

The Pros and Cons of Teaching Kids About Disability Awareness Through Simulated Experiences

A popular way to teach youth about how people living with special needs and disabilities experience day-to-day activities is through the experience of a disability simulation. Since Scouting is built on hands-on experiences, it's natural to consider experiential education like simulations, to teach this topic to Scouts.

However, simulation experiences do have their drawbacks. First, simply handing a child a blindfold, earmuffs, or crutches reverses the EDGE (Explain–Demonstrate–Guide–Enable) model. Disability advocates tell us that such simulations can exaggerate how hard it is to live with a disability, potentially portraying people with disabilities as less capable than they truly are. Moreover, younger Scouts may not have the cognitive and emotional ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes (this is not fully developed until at least 13 years of age). Lastly, simulations are brief experiences. This is different in many ways from the lived experience of a person with a disability.

The key to a meaningful disability simulation lies in two critical discussions: the **introduction** beforehand and the **reflection** afterward. The introduction should include a brief explanation of the disability involved (including a positive example of people who navigate the disability) and the basic details of the upcoming simulation. Reflections should focus on developing an understanding of the disability, developing empathy for living with the disability, and encouraging positive interactions with people who live with the disability. The details of these conversations should be tailored to the age group of the Scouts involved. A Tiger Cub will interpret the experience differently from a high school-aged Scout or Venturer, and their takeaways will evolve as they progress through Scouting. Just like we repeatedly reinforce core Scout skills, disability awareness should be revisited with increasing depth at each level of Scouting.

An online resource, that unfortunately, is no longer posted, provided an excellent resource. *Disability Awareness Fair Ideas* (Framingham Special Education Parent Advisory Council) outlined essential concepts to introduce before a simulation:

1. The experience will likely seem harder to you than for someone with the actual disability, because they have had practice and time to invent easier ways to navigate their daily lives.
2. Even though you will learn from the simulation, you will only partly understand what it means to live with that disability. Similarly, imagining life as a person of another race or gender is different from actually experiencing it.

3. People with disabilities are more than their disability. They adapt their attitudes and emotions along with their actions, recognizing that their disability is just one aspect of their identity.

Reflection is crucial to ensure the experience leads to lasting awareness. With a well-framed introduction, most Scouts will naturally grasp the key lessons. Encouraging them to put words to their thoughts, sensations, and emotions about the experience helps reinforce their understanding. Some may need a little encouragement to express themselves, while others might need gentle guidance to shift from ableist perspectives (prejudiced ideas that define people by their disability) to more inclusive and respectful attitudes.

Some reflection questions may include:

- Older Cubs and Webelos from 3rd to 5th grade:
 - How did you feel while you were doing this (simulation)?
 - When you were doing the challenge task, did you want to be helped or to do it by yourself?
 - Is there something about you that makes it harder to do certain things than most people?
- Scouts from 6th to 8th grades are at an age where they become more self-conscious and more hesitant about asking questions or asking for help:
 - Were people that meant to help you doing what you needed them to do or not?
 - If you had more time, what tricks would you have tried to make things easier for you?
 - How do you show respect to people with disabilities?
- At high school age, youth can be asked deeper questions, for example:
 - When you need help from others, what are the best ways to get the kind of help you need?
 - When you are leading a team, how can you take advantage of the strengths of every team member has?
 - If you could change things at your school to make things better for people with disabilities, what would you do?
 - How do you adjust your own limitations in ability? How is that different from what you would do with a disability?
 - Have you ever been amazed at something a person with a disability has done? Why?

Providing a solid introduction and a reflection will require those leading the simulation to spend some time thinking about the purpose of the simulation and how to present the introduction and guide the reflections in an age-appropriate manner. Hence, it is important to ensure that the entire team is familiar with the suggestions in this document. Doing so will help the Scouts participating in the simulation develop positive attitudes towards those with disabilities and understand the harm of an ableism mindset (prejudice ideas about disabilities and those that have them).

Other tips about simulations from The Framingham Special Education Parent Advisory Council included:

- Do respect participant's right to refuse to participate in a disability simulation activity.
- Don't make a game of disability simulations.
- Carefully select disability simulation activities and environments.
- Do allow participants to choose the type of disability simulation in which they will participate.
- Pair participants with a partner who can assist them if needed.
- Do emphasize the physical, psychological, and societal barriers faced by participants in various settings, rather than the perceived limitations of the disability.
- Do discuss the importance of adaptation to disability and accommodation strategies.
- Do provide assistive technology and adaptive equipment.
- Do supplement disability simulation activities with examples of people with disabilities successfully addressing barriers and challenges in real-life situations.
- Consider alternatives to disability simulations
 - Invite people with disabilities to talk about their experiences.
 - Read a book or watch a video about a person with a disability. Talk about how the person was portrayed in the book or video. Talk about the similarities and differences they demonstrate.
 - Conduct an informal accessibility survey in the community. Identify and discuss architectural barriers such as steps, curbs, steep inclines, narrow aisles, heavy doors, etc. Identify accessible entrances, curb cuts, ramps, etc.
 - Visit local hotels or motels and ask to see accessible rooms. Do the rooms have accessible bathrooms including accessible sinks, roll-in showers and/or shower chairs? Are the rooms located on the ground floor or near an elevator? Does the hotel/motel provide vibrating or flashing alarm systems?