

From the desk of

Akela 1st Midrand Cub Pack



Why Scouting Matters Now

By James Urry, Pack Scouter and Scout Group Leader, 1st Midrand Scout Group

In March 2026, twenty-four Cubs from 1st Midrand went camping for a weekend. For those two days there was no social media, no gaming and very little interest in screens. The Cubs were simply too busy. They followed trails, swam, played games, tied knots, learnt about fire safety, solved codes, completed challenges, sang around a campfire and slept in tents with their friends.

The camp had a Carmen Sandiego theme. Each Cub became a junior field agent, complete with an identity card and a suitably improbable spy name. Working in their Sixes, they trained to stop V.I.L.E. from stealing the Golden Rhino of Mapungubwe. The final challenge took them around the campsite, following woodcraft signs, solving a Pigpen cipher, using ropes to retrieve clues, navigating by compass directions and guiding a blindfolded member of their team through a maze. Eventually, each Six collected the combination needed to open a locked box and recover its golden rhino.

From the Cubs' point of view, it was an adventure. They were playing. From a Scouter's point of view, something much more was happening. Twenty-four children had spent a weekend outside, fully engaged with the people and the world immediately around them. They had exercised, laughed, argued, negotiated, shared, made mistakes and tried again. Older and more experienced Cubs helped younger ones. Sixers and Seconders were given genuine leadership responsibilities. The Cubs had to listen, remember instructions and work together. Nobody could complete the final mission alone.

For two Cubs, even the midnight realisation that they were missing home, and the resulting tears that followed, was a challenge that could be overcome and a lesson in courage and self-confidence. For a certain Pack Scouter, that same midnight realisation led to a very uncomfortable night sitting upright in a chair.

The Cubs were learning without being constantly reminded that they were learning. That weekend captures much of why I believe Scouting is more relevant now than ever.

Growing up in a digital world

Technology is not the enemy. I use it constantly, our children will need to understand it, and Scouting itself should not pretend that the modern world does not exist. The Carmen Sandiego theme we used at camp originated in a computer game. Technology helped us plan the camp, communicate with parents and prepare many of the activities.

The problem comes when screens begin to displace too much of childhood. Children now have entertainment available every minute of the day. They seldom need to wait for a programme to begin, find someone with whom to play or invent something because they are bored. Social media brings its own pressures. It invites young people to compare their ordinary lives with the edited highlights of everyone else's. Young people can easily begin to measure themselves by how many likes they receive, how they look online and what others say about them.

Even adults struggle with this. We should not be surprised that children do too.

Scouting gives them a break from that world, but it does more than simply take away the phone. It gives them something better to do.



At camp, the Cubs did not spend the weekend asking for screens. They were occupied with real people and real experiences. A game was not happening somewhere behind glass; they were inside it. If their team became lost, they had to look more carefully at the trail signs. If a knot came undone, they had to tie it again. If the message at the end of a relay bore little resemblance to the message at the beginning, everyone could laugh, and then understand why clear communication matters.

There was no digital score, but there was immediate feedback. Either the knot held or it did not. Either the Six worked together or it became stuck. Either the Cub remembered what had been shown during Kim's Game or another member of the team had to help.

These are small things, but childhood is largely made up of small things. Repeated often enough, they become habits and, eventually, character.

Confidence has to come from somewhere real

We speak a great deal about self-confidence in children. Sometimes we behave as though confidence can be created by praising every attempt and protecting children from failure. Encouragement matters enormously, but lasting confidence needs evidence.

A child becomes confident by discovering that he or she can do something that was previously difficult. Perhaps it is spending a first night away from home, swimming to retrieve a clue, lighting a match safely, speaking in front of the Pack or leading a group through an activity. The achievement need not appear impressive to an adult. For that particular child, it may be a very big step. Scouting provides a safe place in which to take those steps.

Safe does not mean that everything is easy or that nothing can go wrong. It means that the risks have been considered, trained adults are present and the challenge is appropriate to the child's age and ability. Within those boundaries, young people are allowed to try. They will sometimes get it wrong.

A Six may misunderstand a clue and walk confidently in the wrong direction. A carefully packed bag may still be missing the one item that is suddenly needed. A child who thought they knew a knot may find that tying it under pressure is quite different from demonstrating it at a meeting. The temptation for an adult is to step in and fix the problem. Usually, the better lesson comes from giving just enough help for the young person to work it out.

When they do, the confidence belongs to them. It is not something an adult has artificially bestowed. This is also one reason why badges and advancement remain valuable. At their best, they are not prizes for attendance or decorations for a uniform. They mark a journey: something attempted, practised and eventually achieved. Different children find success in different places. One may excel at camping and navigation, another at first aid, cooking, creativity, observation or caring for others. Scouting allows children to discover abilities that may never emerge in a classroom or on a sports field.

The method matters

Scouting is sometimes described from the outside as a collection of activities: camping, hiking, knots, badges, games and campfires. Those activities are important, but they are not the whole point. Behind them is a deliberate educational method.

We learn by doing. We work in small groups. We use imagination, ceremony and adventure to create a framework that draws young people into the programme. We give them increasing responsibility as they become ready for it. Adults support and guide them without taking over everything. The outdoors provides both the setting and, very often, the challenge.



The Scout Promise and Law give this method its direction. We want young people to be trustworthy, loyal, considerate, courageous and willing to help others. We want them to respect themselves, other people and the world in which they live.

These values cannot be taught only by reciting them. They have to be used.

It is easy to say that we should be helpful. It becomes real when an older Cub notices that a younger one cannot manage a sleeping bag and stops to assist. Teamwork sounds obvious until six excited children have to agree on which trail sign to follow. Leadership looks attractive until the leader has to listen to different opinions, keep the group together and accept responsibility for a poor decision. This is why the small-group system is so important. Within a Six or Patrol, a young person is known. It is difficult to disappear into the background, but it is equally difficult for one person to do everything. Each member has something to contribute.

At our camp, the Sixers did not merely receive a badge of office. They helped guide their teams through the activities. The senior Cubs later led the Cubs' Own, taking responsibility for its readings, reflections and prayers while the adults remained in the background. Their leadership was age-appropriate, but it was real. Young people learn leadership by being trusted with opportunities to lead.

They also learn that leadership is not the same as being the loudest person in the group. A good leader prepares, listens, notices who is being left out and helps the whole team move forward. Sometimes leadership means taking charge. At other times it means stepping back and allowing someone else to contribute. That understanding is badly needed in the world our children are entering.

Awareness, aptitude, community and the outdoors

The Cub programme develops young people across four broad areas: awareness, aptitude, community and the outdoors. I find these useful because they show just how wide the purpose of Scouting is. Awareness includes understanding oneself and noticing other people. It develops observation, memory, emotional maturity and an appreciation of the wider world. Even a simple activity such as Kim's Game asks a child to stop, look properly and remember. Those are increasingly valuable skills in a world designed around quick glances and constant distraction.

Aptitude is about becoming capable. Children learn practical skills, solve problems and discover that improvement usually requires practice. They begin to trust their own hands and judgement. They also learn when to ask for help.

Community takes them beyond themselves. A Cub belongs to a Six and a Pack; a Scout belongs to a Patrol and Troop. Each of these forms part of a Scout Group, a national organisation and a worldwide movement. Young people discover that membership brings both support and responsibility. We take part, help others and leave places better than we found them.

The outdoors brings all of this together. Nature does not respond to a swipe or a click. Weather changes, the ground is uneven and a tent still has to be put up before dark. Children have to notice their surroundings and adapt. They also experience the simple pleasures that can easily disappear from modern life: getting dirty, finding a trail, cooling off in a swimming pool after running around, eating outdoors and sitting beside a fire with friends.

There is room for wonder in that.

Being part of something larger

Scouting gives young people a sense of scale. They matter as individuals, but they are not the centre of everything.



They are part of a Six or Patrol in which other people are depending on them. They wear the same uniform and make the same Promise as young people throughout South Africa and across much of the world. They become part of a movement that existed before they were born and, we hope, will continue long after they have moved on.

I experienced that myself as a Scout, including as a young South African attending the World Scout Jamboree in the Netherlands in 1995. There is something powerful about discovering that the small Scout Group to which you belong is connected to millions of other young people. Languages, uniforms and customs differ, but the underlying values are recognisable.

Our society often encourages individual achievement, personal branding and public recognition. Scouting does recognise achievement, but it places it within a community. The question is not only, "What can I accomplish?" It is also, "What can I contribute?" That is an important distinction.

The example set by volunteers

Scouting would not exist without volunteers.

At 1st Midrand, as in Scout Groups everywhere, adults give up evenings, weekends and family time to run meetings, maintain equipment, organise camps, complete administration, raise funds and create opportunities for young people. Much of this work happens out of sight. A camp that feels effortless to a Cub is anything but effortless to organise. Our March camp required training, a formal camping licence process, site selection, safety planning, catering, equipment preparation, parent communication, transport arrangements, detailed programmes and wet-weather alternatives. Every activity had to be considered in terms of supervision, learning value and risk.

We do this because enthusiasm alone is not enough when one accepts responsibility for other people's children. Scout leaders undergo training so that the adventure can be delivered safely and properly. Good preparation does not reduce the fun. It is what makes the fun possible.

Volunteering also demonstrates something important to young people. The adults around them are choosing to serve. They are not doing it for payment or because it advances a career. They do it because a community only survives when people are prepared to build it. The same is true of the parents and committee members who transport children, repair equipment, help with events, manage finances, clean up after activities and respond when assistance is needed. No single person creates a successful Scout Group. It is shared work.

For children growing up in a world where so much is purchased as a service, seeing adults volunteer may be a lesson in itself.

Not an escape from the modern world

Scouting is not an attempt to return children to an imaginary past. We cannot, and should not, pretend that technology, social media and the pressures of modern life will disappear.

Our task is to prepare young people to live well in that world.

They will need judgement, because information is not the same as truth. They will need confidence that does not depend entirely on online approval. They will need to cooperate with people who are different from them. They will need to solve problems for which there is no immediate tutorial. They will need to lead and to be led. They will need resilience when plans fail and the courage to try again. They will also need friends, communities and places where they are valued for more than their image or achievements.



Scouting offers all of this, not through a lecture, but through experience.

I think again of those twenty-four Cubs at camp. They arrived with bags, sleeping gear and the usual mixture of excitement and uncertainty. Over the course of the weekend, they became junior field agents. They followed clues, looked after one another, learnt new skills, led their teams, played until they were tired and recovered a small golden rhino from a locked box.

On Sunday afternoon, they went home dirty, tired and happy. They had belonged to a team, taken part in a shared adventure and discovered a little more about what they could do.

What happened at our camp was special, but it was not unique. Every weekend, in Scout halls, campsites, parks and communities across South Africa, young people are having experiences like these. The same is happening in countries throughout the world. They are learning practical skills, spending time outdoors, forming friendships, serving their communities and being trusted with opportunities to lead. Much of this happens quietly. It is made possible by volunteers, families and communities who believe that investing their time in young people is worthwhile. There may be no great public recognition, but with every meeting, hike, camp and service project, Scouting is helping young people become more confident, capable and considerate.

One activity may teach a new skill. One camp may give a child courage they did not know they had. Over time, all these small experiences can change the direction of a young person's life. This is happening every day, all over the world.

That is why Scouting matters now.