

## Differing Abilities Handbook

*The Girl Scout Experience is for all girls. Every girl has something fabulous to bring to the table!*

Girl Scouts of Central Texas welcomes girls and adults whose learning or physical disabilities and differing abilities may limit their activities but not their hopes and achievements. The Girl Scout Leadership Experience is flexible enough to bring out the best in girls and adults of any ability.

### Exactly what is a disability?

A disability is something that substantially limits one or more major life activity: walking, talking, reading, writing, eating, dressing or bathing yourself or any of the everyday things people do for themselves and others. A disability may affect only a small part of your life, or it may affect every part of your life.

Some disabilities are obvious: a person uses a wheelchair or walker, has a guide dog or white cane, or communicates using American Sign Language; or perhaps a person has an artificial limb or her speech is hard to understand. Other disabilities are “invisible” – you can’t tell just by looking that a person has a seizure disorder, life-threatening food allergies, a learning disability, or asthma.

### Juliette Low showed us the way

Juliette Gordon Low, the Founder of Girl Scouting in the USA, was deaf for most of her adult life. She sometimes used “ear trumpets,” the forerunner of today’s hearing aids, but she also tried to hide her deafness by being charming, talking a lot and moving quickly from one person to the next. Her deafness was a great inconvenience for her – but it didn’t stop her from starting the Girl Scout Movement in America. Juliette Low’s disability didn’t stop her from following her dream – and a disability should not stop a girl from becoming a Girl Scout or an adult from becoming a leader.

### Who can be a Girl Scout? Any girl!

Membership as a Girl Scout is granted to any girl who:

1. Has made the Girl Scout Promise and accepted the Girl Scout Law
2. Has paid annual membership dues
3. Meets applicable membership standards [in grades K–12]

Girls with developmental delays may be registered as closely as possible to their chronological age, and they wear the uniform of that age level. They may keep their girl membership until age 21, then move into the adult category.

That’s it! There are not requirements on how far you can walk or run, how well you can see or hear, how well you can read, or how quickly you can think. Girls are placed whether they have differing abilities or not.

Girl Scouts of Central Texas has developed resources for leaders so they can “be prepared” to welcome a Girl Scout with differing abilities to the troop. (How likely is this to happen? In Texas, according to the 2010 Census, 5.5% of school-aged children in metro areas had a disability and 5.9% of school-aged children in non-metro areas.)

### But what will I DO with a girl who has differing abilities?

The same thing you “do” with a girl who doesn’t: help her grow in courage, confidence and character so she can make the world a better place. You’ll model the Girl Scout Promise and Law, but you’ll also help her choose the activities she wants to do at Girl Scouts, just like you do with the other girls. Show her how to stay safe and healthy... help her make friends...teach her how to live outdoors... share “fun” Girl Scout traditions! She may be bullied at school and not able to participate in other groups. So, make your Girl Scout troop a safe haven. Show the rest of your troop how to be inclusive.

## So ... I have to take a girl with a disability into my troop?

Sure. Why wouldn't you want to?

## That's a little scary...I'm not a teacher or therapist, and I don't know what to do, where to start.

Neither did her parents, when their daughter was born or whenever her disability was incurred. None of the girls arrive with an instruction manual. It takes time to get comfortable with new situations. And we're not asking you to become an expert or nurse or therapist – just a Girl Scout troop leader. Your responsibility for a girl with differing abilities is the same as it is for the other girls in your troop.

## What if I just can't handle the thought of working with someone who is different?

Try putting the girl first: her abilities are different, but she's also a girl who has feelings and wants to have friends, learn new things, go places and have fun. Will she sometimes need extra help, or will you have to adapt activities for her? Possibly – but doesn't every girl need a little extra help or understanding from time to time? So why not give it a try... it is okay to be nervous or uncomfortable; that's absolutely normal when you try something new (remember?). As a leader your girls will be trying new things; you can relate. Give yourself time to get to know the girl and understand her abilities before you say, "No – I can't do it."

## You mean I have to take a girl with a disability, whether I want to or not?

Well, no. A troop leader is allowed to be comfortable with the participants in her troop. However, when

you accept the position as a troop leader you are expected to welcome all girls who meet the grade requirements, pay their national membership dues, and make the Girl Scout Promise and accept the Girl Scout Law. Knowing that, ask yourself, "What help do I need to feel comfortable welcoming a girl with \_\_\_\_\_ into the troop?"

First, you are not alone. That is why these resources and the GSFA Rallyhood group were created. Learn at least a little bit about this girl's abilities, and her parents are usually the best place to start. Say something like, "I want Girl Scouting to be a great experience for your daughter, but I've never met anyone like her before. It would be a big help if you could tell me about your daughter and her abilities." Most parents will not be offended if you ask, "Can she do this? Does she need help with that? How do you handle \_\_\_\_\_?" So first, ask the parent or guardian. And ask the girl! Usually girls can tell you when they need (or don't need!) help and what kind of help is needed. YOU CAN DO IT. And there are lots of resources to support you, starting with the Girl Scouts for All Committee.

Some leaders are understandably hesitant about taking a girl with a medical condition or other difference into the troop; they worry about saying or doing the wrong thing, coping with adapting program activities, and about how other girls in the troop may feel. When you focus on ability – on what a girl can do rather than what she can't – you begin to ease some of the scary thoughts in your head. "It's true Meg can't do X, but she can do Y – so we should be able to take part in Z with no problems."

## Girl Scouts of the USA's Safety Activity Checkpoints contain resources for working with Girl Scouts with special needs.

Sometimes it helps to have the new girl's parent come to a meeting prior to her or his daughter joining the troop, to explain her/his daughter's abilities and answer girls' questions. The leader may also feel more secure if the parent comes with the new Girl Scout for her first meeting. These are all things to talk over with the parents of the girl with a disability.

## ADVICE FROM "A GIRL WITH A DISABILITY"

1. Please don't worry about me. I'm a lot tougher than you think.
2. Most of my needs are just like those of other girls even though my physical or mental development is different.
3. Give me what you naturally give to all the other girls: your love, your praise, your acceptance, and especially, your faith in me.
4. Help me to have a successful experience in your troop (or group or camp unit.) If you help us plan a variety of activities, I will always find at least one thing I can do well!
5. Encourage me to do things for myself, even if it takes me a long time.
6. If the troop has a regular meeting-time routine, I will know what to expect.
7. Like other kids, I remember instructions best if they are short and clear.
8. Give me opportunities to help others.

*Written by: Carole Carlson*

*Adapted by: Ginny Thornburgh*