How to help Scouts with ADHD succeed — without hurting anyone's feelings

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Review a full list of ADHD symptoms published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. You'll also find an interactive list to help evaluate a child's behavior. Please note that the information is in a shortened form and is presented for informational purposes. Only trained healthcare providers diagnose and treat ADHD.

When David Urion, M.D., was a Boy Scout, his troop met at an Episcopal church. One summer afternoon, the Scout leader turned his back for a minute. Before Urion knew it, his friend Doug had climbed to the top of the church steeple.

The leader talked Doug down from the steeple to the church roof, then a lower overhang, and onto his shoulders. But that adventure was only one of many exploits of this inveterate thrill-seeker. "Every time any responsible adult turned his back, Doug was on top of a garage or a flagpole," remembers Urion, a fourth-generation Eagle Scout. "We'd be on a 25-mile hike, he'd see something off the trail that looked interesting, and if you weren't careful, at the next stop, it would be, 'Where's Doug?' "

Now a neurologist at Boston Children's Hospital, Urion realizes in hindsight that this relentlessly impulsive boy likely had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder — known as ADHD — a condition that causes children to exhibit symptoms including difficulty staying focused, controlling behavior and hyperactivity. The average onset age for ADHD is age 7, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

"When you see a kid who's always out farther on a ledge or higher than you'd like him to be, it would be a good time to have a conversation with his parents," Urion says, "because then you can see if he's just kind of exuberant, or if, in fact, he has ADHD."

Persistent thrill-seeking is one of several signs of possible ADHD. Doctors diagnose a child with the disorder if he displays six or more symptoms from either a list of nine inattention symptoms or from a list of nine signs of hyperactivity and impulsivity. (**Find these lists here for your review**.) They next ask whether he has done so for more than six months.

If you have an "Energizer Bunny" Scout so relentlessly active and unable to focus that he stands out among kids his age, he might be among the 3 to 7 percent of school-age children who have ADHD, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This percentage is likely higher among Scouts because, as CDC data reveals, the disorder affects more than twice as many boys as girls.

A child with ADHD experiences multiple stimuli — say, a parent setting up snacks, another boy tapping his foot, a fire truck going by outside and the leader talking to the group — as equal. Faced with all of this stimulation, "ADHD kids don't know what to block and what to focus on," explains Jen Reid, who co-teaches a class, "Including Scouts With Special Needs" at the University of Scouting of the Flint River Council near Atlanta. "Their mind keeps shifting from one thing to another."

How can you cope with a Scout who can't sit still, doesn't seem to listen, can't concentrate on a project or even disrupts the whole troop by constantly wandering off?

The first step is to talk to the Scout's parents, which calls for some advance planning.

Partner With Parents

Whether or not their child has been diagnosed, it's time to start building a partnership. Sometimes the parent will take the lead, as Paige Lawson did when her son Wolfgang, 9, was diagnosed with ADHD two years ago.

"I talked to his pack leaders. I told them that a lot of activity keeps him busy and moving, and that keeps him from getting upset," she says. "I explained the medication he takes so they knew if he started behaving oddly to let me know." If Wolfgang balked at an activity, she suggested letting him sit by himself, because he'll usually join in later.

"It's about keeping open and honest communication between both sides," says Lawson, whose son belongs to a pack in Kansas City, Mo.

Now the leader asks her questions whenever they need help solving a problem with Wolfgang.

"Parents are the child's biggest advocates," agrees Kelli Fisher, who co-teaches the University of Scouting class with Reid. "Ask them what works and what doesn't. Find out signs of a pending meltdown and how best to redirect it."

The partnership you build with parents of a special-needs Scout will enrich the whole troop. "If you get parents to step up and help you with their child," Reid says, "they'll help you with other things as well."

Improve Scout Meetings

"Redirection" is a crucial tool to use with inattentive or disruptive Scouts. After stating the unit's "ground rules" for behavior — some leaders do that as often as every week — you can "redirect" or remind a Scout what's acceptable when he breaks a rule.

You might assign an adult or an older Scout to "shadow" a boy who often breaks rules. That person can redirect him by saying, "This is important, so quiet down," explains Fisher, or, "Hey Marco, we gotta go this way. Come back here!"

After a Scout has repeatedly heard "Listen to Mr. Smith now," Reid says, he might refocus when the "shadow" simply sits next to him or taps him on the shoulder.

Even though a hyperactive Scout tries your patience, he needs praise as much or more than other boys. So tell him when you notice his improvement, and look for his strengths. It's also a good idea to separate two impulsive kids from each other, so they won't disrupt the rest of the group.

Because, as Cub Scouter Hector X. Merced puts it, most ADHD kids have "all this energy inside them that needs to get out," you can feed their hyperactivity by including plenty of activities that let them move.

As the Cub Scout Handbook suggests, Merced, a Tiger den leader in Springfield, Va., never lets his den sit for more than 20 minutes at a stretch. The last half-hour of every meeting is a game. "That has worked wonderfully," he says. "When you mix it up, they're very interested."

Alternating active and passive activities and promoting learning while moving will benefit the entire troop. So will using both verbal and nonverbal language.

Reid will tell Scouts to nail boards together, paint them, set them out to dry and then stencil them, but she also writes each step down and even charts them with pictures. While these methods will help an ADHD Scout in particular, at the same time they will also cater to the varied learning styles of all Scouts.

Surprises add stimulation, but consistency — like always meeting in the same place — helps keep Scouts calm and focused. Announcing next week's activities at the end of each meeting also lets Scouts know what to expect, as does emailing that information to parents.

Prepare Them for Life

Scouting can be a lifesaver for boys with ADHD. Its active program and diversified, hands-on skills training can give kids the competence and confidence so essential to their well-being.

Boys who don't shine in school can excel in archery, camping skills or photography. Scouting gives them "a place to have something other than constant messages of failure," Urion says.

Merced's son Xavier has made tremendous gains in Cub Scouts. To help earn his Astronomy belt loop, Merced put the eight planets of the solar system on his bedroom ceiling, and Xavier learned them in order. "They were difficult, and he learned them all," his dad says. "He felt very proud. His self-confidence was very low, and the Cub Scouts have given that back."

Programs such as National Youth Leadership Training can build the self- confidence of older Scouts, says Lisa Kirschner, of Stroudsburg, Pa. It taught her sons, Dagan and Mark, both of whom dealt with ADHD as children (they're now 21 and 17), how a leader thinks and the meaning of leadership.

Scouting also uniquely prepares boys for life by providing a wide array of role models. Scout leaders range from carpenters and software entrepreneurs to firefighters and corporate executives, Urion points out. As a Boy Scout, "I realized you could be good in a lot of different ways in the world," he says. "That's a very important gift that Scouting brings."

What To Avoid With a Kid Who Has ADHD

Jen Reid and Kelli Fisher, who teach a class titled "Including Scouts With Special Needs," have compiled a list of common mistakes adults make with Scouts who have special needs:

- Raising your voice
- Insisting on having the last word
- Clenching your hands or using other tense body language
- Insulting or embarrassing the Scout

- Bribing him
- Attacking his character
- Mimicking him
- Comparing him to other Scouts
- Using "command and demand" leadership
- Holding a grudge. ("If the kid is a pain one day, start a new page the next day," Reid and Fisher advise.)

Help ADHD Scouts Make Friends

In school, the boy with ADHD is often labeled the class clown, the troublemaker or simply "weird." But Scout leaders can perform a terrific service by helping them make friends while teaching the whole group a lesson in tolerance.

When Lisa Kirschner's sons joined Cub Scouts, the den leader not only corrected their behavior but also made clear to other boys that "We still like him, and he's a good kid." The results: "Three of the kids he started with in Tigers are his best friends even though they're all in college," says Kirschner, who both volunteers for Scouts as assistant Scoutmaster and crew Advisor and works as senior district executive for the Pocono District.

Diversity policies also promote friendships with kids with ADHD. Boys who learn to accept and understand Scouts from different ethnic and racial backgrounds can do the same for boys with special needs, Hector Merced explains. In his own den, parents of boys come from Vietnam, China, Peru, Puerto Rico and Thailand.

Medication

If a Scout has been diagnosed with ADHD, he might be taking medication. Most ADHD medication is taken once a day. When it wears off, a child might get crabby and fidgety and want to get up and run around. To prevent this behavior, some parents may decide to give their sons half a pill before late afternoon or evening meetings.

Parents might ask you to ensure their child takes medication when away on a camping trip. (First ask parents to review the prescriptions section of the Guide to Safe Scouting, as well as the BSA's requirements for annual health and medical records.) There are no strange side effects or extreme reactions to the typical medications for ADHD. Most are slightly dehydrating, and some decrease appetite. So before a long campout, ask the parents if they want you to pay extra attention to the Scout's food and water intake.

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