



Anecdotes Regarding Actual Special Needs Scouting Experiences

Some heartwarming anecdotes about Scouting and special needs kids.

(Names have been changed.)

(A) When my husband and I were Cubmaster and Committee Chair of our old Pack, there was one particular Webelos who was always a handful. Howard wasn't a bad kid, just constantly unfocused. Nothing less than duct tape could keep him on task, not to imply that we would have used duct tape. So we were mildly surprised to find his name on the list of the school's honor role kids that spring. We gave our congratulations to Howard's dad, taking care to conceal our surprise, and dad replied, "Yeah, he's great at school. It's too bad you guys only see him in the evening; by then, his meds have worn off." It turns out that Howard was ADD, and we'd never been told so we hadn't worked his situation into our plans. So here's my suggestion: if a boy is a behavioral problem, particularly in terms of focus, talk to the parents. Never say or even imply, "What's wrong with Howard?" Just say, "I seem to have problems keeping Howard's interest. Can you tell me if he has any issues at school and if so, what his teachers do about it? They see more of him, and their techniques might help here, too." That will get the conversation started in a non-confrontational way and might provide useful insights. Incidentally, Howard is now sixteen and at work on his Eagle Project. His parents got him on a different regimen of medicine that is working better.

(B) Another boy I knew had trouble with the Swimming requirements as a Boy Scout, and had had similar problems with the Aquanaut activity pin as a Webelos. Sid was perfectly capable of survival swimming, but he was seriously hearing impaired and wore hearing aids, which weren't supposed to get wet. So to swim, he had to take out the hearing aids and then couldn't hear directions as to what he was supposed to be doing. The easy solution was to talk with him and his parents in advance so that they would know the basic plan, then work out a system of hand signals that Sid would know to watch for. Then, once he got in the water, he knew what he was likely to be asked to do and watched for the signals as to when to do those things, problem solved.

(C) I've often been told that children with autism hate to be touched or to touch others, and this is true of some but not all. When I read that statement aloud to my husband the former Cubmaster, I asked him, "But if you were at a Pack Meeting and some kid ran up and hugged you around the knees, who would it be?" "Jerry," he answered. "Jerry's always doing that." Jerry, we knew because his mother had made the effort to tell us, had autism, but he was the huggiest little kid I'd ever known. So the lesson is, don't make assumptions about anyone. Is it fair to guess that a kid with autism is likely to perceive the world differently than we expect? Yes, but how he reacts to those perceptions cannot be predicted with much accuracy. Every kid is an individual case.

(D) A Scoutmaster of my acquaintance, when he heard that I was leading training sessions in Special Needs Scouting, said something quite profound. "They all have special needs," he declared. "It's just that some need more direct supervision than others." Indeed, we are all of us special. Incidentally, in that Scoutmaster's troop, of the seven patrols, one year three of the seven patrol leaders were special needs kids of different types. Each did fine in his job, as long as he had some direct supervision (in this case, from boys on the Senior patrol) to keep him on top of the task. Those three boys have now moved up to the Senior Patrol themselves and all are Life Scouts.

(E) One Scout in our Troop, who I know has significant learning disabilities, came to me as councilor for the Music Merit Badge. One of the requirements for that badge is to be able to look at a printed piece of music and explain the meaning of each of the symbols. This was incredibly difficult for Frank to express in verbal terms. However, he'd been studying piano for years, and had given a solo piano recital which his parents filmed on video and played for me. At the recital, he played a dozen short piano pieces well, and all from memory. When he made an occasional small mistake, he recognized the fact, backed up, and went over that passage again correctly. It seemed to me that Frank's ability to verbalize the symbols was far less important than the clear fact that he understood how to play complicated rhythms and harmonies, even under the pressure of an audience and a video camera. So I happily signed off on that requirement. Work within their abilities. In the same way that we wouldn't expect a twelve-year-old Scout to complete as long and challenging a hike as a seventeen-year-old Scout, we should set reasonable levels of achievement for Special Needs Scouts in accordance with what they are able to do.