



Understanding How the Program Year Works

Troops are where everything happens. For a family to be involved, there has to be a Troop nearby to join.

Troops are started in, and belong to, local churches. Pastors select leaders who then guide their Troop ministry. Troops that plan and carry out a full and exciting program always grow and thrive. Troops that don't...don't. Families in thriving Troops stay involved, and tell their friends. Families in poorly-run Troops drop out—and tell their friends.

Trail Life USA is all about starting and strengthening Troops that will thrive for generations. We provide tools—local volunteer coaches and created resources—to help Troops carry out our shared mission.

Every Troop's calendar looks the same—it's like a big circle. Whether leaders and participating families know it or not, it's formed by natural seasons. Each Troop's "program year" naturally begins in August, with the start of a new school year; and ends in July, once they have held their Summer Adventure, finished family vacations...and take a breath before doing it all over again!

This annual school year cycle begins when 5-year olds start kindergarten, and it doesn't end until they finish their education and enter the workforce, full-time, as adults. But it's not over for long—the cycle begins all over again about 10 years later...when they have a five year-old kid of their own!

We make sure Troops are ready to handle all of the events that repeat throughout each calendar year. We prepare them for their mid-August Troop "kick off" by providing planning tools to make sure they are ready to go. Interested parents will not "Join the Adventure" in September if the Troop's program is not planned and ready in August.

But Troops must also plan out a viable budget—how they will pay for their year full of exciting adventures (and all related Troop costs) they have planned. This is known as the Troop's [Annual Planning and Budgeting](#) process. Supporting this effort is one of the most important things we do, well before the start of each program year. We'll begin to promote it in March—to describe what Annual Planning is; we'll educate Troops in April—explaining why it's important; then we'll provide tools— both online and through Area Trail Gatherings, in May; so they can carry out the planning (and budgeting) process in June—before their formal Troop meetings start up again in August. Planning ahead is so important! We backdate all repeating annual campaigns in similar fashion.

Once the summer is over, kids are headed back to school. Troops will have planned and budgeted, ready to recruit new members. Remember the annual cycle? Parents expect their kids to join something—sports, clubs, and organizations—as soon as the school year starts. We want them to join Trail Life!

So Troops must be prepared to market their product to youth and their families leading up to their September "Joining Event". We do this through a time-proven campaign that we call [Join the Adventure](#). Join the Adventure Open Houses are supported with a proven plan, and materials to make Troops successful in recruiting new Trail Life families. Troop leaders should use the [Join the](#)

[Adventure Planning Guide](#) that is part of the 5-part Planning Guide series that is available in Trail Life Connect resources.

Most of the messages you will see each Summer in Trail Life Connect are focus on strategies to reach local families. With the right plans in place, thousands of new families join in September and October.

October—the perfect time, according to our cyclical calendar, to begin a fundraiser! Excited new families, now connected and fully on board, understand that for their robust program year to be filled with adventure, they must carry out one really great fundraiser! Troop leaders will have all the tools they need to have a successful sale in hand with the [Fundraising Guide](#) that is part of the 5-part Planning Guide Series that is available in Trail Life Connect resources. And if they earn enough, families can enjoy the rest of the year filled with fun and adventure—not endless bake sales and car washes. It's of utmost importance that we keep that promise...and making sure families can afford it is a key component. Troop members join for the adventure, but they stay when they feel accepted and connected, understand the importance of their involvement, and are not overburdened with high (or unexpected) expenses.

Which brings us to the most important “membership booster” of all—retention—which is a direct result of program support. Well-planned recruitment campaigns might net a 20% increase in membership. That sounds like a big number—but not compared to the other 80% that will drop out if not supported correctly. That's why many other efforts throughout the year (same time, every year) exist—to retain those members! Leader trainings, Operation Christmas Child, Area-coordinated events (like Trail Gatherings and Camporees) and Summer Adventures, are all placed on calendars at the right times to provide support when it's needed most.

Other emphases that retain families: connecting them right away to other Troop leaders and activities; getting outside at Troop meetings; and camping! Volunteer support comes from Direct Service Advisors (who serve as coaches for leaders). DSAs stay in regular communication with other Area Team members—subject matter experts in Training, Camping, Advancement, Activities, Community Service, and more.

Regular Area Trail Gatherings keep Troop leaders connected with each other and everything going on locally. Attending these will keep your Troop in the know. If you ever get out of sync with the program year, contact your DSA or Point Man, and he will get you back on the right path!