



Girl Scouts of Northern Illinois

A Place Where I Belong

The term “inclusion” closely follows the mission and purpose of Girl Scouting. In fact, GSNI has our own **Belonging Statement**:

Girl Scouts of Northern Illinois draws inspiration from our Girl Scout Promise and Law in our Belonging Statement. Being a member of Girl Scouts of Northern Illinois means you are part of a community of diverse races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, and religions. We commit to providing an equitable and accessible Girl Scout Leadership Experience to all Girl Scouts in our council. We are champions for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access.

Girl Scouts is about sharing the fun, friendship, and the inherent power of Girl Scouts in an inclusive, supportive, youth-led environment.

Inclusion means that all Girl Scouts plan and participate in all activities, regardless of level of ability, gender, and all youth of color feel supported, welcomed, and treated with dignity and respect. GSNI does not have all the answers but pledges to work toward these goals as advocates and allies. GSNI seeks to address barriers that impede our members from reaching their highest potential.

Equity

Equity in Girl Scouts means giving every Girl Scout participant what they need to succeed, recognizing that different Girl Scouts face different barriers. It's not about treating everyone the same—it's about **responding to individual needs and creating fair opportunities** for all members to learn, grow, and feel valued.

Representation Matters

To make troop meetings and programs more friendly and culturally appropriate for youth of color, leaders should create an inclusive, affirming environment that reflects and values students' identities and lived experiences. This includes integrating diverse voices, histories, and contributions into the curriculum—not just during heritage months, but consistently throughout the year. Representation is critical: programs, flyers, posters, learning materials, and media should include authors, leaders, scientists, artists, and everyday people from different and diverse racial backgrounds. Girl Scouts should see people who look like them—and their families—reflected positively and powerfully in any

gathering place. Culturally relevant teaching practices should connect learning to Girl Scouts' backgrounds, languages, and communities. Building strong, trusting relationships, using inclusive and respectful language, and showing genuine interest in other Girl Scouts' cultures and experiences fosters belonging. It is important to actively address biases, challenge stereotypes, and create space for individual voices, storytelling, and expression. Partnering with families and community members, celebrating bilingualism, and maintaining high expectations with meaningful support help ensure Girl Scouts feel respected, seen, and empowered to thrive.

Traditions

Halloween Bash, Super Sellerbration, Service Units, Cadettes, and troops oh my! Our Girl Scout traditions are important, but sometimes it can seem like we're speaking our own language. Sometimes we unintentionally make new Girl Scouts, youth and adults, feel left out by using Girl Scout 'jargon'. This is a great inclusion tip, often used in educational or group settings (troop and service unit meeting) to foster belonging and clarity. It helps ensure:

- Everyone is on the same page.
- No one feels left out or confused.
- Cultural or community practices are respected and understood.

Gender-Inclusive Language

Using gender-inclusive language—such as saying “youth,” “members,” or “participants” instead of only “girls”—is an important step toward making all young people feel seen, respected, and welcome. While Girl Scouts is rooted in uplifting girls, today's youth come from diverse gender identities and expressions. Some may be nonbinary, gender-expansive, or questioning where they fit.

By shifting our language to be more inclusive, we send a powerful message: *You belong here, just as you are.* Words matter—and when we use inclusive terms, we affirm that Girl Scouts is a safe and supportive space where young people can grow, lead, and thrive.

This change doesn't erase our commitment to girls—it strengthens it by modeling empathy, acceptance, and equity. It also helps create a culture where all young people, regardless of gender identity, feel that they can participate fully and authentically.

Inclusive language is one way we show that everyone belongs in Girl Scouts.

We are asking for all Girl Scouts—youth members, volunteers, alums, supporters, families, donors, staff, and our suppliers and service providers—to commit to taking action to make the world a more equitable place.



A Place Where I Belong

Supporting Girl Scouts with Diverse Intellectual and Physical Abilities

GSNi is committed to making every Girl Scout feel welcome and working with families to include accommodations and modifications as needed. Communicate clearly with young people of all abilities and/or their caregivers to assess special needs and accommodations. For specific guidance on activities, see “Safety Activity Checkpoints” (SAC). Individual activity chapters will provide resources specific to that sport or activity, so always check SAC when planning an activity. Our goal is to include all youth members who demonstrate a desire to participate. Always ask for their preferences.

Overall, adults can support neurodivergent youth by creating structured, inclusive, and flexible learning environments that honor individual strengths and needs. This includes using clear, multimodal communication, providing sensory-friendly spaces, offering choices in learning and assessment, and building predictable routines. Fostering a culture of belonging, teaching emotional regulation, and encouraging self-advocacy are key to helping Girl Scouts thrive. Collaborating with families and specialists, and continuously learning about neurodiversity and inclusive practices, ensures that all Girl Scouts feel seen, supported, and empowered in their spaces.

Adapt as a Girl Scout Leader

Creating an inclusive environment for all Girl Scouts—including youth of color, LGBTQ+ communities, youth from diverse faith traditions, and those from different socio-economic backgrounds and abilities—requires intentional leadership. It starts with getting to know each youth participant’s unique story, fostering positive interactions, and believing in the power of diversity to strengthen your troop. Inclusion, equity, and belonging are not one-time achievements but continuous practices that call for flexibility, creativity, and thoughtful planning. In many ways, this is what you already do as a Girl Scout troop leader—creating safe spaces where every youth participant feels welcomed, valued, and celebrated for who they are.

Sometimes, youth may need adaptations to fully participate in Girl Scouting. An adaptation is an individualized support that helps a young person engage in activities and meet the same expectations as peers. For example, a Girl Scout may need extra time to complete an art activity, materials that reflect their cultural background or family traditions, or encouragement to express themselves in ways that align with their gender identity. These adaptations enable them to fully join in, rather than be left out.

This differs from making exceptions, which involve excusing a youth from participation or changing the group’s shared expectations. For instance, instead of

helping a Girl Scout transition from an art activity to the next group activity, an exception would be letting them do art alone for the entire meeting without supporting the inclusion in the full program.

You may occasionally ask yourself whether you are providing an adaptation or making an exception. A helpful way to reflect on this is: adaptations are supports that help a Girl Scout meet the same behavioral expectations and participate alongside others, while exceptions remove those shared opportunities and expectations.

Ultimately, creating equitable experiences benefits all youth—whether they are navigating cultural differences, managing financial barriers, expressing their identities, or learning new social skills. When you center diversity, equity, and inclusion in your leadership, you are helping every Girl Scout grow in confidence, leadership, and belonging—together.

Reflective Practices as a Girl Scout Troop Leader:

- Create an environment that values and respects diversity
- Foster belonging
- Recognize that equity = treating everyone the same; it’s giving everyone what they need to succeed
- Provide resources equitably
- Model respectful ways to interact with all people
- Introduce a “Get to Know You”. Collect information such as accommodations to fully to participate, holidays they may observe, dietary restrictions, then the these into consideration when planning activities.
- Help facilitate friendships between the Girl Scouts in your troop or group
- Recognize all children have value
- Remove barriers
 - Consider physical, emotional, and academic barriers (e.g., provide quiet spaces, allow extra time, use assistive tech)
- Address bias—yours and theirs
 - Reflect on your own assumptions or classroom patterns (e.g., who you call on most)
 - Interrupt stereotypes and microaggressions when they happen

Inclusion Is a Journey

Remember, being inclusive isn’t about being perfect—it’s about being intentional, reflective, and open to learning. Small, consistent actions create meaningful change over time. Let the youth lead. You are ready to fully embrace their peers so every youth can be their best self. Don’t let fear of addressing differences stop us from fostering a sense of belonging in our service units and troops.

Questions about how to ensure the inclusion of youth within the Girl Scout community?

Please email customercare@girlscoutsn.org.