



Age Sections

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How young? How old? What's the purpose?

- First age section?
- Flexible age limits?
- From Cubs to Scouts

FIRST AGE SECTION?

Q - In our association, the first age section goes from age 0 to age 6. Is this normal?

A - I do not believe that your association is recruiting babies! I think that your association has probably decided to remove any lower age limit to the Scout programme, leaving local leaders free to decide by themselves the age from which they want to welcome young people into Scouting.

There should be specific reasons for such a decision. In any case, it seems that the current tendency among national Scout associations is to extend the length of the Scout programme. At the beginning of Scouting, the Scout programme, starting around age 8 and ending around age 20, was developed to last 12 years. Today, in some associations, it is supposed to last more than 20 years; for example: from 4 to 25 years old.

One can wonder if it is not too much and whether there is not a danger in stretching Scouting over too many years.

On one hand, the Scout method was firstly developed for young adolescents, from 11 to 15. Later, age ranges were enlarged towards childhood, with the Cub Scout section, and towards post-adolescence, with the Rover section. However, it seems quite clear that the Scout method is based on co-operation within a group. Research has shown that it is not before age 7 that children become able to co-operate within a group, e.g. to share roles and respect common rules. Therefore, is it really possible to do Scouting before this age?

On the other hand, such a long programme requires numerous age sections, not only 3 as at the beginning of Scouting but 5 or even 6 (2 "pre-adolescent" sections before 11, one or two "adolescent" sections between 11 and 15 and one or two "post-adolescent" sections after 15. Is it realistic to want to develop so many age sections offering high-quality programmes? Is it really a way to involve more young people in Scouting?

Would it not be better to focus Scouting on a more limited age range and be able to make a difference with a high-quality programme?

Finally, another question should be raised: by enlarging Scouting towards childhood, there is a risk of unbalancing the age section system of an association. It is true that welcoming younger children corresponds to social demand. In many families both parents work and there is not a lot of leisure activities for young children. Creating sections for young children may be a way to get new members. However, several associations have experienced that this can give Scouting the image of a children's organisation, which is less attractive to adolescents and post-adolescents.

Many people believe that the most important goal of Scouting is to help young people during their transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is a difficult period for many young people today and more and more of our partners are evaluating Scouting on its ability to help adolescents find their way in society and take on adult roles.

FLEXIBLE AGE LIMITS?

Q - We have a Cub Scout in our pack who is small for his age but is due to go up to Scouts. His parents and he both feel he will not fit in and want him to stay in Cubs for an extra six months. He will leave the organisation if he cannot. The extra six months could see him joining a Scout Troop, surely that is what we want. Is it possible to 'stretch' a Cub Scouts upper age limit to suit the Cubs ability to fit in with his social and educational skills or his physical size as in this case?

A - In my view, the limits of any age section should be adapted to individual cases. If you think that this Cub Scout should stay for an extra six months in the pack, you certainly have the right to make this decision.

However, you should discuss this with the Cub Scout himself in order to make the decision together. I mean, the decision should not be imposed to him. You wrote: "His parents and he both feel that he will not fit in and want him to stay in Cubs for an extra six months."... Well, the interesting point is to know what the Cub Scout himself thinks.

It is natural for parents to be afraid of their small boy having to face new situations. But it is always disastrous to put a child in a situation of failure - I mean to put pressure on him in order to convince him that he is not able to face a new situation. That could destroy the good self-image that every child needs in order to be motivated to grow.

Remember what Baden-Powell, our Founder, wrote: "There is five per cent of good even in the worst character. The sport is to find it, and then to develop it on to an 80 or 90 per cent basis." He also said that the leader should not look at the child's faults but at his qualities, in order to develop the qualities until they overcome the faults.

Do not forget that children need to face new challenges in order to grow. However, it is true that challenges have to be in line with the child's possibilities. B.P also wrote: "The secret of getting good results in character and reliability in a boy is to expect much of him and to trust him with responsibility. But I do not say teach him to swim by throwing him into deep water and expecting him to be able to make his way safely. You must, as a first step, give him confidence in his own powers by helping him to develop those powers, by training him, and by showing him, through your own example, how to swim."

So, in the case of your little Cub, you should try to make a list of all his qualities and discuss them with him, his parents and the Scout unit leader. The questions to ask the Cub Scout are the following: "Are you interested in joining the Scout unit? What are the skills and the qualities you can offer the Scouts? Do you think you are ready to become a Scout? Do you think you still have to prepare yourself by developing new skills?"

The question to ask the parents and the Scout leader is the following: "Is it not possible to consider that the Cub Scout's qualities could counterbalance his weak points and allow him to become a Scout". The Scout unit leader should also consider how he could welcome this child and help him to find his place within the Scout unit.

Scout leaders sometimes think that future Scouts should meet some specific standards when their own role is in fact to be able to welcome any child and to adapt their programme accordingly. Cub Scouts should be welcomed by the Scouts. Their qualities and skills should be valued. Too often they are treated like small children without experience and are not welcomed properly.

However, if you and the Cub Scout finally reach the conclusion that he is not yet ready to pass on to become a Scout, you should help him to look at this POSITIVELY and to identify new challenges to face in order to grow. Maybe, you should show that you are confident in his abilities by giving him an important role in the six or in the pack during the six next months.

You have to take into consideration all of these aspects before making any decision. There is no ready-made solution and to conclude let me once again quote our Founder: "I do not want Cubmasters to feel themselves fettered by traditions, rules and syllabuses. Their own experience and imagination, their own sympathy with boy nature will be their best guide."

FROM CUBS TO SCOUTS

Q - Until recently I was a Scout Group's Group Leader. We have an excellent Cub Scout section and that is thriving (I'm involved as assistant to our District Commissioner). However the problem arises that when the kids go on to Scouts we are generally losing 50% of them within the first 6 months at Scouts.

The reason that they've given is that, "it's boring!". The Scout Leader has been in Scouting for quite sometime now and has done plenty of training but still can't see that he's not providing an adequate program.

He doesn't appear to be running a proper patrol system and with this goes all the obvious problems. Unfortunately, nobody can see an easy solution and I'm hoping that you'll maybe able to help?

Can the patrol system work with a Troop of approximately 10-12 members or less?.

He also has a tendency to interfere with Group committee doings and sometimes with the running of the Cubs.

A - The problem you are describing is frequent.

For Scouting to be successful, all the leaders in the local group should work as an educational team covering all the age ranges. More concretely, this means that the Cub Scout leaders, the Scout leaders and the Venture (Explorer) leaders should meet regularly (once a month?), under the chairmanship of the Group Scout leader in order to consider together how the Scout programme is delivered through the various sections.

The issues you are facing would therefore find a natural way to be discussed and you could find the best solutions together. We should not forget that the local group is the only place in Scouting where it is possible to consider the concrete implementation of the Scout programme through the various age ranges.

This is why it is so strategically important. Unfortunately, too often, the group is just considered a management structure: the group leader has to recruit leaders, find money, deal with the local authorities, etc. That is wrong: the Scout group leader's function should be considered an educational function and not just an administrative function.

The Scout group leader is responsible for the good implementation of the Scout programme from the Beavers to the Venture Scouts. If a unit leader is not doing his/her job properly, it is the Scout leader's duty to interfere, give advice, put the issue on the agenda of the Group Committee and if no solution can be found, ask the leader to quit his/her responsibility.

You see the problem very clearly: it is not acceptable that all the good work you are doing with the Cubs is destroyed by the leader of the Scout section. Therefore, my advice would be to call a meeting of all the unit leaders, under the chairmanship of the Group leader, to discuss this situation and try to help the leader of the Scout section to change his ways of working.

You could download the Leader's toolbox "Understanding the patrol system". This could be a good basis for your

discussion.

To conclude, let me add one thing: it is possible to start using the patrol system with two patrols of six members in a Scout unit. The only difficulty will be that the Unit Council (or Patrol leader's Council) which should be the governing of the unit will be very limited (2 patrol leaders with the adult leaders).

In this case, I would advise you to also invite the assistant patrol leaders to the meeting of the council.

However, in my view if there are only 12 Scouts in the unit, it is BECAUSE the patrol system is not applied. To work successfully with adolescents, you should give them responsibilities and the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process. This is the main goal of the patrol system.