

Working with... Parents

(Somewhat dated, and not politically correct, but this article contains a number of ideas on how to get parents involved.)

Few problems in Scouting receive as much discussion as the question of parental participation. Yet, in my work in the professional recreation field, I realized long ago that Scouting enjoys one of the best parent-boy ratios. In fact, most agencies working with youth would be happy to have half the help and interest we have!

In this article I am not going to deal with the recruitment of leaders. I feel leaders will come forward as a natural growth process out of a good working relationship with the parents. I intend to outline some parent-boy activities which will help the parents know what you're doing, and hopefully, get them to help you do it.

In the Beginning

Make it a policy to hold a registration night each fall. One parent from each family must bring the prospective recruit to your meeting, pay his fee, fill out a current information sheet, etc. At this time, the leaders introduce themselves, chat with each parent and ask how the parent can help the group. You might do this by handing the parent a hobby or skill information sheet to fill out, and then discussing their interests in the light of your program requirements. Whatever method you choose, it is essential to make it quite clear, in a tactful manner, that the operation of your group requires the help of parents; that everyone will be asked for help in some way and if everyone cooperates, they may only receive one or two calls in a year. It has always surprised me to meet parents who had no idea that they were expected to help with the group program.

Some parents will not show up the first night. A few might have a valid reason for not doing so. Give them another opportunity to come at the beginning of any meeting for the next three weeks. After that, if they still have not come forward, the Scouter should visit the home. In our group, we do not register a boy prior to meeting his parents. The visit to the home will often tell you why the parents have not come forward. If you recognize an impossible situation, the boy should be registered immediately and helped in every way to fit into the Scouting program. No boy should be denied the opportunity of Scouting because of lack of parental interest.

Follow-Up

Always contact parents who have boys involved in investitures, Going-Up ceremonies, major badge presentations, special events in the group or any good reason that you happen to dream up.

At such times tell the parents when and where it will happen; how long it will take; and to bring their cameras.

As a leader introduce the parents to the boys; stick to your announced schedule; personally thank the parents for their interest.

Regular parental visits will become part of your group's tradition. If one lad brings his parent(s), the others will soon demand that theirs be present. Once you see a parent a couple of times, you are no longer a stranger. It's very easy to turn down a voice over the telephone asking for a favour, if you've never met the caller. These above two policies will prevent this from happening in your group.

Group News

Keep the parents informed. Our group issues a three month schedule of events and sends a copy to every home. The major activities are set out briefly as to time, date and place. This way, parents can plan weekend events that will not conflict with camping weekends, apple days, church parades, etc. As these events roll around, the interested parent will remind the boy and the group will benefit by better attendance.

If something special is coming up, we send home a duplicated or photocopied letter as a reminder. This is given to the boy at the regular meeting prior to the event. We find most of the information gets home.

Keeping in Touch

Regular boy-parent activities are possible--even desirable. Here are some that have worked for us.

Parent and Son Banquets

This is the most common link between the group and the home. They range from catered affairs involving hundreds, to small bring-your-own-covered-dish-dinner events. These can be good events, but are often ruined by long presentations, puffed-up speakers, and lack of one key person to keep things rolling. Try to avoid these errors.

Monthly Church Parades

Monthly church parades used to be a common link with the family, but it has fallen into disuse lately. Why not revive it with the help of your spiritual leader?

If held on Sunday evening, there are many possibilities for programs following the service and a snack before going home.

Dad and Lad Hikes

A good Sunday afternoon activity, especially in the winter when there is little to do. Keep it short and not too strenuous, so even out-of-shape dads can take part!

Hobby Night

Line up five or six moms and dads with interesting hobbies. Have them stationed at different parts of your meeting hall. Let your sixes or patrols rotate from parent to parent as they demonstrate their particular skill. If possible, get the boys involved in a project at one of the stations. For example, we had a Norwegian pancake demonstration prior to the 14th World Jamboree. After our Scandinavian friend made the batter and carefully checked the temperature of his cast iron pan, he turned the cooking over to the Scouts. This certainly proved to be more popular than just watching the demonstration.

On another occasion a fiddler provided a demonstration of traditional, country music. He brought a very old instrument with him, and before he played, told us how old it was and how it had been carefully passed down through several generations of his family. After he finished playing he casually passed the fiddle to one of my clumsiest boys for a try. I know the boy appreciated this gesture, even if I didn't.

We generally finish off this type of evening with hot chocolate and cookies for all.

Family Day

Sponsor a country fair type of entertainment with a variety of easy games of chance. For example: tossing jar rings onto dowels that are sticking haphazardly out of a cardboard box; bursting a balloon swinging on a string, by hitting it with a dart; throwing peanuts into a mailing tube that has been glued onto the end of a cardboard box and painted to look like an elephant; throwing a wet sponge at a leader who is brave (or foolish) enough to stick his head out of a one foot hole cut in a sheet of poly hanging from the ceiling.

Of course, there are many similar stunts that can be arranged. The entire family is invited to attend and try their luck at the games. Sell or give away popcorn and cold drinks. (Perhaps Guides or Explorers can look after this.)

Mothers' Night

Mothers arrive and sit down to a light banquet prepared by the group. The boys, after pinning a carnation corsage on each mother, serve the meal. Some entertainment should follow.

Dad or Mom of the Month Award

Each boy writes down an achievement of his mom or dad in the past month. All reports are collected by the leader and read to the boys. They vote on the mom or dad who should be honoured. That person is invited to the next meeting to receive a suitable award in a short ceremony involving the honoured parent's son.

Father and Son Sports

The natural rivalry is there, all you have to do is arrange the time, place and sport. Hockey, baseball, field games and tug of war are good examples. However, in planning, remember the age and condition of the fathers.

Tell Me Your Job

Dads and moms have interesting jobs. Invite them to tell about their work in short, ten minute yarns. Perhaps a visit to some interesting place or factory will develop. I recall one dad who arranged for our lads to make a visit to the local seaside piers. The highlight of the day was a visit to an English ship where the boys engaged in a snowball fight with the ship's crew. Although the seamen were acquainted with snow, they had considered it more of a nuisance than a recreational possibility, until our fellows showed them what great fun it could be.

Earlier I mentioned that leadership grows out of good parent relationships. So does friendship. One of our group's most dedicated dads first brought his boy to the troop on a night when we planned an outdoor excursion. When he arrived, we had just left. He didn't want to disappoint his boy, so he drove around until he found us a few miles away from our headquarters, enjoying a romp on the Atlantic shore. The boy stayed for the evening and later told his dad of the fun he'd had. I don't think we had too many outings after that one, that the father didn't attend. In time, he became our group treasurer and then served as district treasurer and coordinator for Apple Day--and he's still going up.

We've sat at many a campfire and drank a lot of hot chocolate over the 12 years since that first night we met. I like to think of him as a good friend now, not only as the father of one of the boys. And I hope he thinks of me in the same terms.

Of course, you can see the whole idea behind these activities is to bring the family into Scouting and Scouting into the family.

Sure, it will take work--phone calls, follow-up calls, extra planning. Certainly there will be disappointments, but nobody ever said being a Scouter was an easy job--only a rewarding one. Especially if you can Work with Parents.