

ABILITIES DIGEST

Newsletter

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NEWS UPDATE

Congrats to Jane Grossman on being named a Silver Buffalo Award recipient by Scouting America! Our Special Needs and Disabilities Committee is especially proud of Jane and all of the amazing work Jane has done over many, many years of service to our youth with disabilities. Jane is a retired special educator and has always advocated for those in Scouting who have special needs and disabilities.

Created in 1925, the Silver Buffalo Award for distinguished service to youth is awarded to those persons who give noteworthy and extraordinary service to youth. This award is Scouting's highest commendation of the invaluable contributions that outstanding Americans make to youth.

A formal presentation was made at the National Annual Meeting, May 14, 2026, in Dallas, TX.



Congratulations, Jane!



WELLNESS CORNER

Mindful Breathing

A simple calming strategy to reduce stress and anxiety

What Is Mindful Breathing?

Mindful breathing means noticing each breath as it goes in and out. It can help lower stress and make it easier to think clearly. It can be done sitting, standing, or lying down, and no tools are needed.

Benefits

- Slows heart rate
- Relaxes muscles
- Activates the body's rest and digest system

When to Use It

- Before or after stressful events
- When feeling overwhelmed
- As a regular coping habit

Other Names

Deep breathing, belly breathing, box breathing

Resources

- Penn State PRO Wellness: Inhale Calm, Exhale Stress
- American Psychiatric Association: Mindfulness QuickStart Brochure for Middle and High School Settings

How to Coach Someone Through Mindful Breathing

Use these steps to guide someone through the exercise:

1. Breathe in through the nose for a count of four.
2. Hold the breath for a count of four.
3. Breathe out through the mouth for a count of four.
4. Rest with empty lungs for a count of four.
5. Repeat three to five times as needed.

Encourage the person to focus on the rhythm of their breathing and let other thoughts pass without judgment.

CAMP PREVIEWS

Helping Families Prepare for Camp

Even careful inspections by camp administrators, Rangers, and property managers can miss access barriers. A real example: a dining hall where the only accessible entrance had a sticky door latch that was difficult to open. Families and Scouts with disabilities may notice needs that staff do not anticipate, including mobility, sensory, light, sound, or other individual concerns.

The recommended solution is to schedule a time for families to visit camp and walk through the places the Scout will need to access. Families should work with camp staff to identify practical workarounds before camp starts. Sometimes a simple item brought from home can solve a problem if the need is known ahead of time.

Preview tours are most effective when led by someone on the camp leadership staff for that specific session. A specialist from the Council's special needs committee can also attend to help translate needs and solutions. The tour should be similar in scope to the standard camp host tour given to a unit upon arrival.

To save time, camps should schedule and promote group tour opportunities rather than arranging individual appointments.

Suggested Timing for Preview Tours

1. A spring staff workday before the camp session.
2. A weekend when a leadership staff member is already at camp for another event.
3. During camp setup week immediately before opening.

If scheduled options do not work:

- Local families may meet with the Camp Ranger during the week, with the Ranger reporting needs back to the camp director.
- Families traveling from far away may need to arrive a day early and receive the tour after the previous week's campers leave.

Homesickness: It's Real

Supporting Scouts through the challenges of being away from home

"My stomach hurts." "I have a headache." "I feel sick." These complaints are common at weeklong Scout camps, especially during the first few days. Often these symptoms are connected to homesickness, particularly for Scouts who are new to being away from home or who have anxiety, depression, special needs, or disabilities.

Homesickness is real and should be treated with respect and understanding, not frustration or dismissal.

How to Help

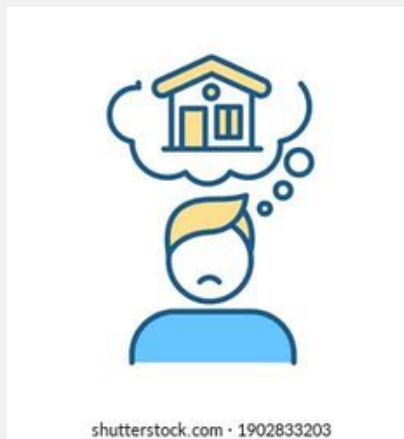
- Acknowledge the Scout's feelings and physical symptoms
- Talk through what they are experiencing and help them name homesickness
- Avoid immediately calling home
- Ask what is bothering them about camp
- Use distraction and familiarization

More Strategies

- Help the Scout build connections with buddies, staff, and leaders
- Check in regularly, especially near the end of the day
- Encourage ownership of solutions
- Communicate with parents and leadership
- Celebrate progress, even small wins

Some Scouts adjust quickly while others need more time and attention. Missing one day of merit badge classes may be better than leaving camp entirely.

Long-term camp should be fun, challenging, and memorable. Homesickness can be conquered with kindness, support, and encouragement. Walk around camp with the Scout, point out locations, show them interesting sights, and help them feel at home.



Prepping for Camp: Tips from the Inclusion Toolbox

Practical guidance for families preparing Scouts with special needs for camp

Parents' mindset shapes the Scout's camp experience. Focus on what the child can do rather than limitations. Define camp wins broadly: sleeping in a tent, navigating the dining hall, or making a new friend.

1. Radical Transparency and the Pre-camp Conference

Schedule a pre-camp conference with unit leaders and camp staff. Explain functional impacts rather than only diagnoses. Share what works at home and what the Scout may struggle with.

2. The Power of the Preview

Take the tour. Walk the routes. Identify physical or sensory obstacles before the session begins. Familiarity reduces anxiety.

3. Identifying Tranquility Base

Find a quiet, low-sensory area for decompression. Every Scout needs a place to reset when overwhelmed.

4. Managing Physical and Medical Logistics

Plan for mobility, transportation, medical care, and accessible campsites. Families remain responsible for one-on-one medical caregiving needs. Identify barrier-free campsites and in-camp support options.

5. The Dining Hall Strategy

Speak with food service ahead of time about allergies, sensory-safe foods, and seating preferences. The dining hall can be one of the most overwhelming spaces at camp.

6. Navigating the Youth-Led Model

Scouting uses a youth-led model. Work through adult leaders rather than intervening directly. Encourage self-advocacy by having Scouts practice asking for accommodations before camp.

<https://ablescouts.org/toolbox/>

Prepping for Camp (continued)

7. Dealing with Discomfort / "Ship in Harbor" Rule

A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for. Distinguish between manageable discomfort and unsafe conditions. Growth happens outside the comfort zone, but never at the expense of safety or dignity.

Some discomfort is part of the camp experience. Help the Scout and family understand the difference between a challenge that builds resilience and a situation that requires intervention.

Final Thoughts: Focusing on the Future

Proactive planning helps Scouts build independence, confidence, adaptability, and enjoyment. Camp is not about perfection. It is about progress.

Every Scout deserves the chance to sleep under the stars, earn a badge, paddle a canoe, or simply sit around a campfire with friends. With the right preparation, families and leaders can make that happen for Scouts of all abilities.



HONORING EXCELLENCE

2026 Distinguished Staff Alumni Award

Chris Werhane

National Leader of Adaptive Sports Development

Chris Werhane has more than 35 years of service to individuals with disabilities, special needs, and wounded veterans. He develops adaptive sports and recreation opportunities providing challenging and fulfilling outdoor experiences.

He grew up near Chicago and developed a love for the outdoors through skiing in Wisconsin and Scouting America. He earned a degree in Outdoor Recreation from Unity College in Maine.

His background includes nine summers at Philmont Scout Ranch, five seasons with the U.S. Forest Service in the Pecos Wilderness, and eighteen years as assistant chief of El Dorado Fire & Rescue.

His adaptive sports work was influenced by his mother's involvement with Special Olympics in Illinois. He worked as a Recreation Administrator at a boarding school for children with learning differences in New Mexico.

He taught adaptive skiing for Challenge New Mexico beginning in 1990, led that program for 15 years, and later became Executive Director. Since 2010, he has worked with Adaptive Adventures as Sports Lead.

He oversees programming at more than 20 ski resorts each winter and leads kayaking, cycling, and rafting initiatives the rest of the year, with a strong focus on serving veterans.

Chris has served for more than 25 years as On-Mountain Safety Director at the VA's National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. He serves on Scouting America's National Disabilities and Special Needs Committee, the Wheels and Boards Committee, the National Tramway Safety Standards Board, RESNA's Adaptive Sports Committee, and PSIA's Member School Management Committee. He helped create Philmont's Zia program for special needs children.

Chris will be honored on July 2 at the Philmont Staff Association HOmEcoming Opening Program.

Supporting Scouts with Invisible Disabilities

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower and Blue Envelope Programs

Not all disabilities are visible. Scouts with autism, ADHD, anxiety, learning differences, sensory processing challenges, hearing or vision impairments, respiratory conditions, and chronic medical issues may need support even when their challenges are not immediately apparent.

These invisible disabilities can affect Scouts during:

- Meetings
- Campouts
- Travel
- Emergencies or schedule changes
- Interactions with unfamiliar adults or authority figures

Two voluntary awareness tools can help promote dignity, safety, and belonging.

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a voluntary symbol—often a green sunflower lanyard, pin, wristband, or badge. It is used to discreetly indicate that someone may need extra time, patience, understanding, or support.

Key points:

- Does not disclose a diagnosis or personal details
- Can be helpful in crowded, unfamiliar, or sensory-intense Scouting environments
- Should always be optional and Scout-led when possible
- Does not provide automatic accommodations or excuse inappropriate behavior

The Sunflower is recognized internationally and can be a simple way for Scouts to signal that they may need a little extra patience or understanding—without having to explain their condition to every new person they encounter at camp, on a hike, or during a group activity.



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Supporting Scouts with Invisible Disabilities (continued)

Blue Envelope Program

The Blue Envelope Program is a voluntary program originally created in Connecticut in 2020. It is designed to improve communication and safety during interactions with law enforcement.

The program uses a blue envelope to store documents such as:

- License, registration, and insurance
- Emergency contact information
- Communication guidance for the individual

The envelope helps a person with a disability communicate important information quickly during a stressful interaction without needing to explain verbally.

Who Can Benefit

The Blue Envelope is relevant for:

- Older Scouts and Venturers
- Adult leaders
- Families planning for travel or stressful authority interactions

It can be adapted by families even in states where the formal program is not offered.

Adapting for Scouting

Units, districts, and councils can share information about the Blue Envelope as part of travel preparation, driver education discussions, or transition planning for older Scouts.

Scouting prepares young people for life. Thoughtfully supporting Scouts with invisible disabilities—through awareness tools like the Sunflower and Blue Envelope, adapted systems, and a culture of patience and belonging—is one way the Scouting community lives out that mission.