

Scouters + Kids + Parents = Great Programme

Section Scouters frequently complain that many parents won't help. They say these parents use Scouting as a babysitting service and don't appreciate how much effort it takes to run a successful program.

Well, let's face it: most parents don't fully understand Scouting. They have a notion that it is a good organization and Scouts do good deeds. Beyond that, they are pretty vague on Scouting's programmes and, therefore, have little idea how they can help.

The biggest single reason parents don't help is that nobody ever asks them. Sure, on the first night at the beginning of the Scouting season, their kid's Scouter probably says, "Anytime you feel like helping out, you're more than welcome." Without more specific direction, most parents don't know how to contribute and are concerned that the Scouter will see their interest as an intrusion.

Yes, I can hear you now. "I don't have time to run after parents," you say. "I have enough to do looking after the kids without looking after the adults, too." It's a familiar cry, but if you don't take time to involve the parents, you won't have the support you need to run an exciting programme for the kids.

Besides, your target isn't to involve every parent immediately. Start with one and give that person the task of enlisting the help of others. And be realistic; not every parent can devote hours every week to help their child through Scouting. Not everyone is as keen as you!

Getting Started

Kick off your Scouting season with a registration and orientation night. Have your experienced kids play host to new members and their bewildered parents while you complete the requisite paperwork.

Your young hosts can describe what they did in last year's programme and outline what they hope to do in the coming year. Encourage them to display their badges and explain how they earned them. And have them make the first appeal for parental help.

A nice touch at this stage is to give parents a page or small booklet that explains the aim and principles of Scouting, the methods of Scouting and, especially, the cost of Scouting. Show how expenses are met through fundraising activities that need parental support. Point out that successful fundraising means a less expensive programme for their children. And clearly outline what you expect of parents: for example, that they ensure their children regularly attend meetings in full uniform.

Follow up with a phone call or visit. Since your goal is to keep parents informed, try not to baffle them with Scouting jargon. The better they understand what your programme entails, the more likely they are to volunteer to help you run it.

Increase their comfort level with the section. Make them feel like they belong. Remind them that they're de facto members of the group committee. And be sure to tell them what other parents are doing to help.

Introduce parents to all the youth members of your section by asking a parent to read or recite the prayer (or a prayer of their choice) in your opening ceremony. Parents will be there anyway, having come to drop off their kids. The parent you ask to participate will have to stay only a few minutes longer than usual.

Similarly, parents who come in at meeting's end to pick up their offspring can offer the closing prayer, or even a "Parent's Minute" in place of the Scouter's Five. Scouting programs are designed to reinforce the values parents hold; give parents a chance to express and share their values with young members.

Easing Them In

Anticipate parental excuses and be ready to suggest alternatives. For example, if parents say they can't make it to your meeting because they need a babysitter or don't have transportation, offer to bring the meeting to them.

How can you do that?

One way is to invite three or four parents to set up an instruction station in each of their homes. Each station offers a five minute demonstration of a simple but useful skill or provides some practical information from the parent's area of expertise. The subject matter can be as simple as cooking tips or planning a menu.

During an evening, Patrols or Sixes visit the home instruction stations in rotation and report back to the Troop or Pack with what they've learned. The activity lets parents be involved without leaving their homes, and five minute presentations to a series of small groups are easy to stage.

Apply the idea of using homes as bases or stations in a wide game. You start Patrols or Sixes with clues on how to reach the first of several bases. At every subsequent base, the parent gives clues leading to other bases. Involved parents will not need to leave the comfort of their homes. They probably won't even miss much of their favourite television shows.

Stay-at-home parents might also volunteer to set up a garage sale in their driveway one summer weekend morning. The kids collect, price, and label all the goods and handle all the sales. Parents just keep an eye on things from their lawn chairs as they read their newspapers and enjoy their morning coffee.

Another way for parents to help from home is as the "mystery address" in a door-to-door fundraising sales campaign. The mystery address parent notes the name of every youth member who makes a sales pitch at that address, and you award a prize to every young person who calls at the address. It's a good way to encourage your young salespeople to cover all the addresses in your target sales area. Again, parents participate without any extraordinary effort.

Building Up

Once you've eased some parents into painless participation, invite them to serve as badge examiners. You supply all the information and criteria they need to check out badge candidates. Candidates make a 15-30 minute appointment with the parent examiner, perhaps just before your weekly meeting. Presto - parental involvement and badge work completed while you devote your attention to running an uninterrupted program for the rest of the kids.

After parents have met some of their children's Scouting peers, they'll feel more comfortable about inviting over these kids for a simple supper of wieners and beans one evening before a meeting. The whole patrol or six attends in full uniform. They help cook the food and set the table. One of them offers a grace before the meal.

Keep the menu simple. They are there for a social event, not the food. After supper, they clean up the dishes before setting off as a group to your weekly meeting. The whole thing needn't take more than an hour. Who could refuse such an easy task? And, after one parent has played host to five or six kids, the other parents will surely feel some obligation to reciprocate in kind.

Maybe an enthusiastic parent will extend the Patrol or Six supper idea to an afternoon barbecue in the backyard. If a summer pool party is impossible, how about water fights with the garden hose? And remember, a backyard camp is the perfect place to practise winter camping skills for the first time. Can you persuade a parent with a personal computer to serve as your section's newsletter editor? Youth members act as reporters, writers, and typists. You ensure copying and distribution. The parent-editor gathers the items and publishes a page every month or so. Such a newsletter actively involves at least one more parent and keeps other parents informed about the section's program.

If parents beg off helping because they don't have "Scouting skills" such as fire-lighting or knot-tying, invite them to share their hobbies or professional skills. Can they arrange for a tour of their job location? Can their company send a representative to your meeting to explain the company's activities? Can they direct you to other resources?

With all that at-home activity, parents will be glad to come out to a meeting or even a camp, just to get away from it all. Each patrol or six might invite one parent (or more) as their guest at a weekend camp, for example. Be sure to emphasise that they are guests, not weekend servants.

If the parents know each other well enough, they can attend the camp as a Senior Patrol and demonstrate the skills they learned when they were in Cubs or Guides. And, if you've planned a camp schedule that stretches the available time to the limit, some parents might do the weekend's cooking chores, leaving everyone else free to concentrate on your intensive program.

There's no end of opportunities for parents to help. They can co-ordinate your section's community good turns or organize your group's Apple Day or Trees for Canada efforts. But remember, you have to ask them to help, tell them what you need done, show them how they can contribute, and explain the benefits to both them and their children.

If they don't respond positively to your first request, keep asking. You may have caught them at a bad time. Even if all they do is drive the kids to camp, it's a start.

Whatever parents do, be sure to thank them. Thank them every single time they help. If possible, publicize their contribution and your appreciation. At least announce which parents did what during the year at your annual parents' banquet.

Make your parents feel part of the Scouting family. After all, your youth members belong to these parents. Why not "invest" the parents along with every new Beaver, Cub, or Scout? Give them a Scout pin--the kind you wear with civilian clothes--imbedded in a small thin diagonal slice of cedar branch to be worn on a cord around the neck. Every time they help, award a bead to add to the cord. Then, at parents' banquets and camps, they can proudly wear their unique "Thanks" badges. A word of caution; remember to treat all your young members in the same way, no matter what the degree of their parents' participation. And be careful not to overdo parental involvement; you may find yourself out of a job as a Scouter!