

HOW TO HAVE A JOINING CONFERENCE WITH A NEW FAMILY

What: A joining conference is a lot like a parent-teacher conference at the beginning of a school year. The unit/den leader should have a joining meeting for every scout. About 15% of Scouts have an acknowledged disability¹ and most disabilities don't change one's appearance, so "you can't judge a book by its cover". Keep the tone of the conference relaxed and friendly.

Why: A joining conference builds trust and rapport with the parents as partners in delivering the Scouting program. It gives you useful information about the unique attributes of the youth that will help you play to each youth's strengths, provide for each youth's special needs, and prevent conflict between the members of your unit.

When: A joining conference should take place soon (first month?) after a youth joins the unit. Remember, Scouting is open to all youth, so the conference happens **after** the youth has been accepted. It is not a "job interview". The youth has nothing to prove before joining the unit.

Who attends: One or both of the youth's parents and one or two responsible (ideally, disability-awareness trained) unit leaders who will have direct contact with the youth. At the Cub Scout level, the Den Leader should be included and the youth is not typically included. At the upper levels of Scouting, the youth is often included in the meeting, but good sense should prevail when deciding whether or not to include the youth.

Where: This is a candid and private conversation with the family, so the meeting should be out-of-earshot of others. It is OK to do this at a regular unit meeting, but you might have to hold the conference at a different place or time to get privacy.

Confidentiality: The parent is who decides what you and other unit leaders may know. Assume everything is confidential until the parent gives you permission to share with others. If you believe the youth will benefit from other key adult and youth leaders being brought into the loop, you may ask if you can brief them.

Topics: During the joining conference you want to learn: (1) what are unique strengths and struggles? (2) What accommodations/adaptations are being made at home and at school? (3) Does anything trigger emotional or behavioral struggles? (4) How does he/she act when things are about to be overwhelming? (5) What concerns do the parents have about putting their child in Scouting? – Never press for a diagnosis. Practically speaking, you don't need to know what the condition is called as long as you know what to watch out for and what to do.

A SAMPLE SCRIPT – Hi. I'm *name* and I'm the *leader position* of *unit type* ###. I'm glad you and *youth name* have joined our *unit type*. The other leaders and I want to give your child the best experience we can. I know we have told you what our unit is like, and it will help if you can tell us what makes your son/daughter unique. Can we have a few minutes? – To start with, is there anything you are concerned about? What are his/her strengths? Is anything harder for him/her than for others? Is there anything that helps him/her be successful at home or at school? Is there anything I need to watch out for or avoid doing with your son/daughter? Is there anything I need to make sure I do for your son/daughter? When he/she is struggling, how do you help him/her?

¹ The numbers are most likely higher as many moderate disabilities are either not formally diagnosed by professionals or may not be disclosed by the family.