

## **Short & Snappy A Place for Every Girl**

Girl Scouts is a place of growth and safety for all girls. In a contentious world, this is easier said than done. So how do we, as volunteers, create a space where any girl can thrive and feel supported as her whole self? Creating an atmosphere of inclusion in your troop isn't a one-size fits all solution. Some troops are made of up girls with similar backgrounds and identities, and others are very diverse; both types of troops have unique problems to solve, and ways they can better understand and promote inclusivity.

**Diversity** is any dimension that can be used to differentiate groups and people from one another. In a nutshell, it's about empowering people by respecting and appreciating what makes them different, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, education, and national origin. Diversity allows for the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment.

**Equity** is an approach that ensures everyone access to the same opportunities. Equity recognizes that advantages and barriers exist, and that, as a result, we all don't all start from the same place. Equity is a process that begins by acknowledging that unequal starting place and makes a commitment to correct and address the imbalance.

**Inclusion** is an organizational effort and practices in which different groups or individuals having different backgrounds are culturally and socially accepted and welcomed, and equally treated. These differences could be self-evident, such as national origin, age, race and ethnicity, religion/belief, gender, marital status and socioeconomic status or they could be more inherent, such as educational background, training, sector experience, organizational tenure, even personality, such as introverts and extroverts. Inclusion is a sense of belonging. Inclusive cultures make people feel respected and valued for who they are as an individual or group.

### **Five Strategies for Including and Celebrating Every Member**

- 1) **Learn:** That's right, hit the books! Whether you just started a troop or have been volunteering for a decade, you know that the first step to helping your girls learn and grow is to learn and grow yourself. Volunteers are role models in their girls' lives, and they look to you for guidance on how to grow up to be a good person. The first step is learning more about people different from you. Whether you've experienced feelings of exclusion or judgment based on what you look like, where you come from, or what you believe, or you've always felt welcome in your community, you can always learn more about what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes. Attend seminars on diversity, read books by authors of different races, faiths, and backgrounds than you, and think about what privileges you have (ways in which your identity makes life simpler for you) and don't have.
- 2) **Talk to new people:** Listen attentively, believe their stories even when they are different from your understanding of the world, and make sure they feel welcome in your community. Set up opportunities during regular meetings and activities to

explore diversity, equity, and inclusion in your own troop and SU. Learn about the girls in your troop first, by inviting their families to participate in activities. Create a culture of collaboration, not cliques, at your meetings and activities.

- 3) **Be more than tolerant:** In a world where divisive language is seemingly everywhere, and arguments over who “belongs” and who doesn’t seem pointedly heated, there are a lot of people talking about the importance of teaching our children “tolerance.” And while those intentions are definitely a step in the right direction, in reality, tolerance simply isn’t good enough. That’s our next strategy: Understand that tolerance is not enough. Why? Well, think about the very word “tolerance” and the kinds of things you tolerate. We tolerate pain when necessary. We tolerate a friend’s bad mood. We tolerate a stressful day at the office. None of those things are good, but they’re things we have to suffer through anyway.

Instead of approaching diversity from an attitude of ‘putting up with differences’, help your girls understand the message of diversity hidden in the Girl Scout Law—“being a sister to every Girl Scout.” Encourage the girls in your troop to invite a new girl to a troop meeting, or adults to invite a friend to volunteer. Making new friends with others from across your community is a perfect way to trade tolerance for inclusivity. Work with your CDM or SU Manager to connect you with leaders you might not normally see...and plan an activity together.

- 4) **Face the issues:** As much as we try to protect our girls from the scarier things going on in the world, it’s impossible to shield them from the many difficult, confusing, and sometimes upsetting conversations and events happening around us. It’s tempting when we see serious topics like racism, free speech, xenophobia, or sexism in the news to just avoid having a conversation with your girls. But if these topics stress you out, imagine how your girls must feel about them with even less knowledge and experience! Girl Scouts, no matter their age, live in the real world, and they need to be prepared to deal with the serious and important topics that adults deal with. And that means having a lot of good but hard conversations.

Find out what worries them, whether it’s feeling like the boys in their class get called on more, or issues of war and political strife. Listen to their feelings, and discuss the issue as a group in an age-appropriate way. Taking their ideas and feelings seriously shows girls that their opinions and emotions matter, which will help give them the courage to stand up for their beliefs, ask critical questions, and build character. Facing the issues will empower girls and adults to lead the way.

- 5) **Empower girls to lead:** Across the country, young people standing up for their beliefs are making headlines, sparking national conversations, and in some cases even getting laws changed to reflect what they think is right.

If your girl is involved in these movements or has been vocal about some other issue, you might worry about her being seen as "disruptive" or too "opinionated,"

but it's important to recognize that it takes courage and character to speak out against the status quo—even if you don't agree with her views.

First, start with a conversation. Ask about their feelings and what they'd like to change. Showing others their opinions and beliefs matter and that you really are listening to what's important to them will give them the courage to speak up and express their views in the future.

If girls in your troop are passionate about an issue, walk them through how to write letters, call officials, create petitions, or even how to attend a local government meeting.

Finally, offer support and try to prepare girls for what they may experience. Iconic advocates famously faced detractors with unflinching dignity, but some forms of opposition may be too much for a child or adolescent just finding her voice. So check in with her and keep an eye out for any signs of anxiety or fear. And of course, if you' are concerned that your child might find herself in harm's way, take her out of the situation immediately, then help her find another way to express her views such as writing a letter to her local newspaper or attending her local city council meeting.