



Perfectly able

How do you provide everyday adventure, with all the activities, excitement and freedom that it entails, to young people with a variety of special needs and care requirements? More easily than you'd think, as **Dave O'Carroll** discovered on a recent trip



Toby and Adam are more like brothers at Scouts than anywhere else

The spirit is there in every boy; it has to be discovered and brought to light,' said Baden-Powell. Those words ring true for boys and girls today, and there are few groups in which this concept is better exemplified than those which deliver the joy of Scouting to young people with special needs.

The 15th Wallington Scout Troop in Sutton District is one. It meets every Friday and offers activities and adventure to local young people of Scout age who have specific needs. Even more exciting though, is their annual weekend camp, which I joined for a day.

Mixing it up

This year, Scout leader Claire Devine joined forces with the 3rd Beddington, so able-bodied Scouts could spend the weekend camping with her Troop.

'Being able to mix with another Group lets us share skills,' she explains. 'Our Scouts with special needs learn from other young people of similar age, while the other Group find out more about disability and how they can make Scouting accessible to everybody.'

To the outsider, the weekend appears just like any normal Scout camp, reverberating as it does to the sounds of excited conversation, laughter, wood chopping, and the smell of outdoor cooking and a campfire. Scratch beneath the surface though, and

something surprising quickly becomes apparent; it is a normal Scout camp.

'We can do pretty much anything,' says Claire. 'It just takes a bit more time to do it. But they'll shop for their lunch, cook on wood fires and do their own washing-up. It's about altering the pace and giving different tasks. For some, putting the plates and the bowls away is the job they will get, while for others, sometimes just standing around and watching is more than enough.'

Family ties

Of course, any group of this nature is littered with touching human stories. One of the most compelling is that of two brothers, Toby and Adam.

Toby is a member of Claire's group while Adam, who has a slight disability, is with a regular Scout Troop, the 14th Wallington, run by Claire's father, Nick Devine. The connection between the leaders has helped to strengthen the brotherly bond, as the boys' mother Yvonne explains:

'Toby is severely disabled and doesn't speak, so there isn't really anything else they can do together. However,

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what they do have in common is that they go to Scouts. As Claire's dad runs Adam's Troop, they often go away on camps together. They are probably more like normal brothers there than they are at any other time.'

Toby, in particular, is a shining example of that spirit which B-P spoke of. Doctors told his parents not to expect him to live beyond the age of four. He was in intensive care 38 times by the age of six. Each time the hospital staff said he probably wouldn't pull through. Now he is a teenager who has gained his 50 Nights Away badge; an incredible achievement of independence.

'I must admit, I didn't sleep much the first time he was away,' Yvonne recalls. 'I was texting and phoning all the time, but he came back exhausted, filthy and with a big smile on his face.'

And on this occasion, there was an unexpected bonus on the cards. 'It's been fabulous for me coming to this

camp today because I didn't know that Toby was capable of washing-up,' Yvonne beamed. 'But I've seen him working on all the plates. He looked fed up and cross about it, but Claire kept him going, and he did them all and put them away.'

One wonders if Toby was cross because once he spotted his mum nearby, he knew his days of not having to do the washing-up at home were now over.

Recruitment and awards

Although the value of these camps is almost impossible to quantify, it can be measured in some ways. Recruitment is one.

'These events bring in people who wouldn't otherwise get involved in Scouting because we need additional helpers and sometimes medical personnel and carers,' says Nick Devine. 'We have two helpers here who came to a previous summer camp and now they are regular volunteers. It's like a magnet that draws people in and breaks down barriers on all sides.'

Mixing groups can also lead to awards. Faith, who was a Scout with the 3rd Beddington, chose to help out with the 15th Wallington when she was trying to get her Community Challenge for the Chief Scout's Gold Award. She liked it so much, she continues to lend her support with camps and activities, as well as being an Explorer Young Leader. The added confidence and skills this gave her enabled her to successfully apply to go to the World Scout Jamboree this year; the first person from the Group ever to do so.

'I would totally recommend this to any Group,' enthuses 3rd Beddington Leader Ewan Duncan. 'If you have a special needs group in your area, join up with them, camp, and do activities together. Our kids are learning how to interact with other young people in their community. They are discovering how to see the world from someone else's perspective.'

'As well as that, they are developing skills in teaching others how to do something, which they take for granted, such as collecting and chopping wood. It makes them more considerate, rounded and skilled young people, which is precisely what we, as leaders, are trying to achieve.'

This view is echoed by one of Ewan's Troop, Kain, who says the mixed camp teaches him 'to be grateful for what I've got and not to take things for granted'. Rather amusingly, Kain qualified that by telling me (with a shocked tone in his voice) that 'sometimes you ask them to do something and they just walk off without doing it' – surely an experience which every leader can relate to.



Scouts are Scouts – you can't tell the difference

Accessible adventure

So, what of these young people themselves? What do Claire's Troop think of it all? The first thing that your correspondent must admit is that upon venturing out to speak to them, I had to ask Claire to point out which young people were in her group as, when they are cooking, chopping wood or building a campfire, Scouts are Scouts. You can't tell the difference.

'I like staying away from home and I've lots of friends here. We've been finding and lighting wood to cook our own dinner,' said George, with an unmistakable note of pride in his voice. He also told me that he had previously gone canoeing and would 'like to do more things on the water'.

Ellie informed me that the campfire is her favourite part of the weekend, 'as it usually involves me singing the Mustard song; I'm always good for a campfire song'. Jamie was eager to show how he had been using a saw. He was also a big fan of overnight camps, 'especially the food and playing dodgeball'.

'You don't join Scouts to stay indoors all day; you join to go out and have adventures, and that is the same whether you are able-bodied or you have special needs,' says Nick. 'With these mixed camps, we've done water activities, days out in other cities and everything that other groups do.'



A splendid time is guaranteed for all

Incredible dedication

Glancing around the camp, it is impossible not to be moved by the dedication and passion of the leaders and the thought of how many young people who have to deal with extra challenges throughout their lives have benefited in the past, and will benefit in the future, from crossing the path of such volunteers. This often includes individuals who run other sections and units in the district who are called upon to support these activities. ‘Claire has been fantastic,’ says Yvonne. ‘She has to adapt the Scouting she offers to the Troop’s level, but it works for Toby. He adores it.’

‘Claire and everyone at the 15th do a sterling job, really tremendous,’ agrees an understandably proud Nick. ‘She works her socks off. The Group has grown so much, and it’s just incredible to watch her go in the way she does things.’

‘My other role is to help run the London Agoonoree camp, which is a London-wide event for Scouts with special needs,’ Nick continues. ‘In 2010, we had 130 people on camp, about 45 with special needs, and the

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rest were helpers and nurses, and all sorts of people. Getting these young people outdoors is vital.’

The word ‘Agoonoree’ comes from the Greek word *agoon*, which means ‘a meeting of friends’, while ‘oree’ comes from Jamboree. And that is probably the best way to describe the weekend camp of the 15th Wallington and 3rd Beddington. Not as a special needs camp or a camp for young people with disabilities, but a Scouting meeting of friends.

more information

If you have any ideas to share or would like to know about special needs Scouting in your area, contact the Accessibility Project Team – special.needs@scouts.org.uk
Visit the Agoonoree London website at www.agoonoree.org

Photography by Becky Tompkinson