

Engaging Youth

by Michael Burdo

Have you ever stopped to realize the variety of youth that we leaders have the privilege to come in contact with? They may cause us to want to pull our hair out, crack a rib laughing or lose sleep worrying but all youth are indeed unique and fun, each in their own different ways.

Engaging Youth in a Positive Manner

Before I attended CJ'07, I participated at the pre-camp preparation training weekend with about 350 Scouts and their respective leaders. In my role as Care Corps staff for the Connaught Ranges Sub-Camp, I felt that it was imperative for me to be able to engage the youth at the earliest possible time. I wanted them and their leaders to feel comfortable in being able to approach me later on with personal matters should the need arise. So I made it a point to be at the entrance gate to the pre-camp, and at the arrival field at the jamboree, so that I could greet each and every participant as they arrived for the adventure of a lifetime.

In order to engage youth and leaders I maintain a positive attitude with a presence of wholesome humour. A smile is understood in any language or multi-cultural group and it goes far in commencing a friendship. By far, a smile with a positive, engaging sense of humour goes miles in reaching out to youth.

In interacting with Scouts with special needs, be it ADHD children, autistic youth, children with Asperger's Syndrome, youth with physical disabilities or any other youth, it is imperative that one finds a way to meet them at their comfort level. Hence, with autistic children I attempt to understand just what their interests are and then strive to obtain permission to enter in at their skill level. For instance, when I had a teenage autistic lad in my Scout troop, I quickly determined that he liked to play with a ball and he loved to read a favourite book in his possession at all the meetings. One night, I slowly approached into his sitting area and asked if he would read me a piece from his book. He immediately responded in kind and

thus I was able to build a relationship with him. By further demonstrating that I could be relaxed and inviting with his mother when she would arrive to drop off or pick up her son, Bobby came to realize that I was a partner. Various techniques like this work quite effectively in engaging youth whether or not they have special needs.

In my numerous years as a Scouter, I have repeatedly discovered that the leaders who are the most effective in encouraging their youth and positively challenging them are those who have a gift for connecting with and engaging the children. This gift is their relaxed, fun-like attitude embodied in a strong sense of humour where the leaders are not afraid at times to laugh at themselves and admit that they are not perfect. They are able to lead, and they are able to play and have fun as well. Special needs youth will respond the very same as Scouts without special needs when you possess this gift and put it to good use in creative and meaningful ways. The important and ongoing focus should be that of discovering a way to engage youth in a positive and meaningful manner. A smile, a sense of good natured humour, and a genuine awareness for the interests of each youth does that. I continue to find that all the best leaders have these characteristics in common. X

— Michael Burdo B.A.; B.S.W., Youth and Family Counselor, Scout Counselor with 92nd Ottawa Scout Troop, Ontario.

Engaging Youth — A New Column

You may recognize Michael Burdo's name; he is a Scout counselor and Youth and Family counselor in his "real" job, who has previously written articles for *The Leader*. He believes that, "No matter how unique each child in our group is with their individual personality and strengths, every child is deserving of our patience, warmth and understanding." Michael was happy to agree to pass on his advice for coping and helping all the different kinds of youth who enjoy our programs. Watch for this new column every issue.

Got a question? Send them in to *The Leader* (leader@scouts.ca) and we will print the answer for one question each issue.



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