From Joining to Belonging: Strengthening Youth Retention in Scouting

Mike Matzinger & Rob Seate

We don’t have a RECRUITMENT issue……

We have a RETENTION issue

#ADVENTUREON!

…membership is more than recruiting — it is also retention. In the coming year, we will intensify our focus on retention and on delivering a more meaningful experience for all members.

Roger Krone

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“The cowards never started, the weak died along the way, that leaves us.”

Shoe Dog, Phil Knight

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Membership Retention (December)

	Total	Packs	Troops
2025	56%	44%	76%
2024	62%	52%	77%
2023	70%	63%	80%
2022	71%	64%	80%
2021	59%	47%	78%
2020	52%	49%	57%

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Unit Counts (EOY)

	Total	Cubs	Troops
2025	39,288	15,462	20,038
2024	40,730	16,072	20,704
2023	41,559	16,296	21,244
2022	42,844	16,786	21,952
2021	44,952	17,800	22,575
2020	51,319	21,497	23,730
2019	79,634	35,296	35,641

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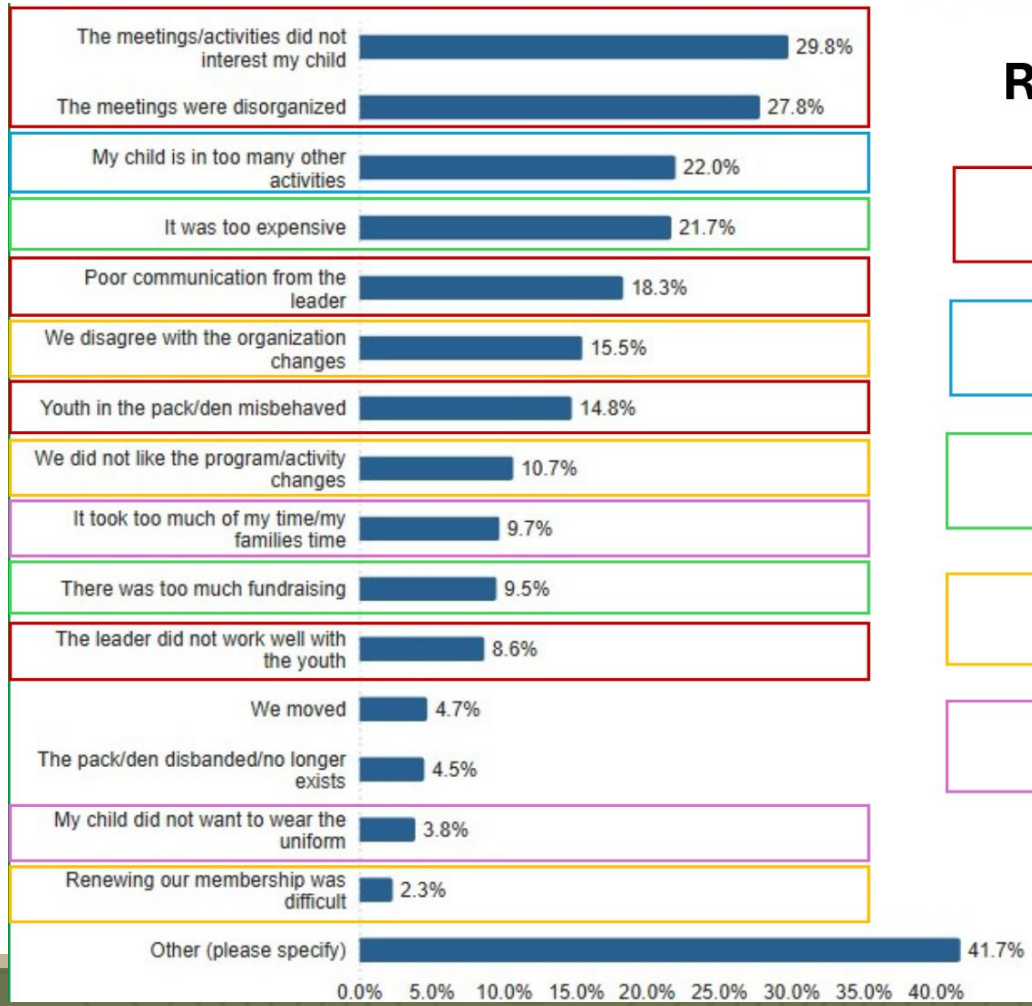
WHAT IS MOST INFLUENTIAL IN DETERMINING IF A SCOUT WILL STAY OR LEAVE?

UNIT LEADERSHIP



Reasons Cub Scouts Left

Poor unit experience

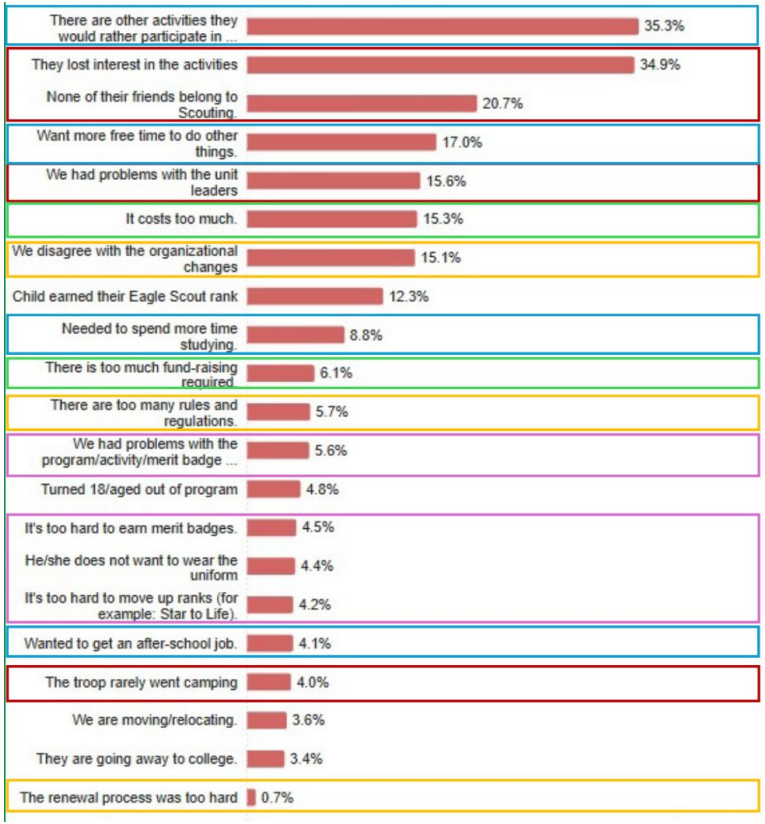
Other Activities

Cost/fundraising

Organizational Changes

Program Requirements

Note: %'s may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses.



Reasons Scouts BSA Left

- Poor unit experience
- Other Activities/Free Time
- Cost/fundraising
- Organizational Changes
- Program Requirements

Note: %'s may add to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

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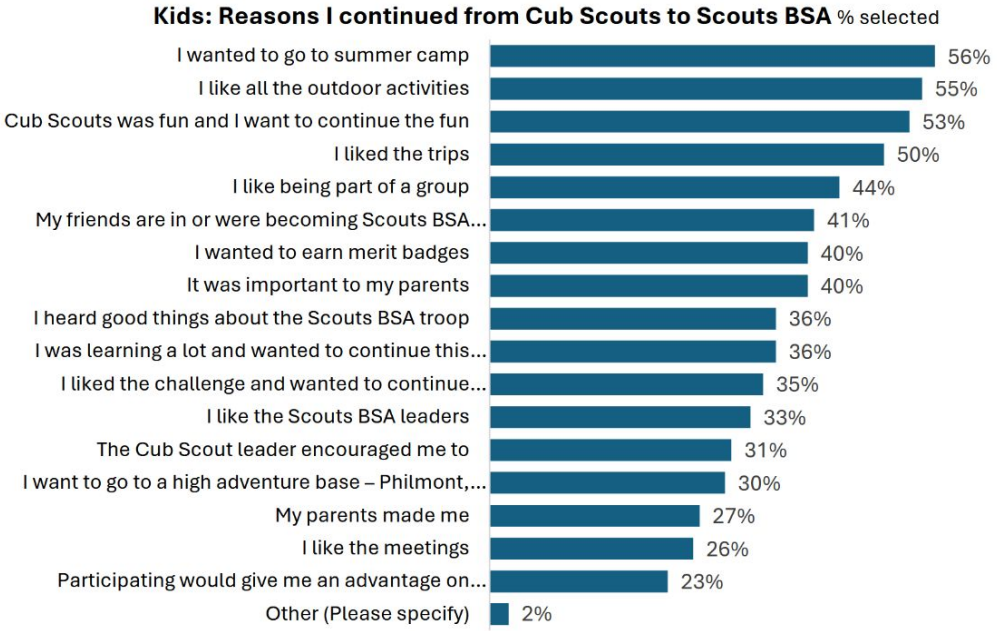
Kids' decision to move to Scouts BSA mostly has to do with the fun activities and social connection they enjoyed in Cub Scouting



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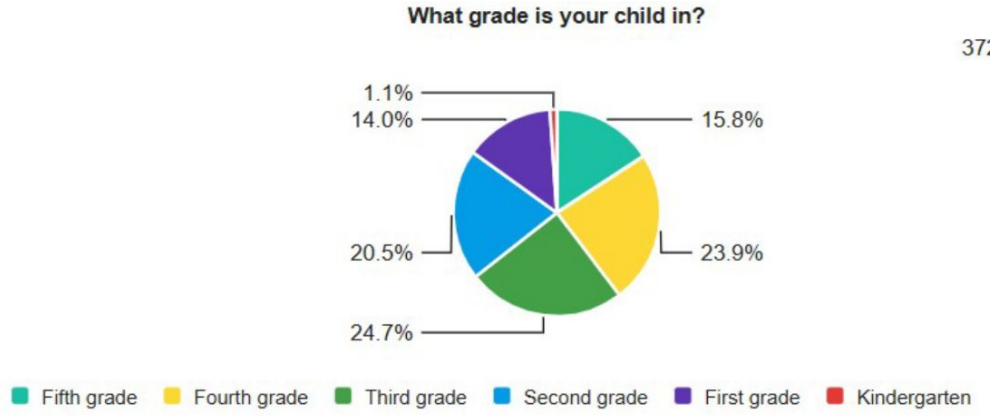
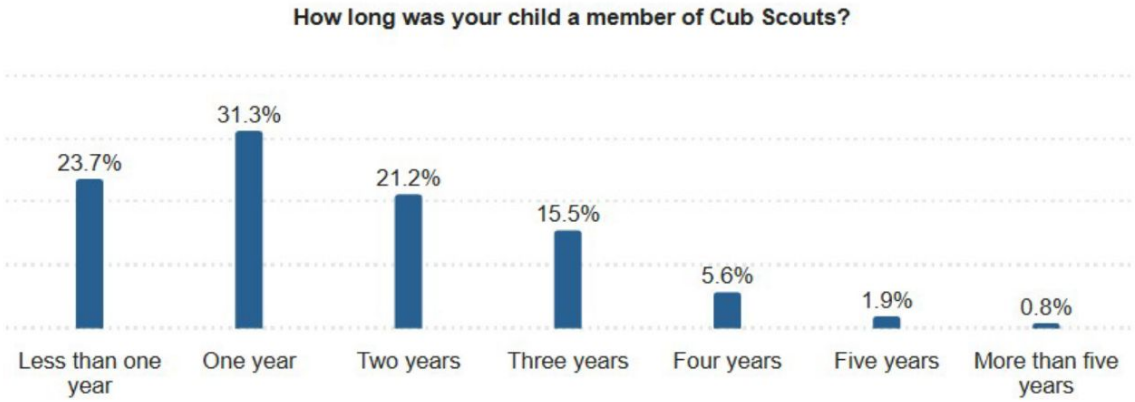


Among Cub Scouts who left, more than half leave within a year of joining.

Most left during or after the Wolf, Bear, or Tiger year



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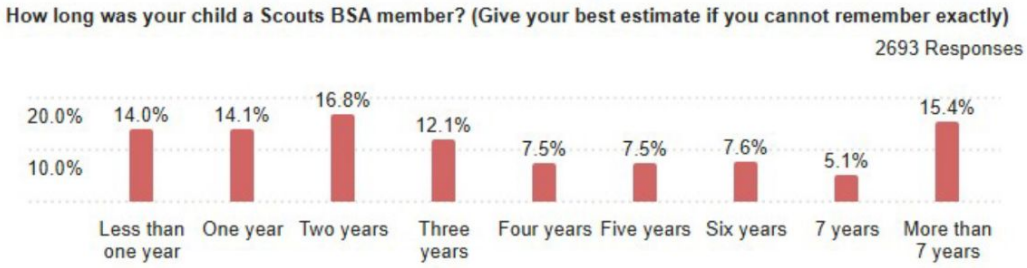
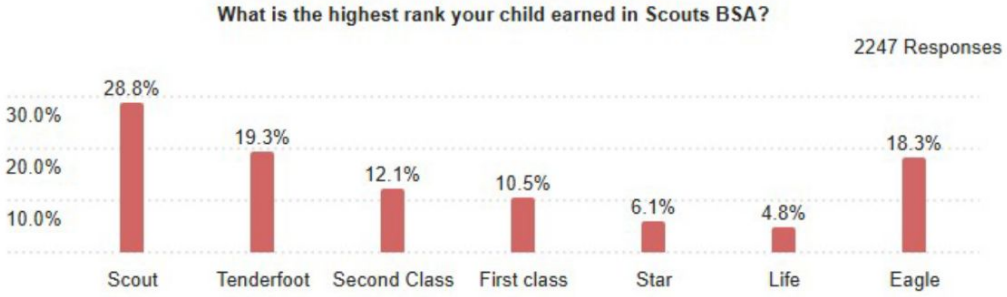


Among Scouts BSA who left, more than half leave within three years of joining.

Most leave before earning First Class.



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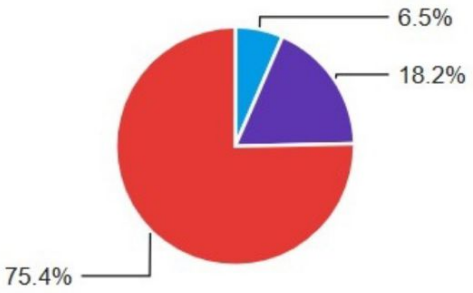
Cub Scout Parents

At the time you received the notice to renew the membership, which of the following best describes where you were in the decision-making process?

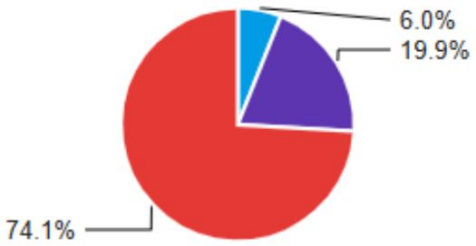
2925 Responses



More than 80% had not attended in 6 months or longer

Scouts BSA Parents

1973 Responses



- The notification prompted us to make the decision to discontinue Scouting
- We already made the decision not to renew, but we were still attending
- We had already stopped attending

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It’s me. It’s I. I’m the problem. It’s me. - T. Swift

#ADVENTUREON!

"Imagine what the best possible customer experience is and do that. Don't settle for the way things have been done before."

Jesse Cole, Savannah Bananas

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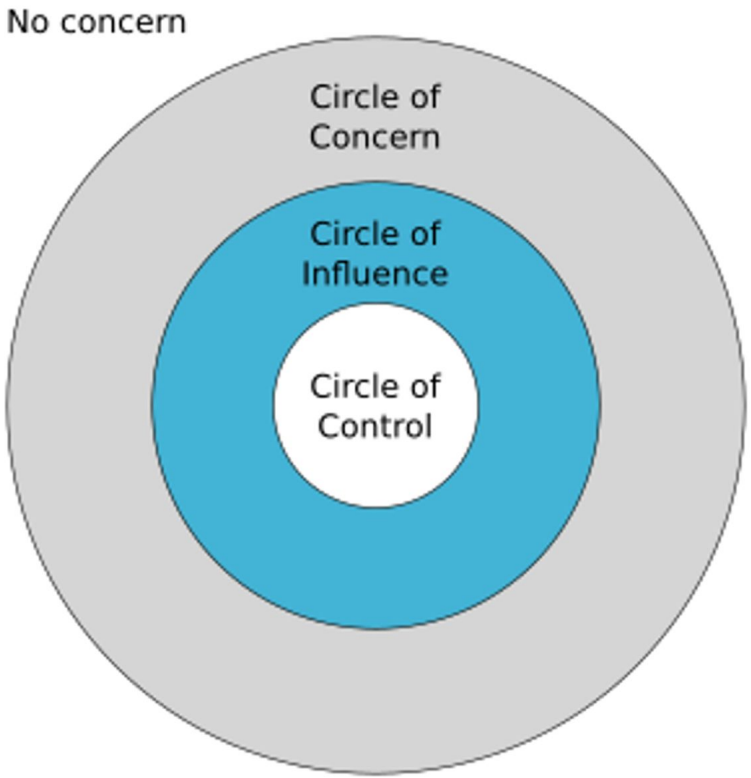

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Unit Leadership Matters

What can you do differently in your council to support unit leader?

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Our largest troops have shown us how to retain Scouts

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Listening to Our CST-15 Unit Leaders

- Identified all Troops for boys with a registered youth membership of 50 or larger = 65
- Identified all Troops for girls with a registered youth membership of 35 or larger = 15
- Emailed survey to all units, 10 Troops of girls and 20 Troops of boys responded
- Held focus groups with each cohort

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Program Quality and Fun

- Make every meeting active. Limit sitting and listening. Games, hands on skills, and movement keep youth engaged.
- Plan one standout event each month that Scouts talk about at school. Campfires, hikes, derbies, lock ins, service with impact.
- End meetings with something memorable. A challenge, skit, reflection, or surprise works well.
- Let youth lead as much as possible, especially in troops. Visible youth leadership keeps older Scouts invested.

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Early Wins and Progress

- Help new Scouts earn their first rank or badge quickly. Early success builds confidence and buy in.
- Track advancement closely and follow up when Scouts stall. Quietly remove barriers rather than waiting.
- Celebrate advancement often and publicly, even small steps.

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Family Engagement and Communication

- Clearly explain what Scouting is and is not at the start. Families who understand the program stay longer.
- Communicate consistently and simply. One platform, one weekly message, no surprises.
- Invite parents into the experience through service projects, camping, and courts of honor.
- Personally check in with families who miss a few meetings before absence becomes dropping out.

#ADVENTUREON!

Strong Onboarding

- Assign a buddy or mentor to every new Scout and family.
- Hold a new family orientation that explains uniforms, advancement, camping, and costs.
- For troops, involve older Scouts immediately in welcoming and teaching new members.

#ADVENTUREON!

Age Appropriate Programming

- For packs, keep meetings shorter and energetic. Cub Scouts should not sit for long.
- For troops, offer increasing adventure as Scouts age. High adventure, leadership roles, and specialized outings matter for retention after age 13.
- Create clear paths for older Scouts such as NYLT, leadership teams, teaching roles, and advanced outdoor skills.

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Belonging and Culture

- Build patrol identity in troops and den identity in packs. Names, flags, yells, and traditions matter.
- Watch for cliques and unkind behavior and address it early. A Scout who does not feel welcome will leave.
- Celebrate service and character, not just advancement.

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Leader Support and Sustainability

- Avoid leader burnout by sharing roles and keeping expectations realistic. Burned out leaders lose families.
- Train leaders so meetings run smoothly and confidently. Chaos drives families away.
- Plan calendars well in advance so families can commit.

#ADVENTUREON!

Retention Through Transitions

- Strengthen pack to troop bridging with joint events, shared campouts, and familiar faces.
- Keep fifth graders engaged during the transition year with special responsibilities and recognition.
- Follow up personally with Scouts who age out or step away to invite them back for specific events.

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Feedback and Continuous Improvement

- Ask Scouts what they enjoy and what they would change, then act on it.
- Survey parents annually about communication, program quality, and scheduling.
- Treat every Scout who leaves as a learning opportunity, not a failure.

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