled out, and all **range officers need to pay attention and help Scouts that are having difficulty even though they meet the age requirements for the activity**.

You may be tempted to try to apply an arbitrary equivalent age to a Scout with a special need or disability to decide whether to allow a Scout to participate. This is problematic in many ways. The way an individual Scout's abilities interact with a specific activity is unique and there is no way to create a formula to score whether a Scout can or cannot be allowed. A typical range officer would not have the

medical/behavioral health skills to make such an assessment. Fortunately, **in nearly every case, the special needs of an individual Scout can be accommodated safely with additional personal support and supervision.**

You will encounter some Scouts whose disabilities are obvious, like physical disabilities, blind, deaf, or Down syndrome. Physical disabilities include people who need mobility equipment like wheelchairs and crutches, but also include people that have limited strength, endurance, or coordination. For every obvious disability you encounter, there will be several Scouts with less obvious special needs like learning disabilities, ADHD, autism, history of seizures, or anxiety disorders. Camp is exciting and challenging and over the course of a multi-day camp session, Scouts with disabilities may tire out or act out more as time goes on. Some Scouts with milder special needs may start camp without needing accommodations but begin to need them later on.

A last thing to remember is that younger, Cub Scout age, shooters may need extra support and consideration even though they are not disabled and do not have an identified special need.

THE TWO KINDS OF SCOUTS WITH DISABILITIES

There are a lot of different types of special needs and disabilities and any one person could have a combination of needs, and people can have different levels of disability from the same condition. However for the purposes of running a shooting program we can boil this down to two different groups, with just a little bit of overlap. **The dividing line is the maturity/intellectual ability of the Scout.** In the first group are Scouts that have a need, but they can understand range commands and operations and take the safety rules seriously. Their needs have to do with the mechanics of shooting. Most Scouts in this group will arrive at the range with someone to assist them and their needs fall into the general category of adaptive sports, with equipment modifications. We will get into adaptations later.

In the second group are Scouts who could have erratic behavior once they are on the range. There are a variety of disabilities that could result in erratic behavior, but the point is not to exclude them from the range but to find a way to prevent unsafe actions. Some of these Scouts will arrive at the range with someone to assist them and you can work with the assistant. The more challenging situation is when such a Scout arrives at the range with only an ordinary "buddy Scout" and no one identifies the Scout to the range staff before the Scout gets on the range. We will discuss how to manage this group of Scouts in more detail later.

ASSISTANTS FOR SCOUTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Additional personal support and supervision at the shooting range solves nearly all problems. In practical terms this means a person to provide one-on-one support for the Scout. A range aide can serve as the support person, but that is most appropriate for a Scout that only needs personal help at the shooting range and nowhere else at camp. Some Scouts with special needs or disabilities that come to the shooting range will have an assistant with them. An assistant can come in many forms. It could be a

responsible mature Scout (peer buddy), parent/guardian, adult leader from the Scout's unit, professional caregiver, chaplain, etc. An important thing to recognize is that **the Scout and the assistant form a team,** and they need to be thought of as one unit at the range. The assistant is not a spectator or an extraneous person that needs to be kept away from the firing line. The assistant knows more about the Scout's abilities and limits than the range officer does, and knows how to best help the Scout. The other important thing to recognize is that **the range officer and the assistant also form a team** to assure the shooting experience is both safe and enjoyable. This second team will need some time to coordinate their efforts before shooting starts.

CAMP ORIENTATION STRATEGIES

While all Scouts arriving at camp get seen by the camp medical department and for swim check, traditionally the range officers don't get to know a Scout until the Scout turns up at the range for a class or for an open shooting time. This is manageable if you have enough staff at the range to operate the range while freeing up the rangemaster to work out the details with the Scout with special needs and his or her assistant.

A better solution is to build a time into the schedule, either on camp arrival day or the first morning of camp, to meet with any leaders, parents, guardians, or caregivers that brought a Scout with special needs to camp or have an unusual concern. (This is actually a good idea for every camp program area.) This will allow you to focus attention on the actual accommodations you need to come up with, and give you and your staff time to think some things through. It also allows you to build a rapport with the assistants that will be coming to the range with Scouts and help them understand what your safety concerns are so they can accommodate you as well.

Another subject to discuss if time permits, is what the Scout's individual goals are. A Scout doesn't have to achieve a high level of marksmanship to have a good time and learn about the sport of shooting. On the other hand, if the Scout wants to shoot with accuracy, you can talk about ways to get enough practice time and instruction to meet that goal.

GENERAL OPERATING STRATEGIES

Time Management – Shooting ranges are a popular camp feature and we often want to maximize the number of Scouts that can participate. We are used to operating ranges in shooting cycles where all the shooters are kept synchronized. When a Scout with a disability is on the range, that Scout may not be able to fire at the same rate as other shooters. This can create a situation where the other Scouts could resent being held up by the Scout with special needs and the Scout with the special needs may feel pressured and frustrated, unnecessarily. Rather than bog down the entire shooting activity, consider allowing the Scout with a need to remain on the firing line for two or three cycles while you rotate other shooters on and off the firing line. From a safety standpoint, the key thing is to have the range cold at the right times. The range officer will ensure that ammunition is removed from all positions while

anyone is down range. If a person needs to remain at a firing position on the range for any reason, the firearm shall also be removed from that position. The unfired ammunition can be reissued as needed to complete the target round. Unfired rounds in the breech can be ejected to clear the gun.

Designated Lane – It is a good idea to take a look at your range before camp season starts and designate a shooting lane for those Scouts with a disability that require an assistant with the Scout at the range. Since every range is different, you will want to consider different features to choose the lane that would work for you. (1) Can the Scout get in and out of the range without being obstructed by other shooters? (2) Can the Scout stay on the range more than one shooting cycle without obstructing the passage of other shooters that are leaving and entering? (3) Which lane has enough space for a table or bench to be set up to support a shooter in a chair? (4) Which lane has enough space for both the Scout and an assistant to be in the lane at once? (5) Understanding that the assistant is providing direct supervision of the Scout, which lane allows the range officer the best sightlines to supervise all of the shooters on the range?

Giving Range Commands –We are used to giving range commands verbally, and most command sequences expect a verbal response from the shooter. At a typical shooting range at a BSA camp, the people on the range are using passive hearing protection, so everyone is at a disadvantage. Verbal range commands obviously do not work for deaf Scouts, and there are others that are non-verbal and are not able to reply out loud. There is a section later in this module to address their needs. This leaves two practical options that would support everyone else. The first is to convert to electronic noise-cancelling hearing protection devices that allow ordinary speech to be clearly heard and the other is to implement a visual signaling system of flags or lights to communicate the most critical commands, like "cease fire". Although it may take some ingenuity to implement, a system that would turn or drop targets out of view would be another way to get the attention of a shooter.

Addressing Safety Issues – Safety is the number one priority on any range. How the instructor/range safety officer handles these issues is critical to supporting participants in their understanding and enjoyment of the activity. The action(s) of the instructor will depend on the nature of the safety issue.

While we want to maximize inclusion of Scouts with different abilities into the shooting program, it needs to be said that **the health and safety of Scouts must take a priority**. One of the jobs of the Scout's assistant is to recognize when the Scout is struggling and needs to leave the range for a while to regroup (self-regulate).

If the range officer needs to remove a participant from the range, take time to explain to the Scout and the assistant what the problem was (if it wasn't obvious to the participant), and why it is an issue. Ask the Scout how the problem can be resolved, and what the Scout can do differently to be allowed return to the range. It might be as simple as saying they understand and will try to do better. As options, you can offer additional training or shooting at times when you can provide better supervision or when there are fewer distractions.

A difficult situation that can occur is when a Scout arrives at the range without an assistant or a responsible adult from the Scout's unit and the range officer/instructor is unaware that the Scout has a special need. If the participant has to be removed from the range for not following safety procedures this can create hard feelings between the Scout's unit and the camp staff. The most important message to communicate to the Scout is that he/she is not being banned from the range but the range staff needs to get help from the unit leadership to resolve the issues. We suggest using a "take home" note or card that you can send back to the campsite with the Scout. Here is a sample text that you can edit for your purposes:

RANGE RETURN INSTRUCTIONS
_____of Unit _____ likely needs an accommodation in order to shoot safely at the _____ range and the shooting staff needs input from those that know the camper best. He/she has been asked to leave the range for now and to return later with a unit leader, caregiver, parent, or guardian to discuss what we need to do differently to allow this youth to shoot on the range. The shooting staff wants every camper to have an enjoyable, educational, and safe experience at our range. The best way to achieve this is with clear communication between everyone involved.Sincerely yours, _____Range Officer

Outright banishment from a range is a last resort. Every effort must be made to resolve safety concerns with the Scout and the unit leaders before banishment. Any time a Scout is asked to leave the range for any reason, the program director should be notified. A conference between the range officer/instructor, program director, and Scout's unit leader should be requested.

SPECIAL TRAINING FOR A SCOUT'S ASSISTANT

Range officers always provide an orientation for shooters arriving at the range for the first time to explain the type of guns being used, the features of that specific range, and to review the range commands. An assistant arriving with a Scout with special needs will need this same training and a little more. If you are using a range aide as a Scout's assistant while at the range, these supplemental instructions will still apply. **The range officer cannot be the individual's assistant if there are any other participants on the range.**

All assistants need to know that they are being relied on to be the hearing/speaking translator to communicate range commands back and forth. This needs to be fast and the method the assistant uses to communicate with the Scout through hand signals, signs, or touch needs to be worked out and practiced before firing any guns. Be sure to have a way for the Scout to acknowledge a command.

For a Scout in the first group that we mentioned earlier, **where the Scout has sufficient maturity to comply with range rules** without any concern, the discussion with the assistant and Scout will focus on what the Scout needs help with specifically, and how equipment on the range can be deployed to make shooting workable. That is the easier situation.

With Scouts in the second group **where the Scout may not be relied on as an individual to follow range rules** by himself or herself, the discussion with the assistant takes on another dimension. Not every caregiver will be willing and able to take on the role of a shooting assistant, but they won't be able to make that decision until the range officer has briefed them on the responsibilities.

Main Things – The assistant needs to understand the two things that must be accomplished are that (1) no shots are fired after a cease fire command; and (2) no one goes downrange to retrieve anything until a cease fire/stop command has been called and all ammunition is secured. The assistant must be able and willing to do what it takes to accomplish this, including taking hold of the shooter.

Vigilance – The assistant needs to understand that they are providing a focused set of eyes and ears to keep the range safe for everyone. They are not there to take pictures or videos of the Scout's experience

to share with folks back home. The assistant needs to remain focused on where the firearm is pointed and on controlling that.

Speed and Proximity – The assistant needs to be able to act quickly to respond to unexpected movements of the gun. This means that the assistant needs to stay physically close to the Scout that is shooting on the range.

Strength – When a disability creates a realistic concern that the Scout might wave a gun around, the assistant has to be strong enough to physically control the direction of the gun and overpower the Scout's movements. A size mismatch between a stronger Scout and a weaker assistant could be a problem. The obvious example would be a Scout that has an intellectual disability and is physically an adult, but is participating in Scouting as a youth. In situations where an assistant must take control, this means taking hold of the gun, not the Scout. So, if there is a reasonable concern about gun waving, it would be prudent to exclude the Scout from shooting pistols or similar short arms, because they don't offer enough grip points for the assistant.

Authority – The assistant is operating under the authority of the rangemaster but also has authority over the Scout. If the assistant recognizes that the Scout is not in a "good head space" for safe shooting or is being distressed in some way, the assistant needs to remove the Scout from the range and has the authority to do so.

Working with the Coach-Pupil – The assistant should involve the coach-pupil partner of the Scout with a disability as a support person when it will help the situation. The partner benefits from being exposed to a different person and the Scout with a disability feels more included.

SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

Wheelchairs – Shooting ranges have a natural advantage over most other camp program areas in that they are compact and often have some hard surfaces, which make accessibility easier to create. Permanent modifications to provide access to the shooting range for wheelchairs and mobility equipment is outside of the scope of this module. It bears mention in passing that it should be possible to bring a shooter up to the firing line and be able to transfer a shooter from a wheelchair to another chair for shooting. If the range staff needs to help a Scout transfer from and to a mobility chair, they need to take direction from the Scout and the caregiver to do so in the most comfortable way. A Scout that looks frail may not actually be fragile.

Blind/Low Vision – Even without vision, a Scout can master the underlying skills of marksmanship. All people have an internal sense called proprioception, which allows us to intuitively know where every part of our body is at all times. It is how you can touch your nose or your opposite elbow with your eyes closed. A Scout that doesn't see can use this proprioception sense to maintain a consistent arc with shotgun and can synchronize the motion to the sound of a target thrower. For other shooting, the Scout will need a gun with a laser sight and a spotter to guide the aiming. A steel "gong" target for the Scout to shoot at is recommended because it gives immediate positive feedback when the shot lands on target. All that a Scout needs is a spotter to assist with aiming. A Scout who doesn't see well may need extra instruction time, off of the firing line, to learn how to load and clear the gun by feel.

People with low vision may not get their best vision by looking straight ahead. It could be that they see best while their eyeballs are turned up, down, left, or right. They probably do this all the time and don't think about how it looks to others. It is OK to ask the person how much vision they have and if there is anything you can do to make the target more visible. If you need more information about vision, see Module M (https://ablescouts.org/toolbox/m/).

Deaf/Hard of Hearing/Non-Verbal – The challenge here is not the actual shooting, but communicating to keep the range safe. The Scout will need a second person with him or her to translate both ways, to give and acknowledge commands. If a hearing Scout is paired with a non-hearing Scout as coach-pupil, the hearing Scout can help make sure that cease-fire commands are communicated. If the Scout already has a tablet, sign language, signboard, or other means of communicating, you want to use that first. While it is not a good choice for range commands, for shooting instruction it is helpful to have a clipboard-size signboard with icons or words that the assistant and Scout can use to communicate by pointing. A small whiteboard and markers can help with communication as well.

We also need to discuss the use of hearing protection for deaf or hard of hearing Scouts. It is appropriate to require the use of hearing protection for all Scouts, even those with poor hearing. For the hard of hearing, we want to do what we can to protect their residual hearing. Totally deaf Scouts may not see a point in this and resist your request. But you can and should ask these Scouts to wear hearing protection as a good example to others even though they might not benefit from hearing protection themselves. Refusal should not be treated as grounds to ask them to leave the range.

A person that uses hearing aids or cochlear implants for hearing will need to wear over-the ear hearing protection if they are using their hearing aids or cochlear processors. (If you aren't familiar, the cochlear processor looks like a larger hearing aid, with a transmission coil that attaches to the head behind the ear.) If they choose to take off their hearing aids or processors for shooting, they will be temporarily deaf and the recommendations in the preceding paragraphs apply. While someday these devices may be able to block the sound of a gun report with their software, at present we cannot count on that, so hearing aids and processors need hearing protection just like normal hearing does. It is not necessary for a Scout to remove the devices to use over-the-ear hearing protection. They are small enough that they are not too uncomfortable to wear along with earmuffs.

If you need more information about hearing, see Module N (https://ablescouts.org/toolbox/n/). For more about non-verbal communication, see Module S (https://ablescouts.org/toolbox/s/).

Sound Sensitivity – There are some disabilities that make a Scout more sensitive to sound than most and it can be painful or distressing. This is fairly common with autism. This can be resolved in part by doubling up on hearing protection, with both earplugs and an over-the-ear hearing protector. Another option is electronic noise cancelling hearing protection muffs that have volume controls on them.

Lower Body Physical Disability – You want to create a shooting station where the bench rest/table or railing height can be adjusted to match the height of a shooter sitting in a wheelchair or a regular chair.

Arm/Upper Body Strength Limitation – You want to be prepared for a shooter who lacks the strength to lift and hold the weight of the gun for a reasonable length of time. When combined with an adjustable height bench rest, large beanbags can be used to create arm/gun supports that will conform to the shooter. Bean bags can also be positioned to absorb the recoil of the gun.

One-handed and Hand Strength Limitation – Whether the Scout has an injury or condition that requires shooting one-handed, or a fine motor control limitation like a tremor or limited hand strength,

the solutions are similar. There are pivoting gun rests on the market that can be attached directly to a chair or to a bench that carry the weight of the gun and stabilize it for shooting with limited hand strength. It may be necessary to improvise an extension for the trigger assembly. There are commercially available add-on devices that allow the trigger to be operated by biting, blowing into a tube, or sucking on a tube (sanitize for each shooter). These are moderately expensive but worth considering.

SUGGESTED EQUIPMENT LIST

For safety reasons, it is a good idea to purchase commercially available equipment when it is available rather than using something homemade. In shooting sports, there are many devices available for purchase as adaptive equipment even though some of it was marketed for other purposes. **This list isn't intended to limit your creativity or prevent you from providing equipment with additional capability.**

Most gun ranges should be able to afford the following basic equipment:

- **Laser sight, binoculars, steel "gong" target, and target holder** – The thickness of a steel target needs to be matched to the caliber of the gun. The target holder tilts the steel target at an angle to the line of fire and gives better control of the deflected bullets.
- **Chair, shooting bench (table), and bean bags** – For example, a table like that shown in Figure 1. This allows for shooting from a seated position and supporting the gun and the shooter's arms in different ways to allow people with strength and endurance limitations to shoot. The table can be something as simple as a couple of sawhorses with a piece of plywood across them or a small plastic folding table.

Figure 1

- **Double hearing protection** – Have both earplugs and over-the-ear hearing protection available. If the standard issue is earmuffs, have some earplugs on the side and if standard issue is earplugs, have some earmuffs on the side.
- **Hand held signboards** for communicating with Scouts by pointing at words and symbols.

If you can afford more equipment, additional suggestions are:

- **Chair-mountable pivoting gun rest** (Figure 2)
- **Mouth-operated trigger release**
- **Electronic noise-canceling hearing protection**

Figure 2

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