Supporting Young Neurodivergent People at Scouts SA Camps

A practical guide for parents before, during and after camp

Scouts camp can be exciting, adventurous and a great opportunity to build confidence and independence.

For a neurodivergent young person, it can also mean a lot of change at once:

- New surroundings and sleeping arrangements
- Changes to routine and sleep
- Lots of people and social interaction
- Physical activity and sensory demands
- Managing belongings and personal care
- Following instructions in a busy environment
- Being away from familiar supports

The goal isn't to make camp easy.

The goal is to make it predictable, supported and achievable.

*Adapted from **Sharon Collon**, Functional Family — Episode 84: "School Camp and ADHD: What to Do Before, During and After".*

BEFORE CAMP

1. Talk to your Scout Leader early

Share information about your young person's:

- Strengths and interests
- Likely challenges
- Early signs of overwhelm
- What helps them regulate
- How they respond to instructions
- Any personal care or medication needs
- What they can do when they need a break

Think of it as giving the Leader a *user guide to your young person*.

2. Find out what to expect

Ask your Leader about:

- Where they will sleep and who they will sleep with
- The daily routine and meal times
- Activities and physical demands
- Toilets and other facilities
- What happens at night
- Where they can go if they need help or quiet time
- What equipment they need

If possible, look at photos, maps or information about the campsite together.

The more familiar camp feels beforehand, the less your young person has to work out on the day.

3. Choose a "go-to" Leader

Make sure your young person knows:

"If I don't know what to do or things get too much, I go to _____."

Ideally, the Leader should know your young person, understand their needs and be someone they feel comfortable approaching.

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A named person is much easier to find when a young person is overwhelmed.

4. Sort out medication and medical information

Don't leave this until drop-off.

Check with your Scout Leader about:

- Required medical information
- Medication storage and administration
- Required authorisations or paperwork
- When medication will be given
- What happens if routines change

Check the specific requirements for your Group and camp.

5. Practice camping skills

If something will be new at camp, practice it beforehand.

For example:

- Sleeping in a sleeping bag
- Using a tent
- Using a torch/head torch
- Managing clothes and belongings
- Using camping toilets
- Applying sunscreen and insect repellent
- Keeping track of their drink bottle

Familiar beats new. A practice run can remove a lot of unnecessary stress.

6. Make packing simple

Avoid leaving everything until the night before.

Try:

- Packing clothes into day-by-day outfits
- Using labelled bags or packing cubes
- Labelling belongings with their name
- Packing spare socks and underwear
- Checking the specific camp packing list

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The aim is to reduce decisions when your young person is tired or distracted.

7. Protect sleep

Camp sleep may be very different from home.

Think about:

- Noise and other campers
- Early mornings and late nights
- Temperature
- Sleeping on the ground
- Difficulty switching off

Practice unfamiliar equipment beforehand and consider what familiar items might help.

Less sleep can mean less capacity to regulate.

8. Make a simple "when things get too much" plan

Work this out together before camp.

If I feel overwhelmed:

1. Stop and take a breath.
2. Find my Leader.
3. Ask for a break.
4. Get some water.
5. Go somewhere quieter if appropriate.
6. Rejoin the group when I'm ready.

Taking a break isn't failing. It's a skill.

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DURING CAMP

9. Don't expect them to manage exactly like everyone else

Support isn't failure. It's okay to need:

- Clearer or repeated instructions
- More reminders
- Extra transition time
- Downtime
- Help finding belongings
- A quieter space
- Support with regulation

10. Watch for overload

Camp can combine:

physical activity + noise + excitement + social interaction + less sleep

For some young people, eventually that becomes:

"I'm done."

Help them use their plan before they reach crisis point.

It's okay to:

- Sit quietly
- Take a bathroom or water break
- Have some time away from the group
- Talk to their Leader
- Spend a few minutes somewhere quieter

11. Don't panic if they don't contact you

Your young person may be busy, having fun, tired or completely absorbed in camp.

If there is a significant problem, Leaders have your contact details.

No message doesn't automatically mean something is wrong.

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WHEN THEY COME HOME

12. Expect a possible "post-camp crash"

Your young person may come home:

- Exhausted
- Irritable or emotional
- Quiet or withdrawn
- Overwhelmed
- Tearful or angry
- Unable to talk about camp
- Saying they hated it or "nothing happened"

This doesn't necessarily mean camp went badly.

They may simply be exhausted from several days of managing new surroundings, social demands, activity, excitement and less sleep.

13. Give them time to recover

If possible, keep the day after camp quiet.

Prioritise:

- Sleep
- Rest
- Food
- Shower
- Familiar surroundings
- Quiet time
- Low demands

Don't expect them to immediately return to normal capacity.

14. Don't interrogate them at pickup

You may be desperate to hear everything!

Instead of lots of questions, try:

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"I'm really glad you're home. You can relax now. Tell me about camp when you're ready."

The stories may come out later (sometimes even days later).

15. Look for the wins

Once they've recovered, ask:

- What were you proud of?
- What was easier than you expected?
- What helped when things were hard?
- What did you learn?
- What would you do differently next time?

This helps turn camp into a story of confidence and capability, not just survival.

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THE SIMPLE CAMP PLAN

Before camp, make sure your young person knows:

WHO — Who is my go-to Leader?

WHERE — Where do I go if I need help or a break?

WHAT — What do I do when I feel overwhelmed?

WHEN — What do I need to know about medication or other supports?

HOW — How will I manage my clothes, equipment and belongings?

THEN — What will I need when I come home?

THE BIG REMINDER FOR PARENTS

Your job isn't to make sure your young person never struggles at camp.

Your job is to help them have the support and skills to work through the struggle.

Camp isn't a test of whether they can cope without you.

It's an opportunity to discover:

"I can do hard things — and I know what to do when things get hard."

Prepare the scaffolding.

Share the information with Leaders.

Teach your young person how to ask for help or a break.

Then let them have their adventure.

Parent tip: Every Scout Group and camp can have different requirements. Always check the specific camp information and packing list provided by your Scout Leader, particularly for medication, medical information, activities and equipment.

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