Learning How to Fly:
Creating an efficient Pack/Troop for Scouts with Special Needs.
University Of Scouting 2017
The prevalence of Emotional & Cognitive Difficulties

12-month Prevalence for Children (8 to 15 years)

- Any Disorder: 13.1%
- ADHD: 8.6%
- Mood Disorders: 3.7%
- Major Depression: 2.7%
- Conduct Disorder: 2.1%
- Dysthymia: 1.0%
- Anxiety Disorders: 0.7%
- Panic Disorder: 0.4%
- Generalized Anxiety Disorders: 0.3%
- Eating Disorder: 0.1%

Data courtesy of CDC
Why is it hard to identify emotional / cognitive conditions in children?

► It is not easy to identify mental illness in children, because young people often lack the vocabulary or even awareness to express what is going on.

► It is hard because it still carries a certain amount of stigma, so often children/adults don’t want to or don’t know how to help their child with emotional and cognitive difficulties.

► Resources are not available; insurances do not always reimburse mental health services in the same manner they will reimburse other medical conditions. This way, many people who need the service cannot access the service due to scarcity of providers and mental health settings.
Adult leaders in BSA are not expected to diagnose children with mental / emotional conditions. However, by becoming more “attuned” to certain signs and symptoms, you may benefit from running a smoother unit, ensuring retention, and creating a positive microcosm in all children’s lives.

It starts with the new Scout’s admission to your Pack/Troop. Put families and new Scouts at ease. Make sure you let the parents or guardians know that Scouting is all about inclusion, and that you have their child’s best interest in mind only. Then start your conversation.
How do I ask what are the Scout’s Special Needs?

A conversation with the Scout’s parent or guardian at this stage can establish an overall overview of the young person’s areas of strength as well as areas of challenge. Don’t shy away from asking whether or not the child is receiving accommodations or other supports in school.

Elicit parents’ and caregivers’ support and involvement by asking them to give you advice and suggestions on how you can best support their child in Scouting.
How do I know if my Scout is having emotional difficulties?

What if your Scout is going through a “rough” patch?

- Sudden changes in the young person’s behavior, such as becoming withdrawn or clingy
- Appearing highly self-critical and lacking confidence
- Losing interest in doing activities that he previously enjoyed doing
- Changes in eating habits such as rapid weight loss or gain
- Isolating oneself from the Pack/Troop
- Unexplained cuts and marks (engaging in self-harm behaviors)
- Many somatic complaints e.g. headaches, stomach aches etc.
- Substance use
How do I as an Adult Leader promote a positive environment for Scouts with Special Needs?

If a young person lets you know they are experiencing anxiety or negative thoughts about an activity or situation, give them space to talk. Just try to listen calmly, try not to make assumptions, let them set the pace and reassure them they are not in trouble and they are not alone.

Talk about well-being. Include activities in the program to get your Scouts talking about understanding their emotions. Encourage young people to learn, raise awareness and challenge the stigma around mental health.
What is expected of me as an Adult Leader?

Know your limits. Do not assume the role of a counselor in a Boy’s life with an emotional condition and/or cognitive difficulties.

The major support for a young person with mental health problems need to be identified outside of Scouting.
Some tips to foster growth among your Scouts with Special Needs:

Stay calm. People with emotional & cognitive difficulties need to feel safe and protected.

Work closely with families.

Encourage participation and make sure every Scout feels included and able to express themselves, if and when and how they want.
Promote Awareness of Dis-Ability among Scouts

Ask your Scouts to watch a movie about emotional and/or cognitive conditions. Encourage them to write down questions they want to share with other Scouts.

Ask guest speakers to come and talk to your Scouts about individuals with special needs and how they “negotiate” social participation in their daily life.

Attend with your Scouts Council’s Events, such as Disability Awareness Stations.
Support positive relationships. Help young people understand each other’s perspective.

Support positive language. Consider the words that you and others use in your Pack/ Troop and how you talk about mental health. Respond to and challenge any language that may cause offense or lead to stigma. Don’t use baby talk.
Stop Cruelty!!!

Prevent **bullying** by taking immediate action to prevent it and identify and respond to any incidents accordingly.
Streamline your Pack / Troop Meetings

Be consistent and predictable in your structure. Allow extra time for activities and give information to your Scouts about new activities ahead of time.

Provide a visual schedule using words and pictures, but don’t put times in the schedule because some of your Scouts may expect you to follow the schedule to the minute.

Let your Scouts know early about transitions by saying “in five minutes we’ll be ending this activity and starting another”
Successfully Address Cognitive Challenges

Break up tasks into smaller steps and alert the Scout’s parents if an activity might be extra challenging or overstimulating (noise, movement, texture).

Simplify complex directions. Give one or two steps at a time.

Be realistic about behavior and assignments. Many children cannot sit still for long periods of time, or follow detailed instructions. Make learning interesting by including plenty of hand-on activities.
Monitor behavior through charts that explain expectations for behavior and rewards for reaching goals. This system of positive reinforcement can help the Scout to stay focused and calm.

Remember that praise and encouragement will help self-esteem.

Get into the habit of giving reports to parents or guardians. Timely reports can increase their involvement.
Use the **buddy system** whereby a child who has higher competence in an area, is paired up with a child with lower competence so that the former can scaffold the latter's areas in that area of learning. This could be in any area of learning, be it language, cognitive, emotional, or social.
Get moving. Whether it’s playing a game of tag or building a campfire, physical activity is good for young people’s physical and emotional well being.

Use Mindfulness techniques such as four square breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation and visual imagery.
Square Breathing Technique

Square breathing is a simple, easy, and effective way to calm yourself and enjoy a few minutes of tranquility.

The suggestion is to sit tall in your chair, both feet on the floor. Then, it’s just four simple breath segments done to a count of four.

1. Inhale 2 3 4
2. Hold 2 3 4
3. Exhale 2 3 4
4. Hold 2 3 4
Guided imagery can be beneficial for a variety of issues and the process can be tailored to suit the Scout’s specific needs.

It can help reduce stress in all children, enhance coping skills, encourage self-esteem, increase creativity and boost the immune system.

Guided imagery is recognized as a form of treatment for anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder, and to help patients prepare for surgery and procedures. Considered an alternative therapy for years, guided imagery is now beginning to gain acceptance in the educational world.
“We’re so busy watching out for what’s just ahead of us that we don’t take time to enjoy where we are.”

- Calvin & Hobbes