



Because Girl Scouts Is for Everyone: How One Troop Leader Supports Girls with Autism

Bridgette McNeal, a troop leader in the metro Atlanta area, shares how she took the lead like a Girl Scout and created a more inclusive troop by inviting girls with autism to join.

I'm a third-year Girl Scout troop leader. I'm also an autism mom; I have four children, two of which are twin boys with severe autism. Although my family has an amazing local support group that provides us with a wealth of activities for my boys, I've always felt a big gap in the mainstream activities available for my children. As a parent, it's hard to explain how hurtful it is to see schools promote clubs, activities, and events that you know aren't intended for your children.

As my Girl Scout troop entered a new school year, I realized that I'm uniquely suited, given my own children, to understand the needs of girls on the autism spectrum. I asked my co-leader how she would feel about opening our troop to my autism group, ATL-Spectrum, to see if any girls were interested in joining us.

The response was thunderous! Originally our troop was a small one of five girls; now we're a Multi-Level troop of 32, with girls in grades K–12 and all levels of Girl Scouting represented. One thing I made clear when I extended this invitation was that our troop was not just for high-functioning girls. I wanted *all* girls to feel welcome in our troop—and I think we've accomplished that.

I started by holding two meetings every other week, one with my "base group" and one with my "adaptive group." In the adaptive group, even if a girl is an Ambassador, she might developmentally be more at a Daisy or Brownie level, so I strike a balance between what she can achieve and what's in the spirit of the badge work for an Ambassador.

For example, we're currently preparing for our county bake-off. Baking can be a challenge for girls on the spectrum. To work with this, we'll have a special meeting at a bakery, during which the bakery staff gives tips and tricks on how to bake and work in the kitchen. This particular bakery employs people with special needs, so the staff members gear their talk toward our girls and help raise parents' confidence about working with their girls in the kitchen. Because the requirements for all the cooking badges vary, we'll have more than one meeting focused on cooking. During the meetings, we'll talk about healthy choices, how to plan a meal, and the

food groups, as well as cook a dish outside the bake-off's scope. What's most important to me is finding a way to adapt the badge requirements so all the girls can earn their badges.

Once a month we host a full troop event in which all 32 girls come together for an activity. For example, we attended a native peoples event with our local parks department. The girls learned about Georgia's native peoples, made pottery and corn husk dolls, and played games. I called the parks department ahead of time and told staff members that we were coming, and they were so on top of it they even had extra volunteers to help us out. The girls had an awesome time!

We've found that, just as we'd tweak activities to work for our base group, it's easy to modify activities for our adaptive group. It simply takes a little planning and patience. If you're a leader who wants a more inclusive troop, here are a few suggestions to get started:

1. Start with what you know; if you have a family member or friend who has special needs, reach out to that particular community.
2. If you don't have that connection, contact local schools and ask if you can provide the special education teachers with recruiting pamphlets. Make sure those materials specifically say that girls with special needs are welcome in Girl Scouts. Special needs parents are used to assuming our children are excluded, so you have to wave us down to get our attention.
3. Another key to troop success with girls on the spectrum is keeping their parents or caregivers involved. The parents in my troop come to the meetings and sit with their daughters and participate. This is helpful if I'm unaware a girl is having a bad day or if she has fears or issues about certain things; their parent helps me out.
4. Like any other troop, don't be afraid to tell parents that you need help—they'll pitch in, especially when they see the effort you're making to include their girls. Let them know how they can best assist.
5. Importantly, talk to the girls not on the spectrum (or those who have other disabilities) about being differently abled! The conversation can be as simple as, "This is Suzie, and she has autism and doesn't talk very much. Does everyone know what autism is? Do you know anyone with autism?" With those conversations, you'll normalize differences in the world . . . because differences *are* normal in the world.

All of our girls and parents love being part of Girl Scouts—and we're so very happy to have them with us. It's been a wonderful experience bringing Girl Scouts to a population that didn't think it was even an option for them. This is truly one of the best things I've ever done.

I stress to everyone I meet, however, that we're not a special needs Girl Scout troop; we're a Girl Scout troop. Because Girl Scouts is for *everyone*.