

## LGS020 - Understanding the Scout Law and Promise

Young people - Nature - Activities - Team System - **Law and Promise** - Symbolic Framework - **Personal Progression** - Adult Support

*The Law and Promise are essential elements of the Scout Method. However, they are often misunderstood both within and outside the Movement.*

*This handout presents the psychological foundations of the Law and Promise as essential elements of the Scout Method and explains their relevance to current educational needs. The next handout - LGS021 "How to present and use the Scout Law and Promise" - explains how to apply these elements concretely in a Scout unit.*

### Elements that are often misunderstood

Sometimes, in Western societies, the terms "Law" and "Promise" may appear old-fashioned and suspect. For many, the only law that counts is that of spontaneous expression and personal pleasure. In more structured societies, the Law and Promise are understood literally as a set of obligations to which the child must submit. Neither of these cultural environments prepare people to understand the Scout Law and Promise correctly.

Let's go back to Scouting's roots: what did Baden-Powell say about the Law and Promise? Here are a few quotes:

*The Scout Law is the foundation on which the whole of Scout training rests.*

(B.P. Aids to Scoutmastership)

But what kind of law?

*The boy is not governed by DON'T, but led on by DO. The Scout Law is devised as a guide to his actions rather than as repressive of his faults.*

(B.P. Aids to Scoutmastership)

Let's stop to think about the words that Baden-Powell used: "not governed by DON'T" - the young person should not be governed by (subjugated to) a negative and repressive law, but rather be led forward by a positive law ("led on by DO").

In his writings, Baden-Powell often denounced the harmful nature of rules that prohibit or repress. In January 1916, for example, he wrote in "Headquarters' Gazette":

*Education must be positive, not negative – active, not passive. For example, the Scout Law in each of its details says: "A Scout does" - this, that, or the other.*

*Authorities have come along to improve the Scout Law, and not recognising the active side of it, have changed it to the*

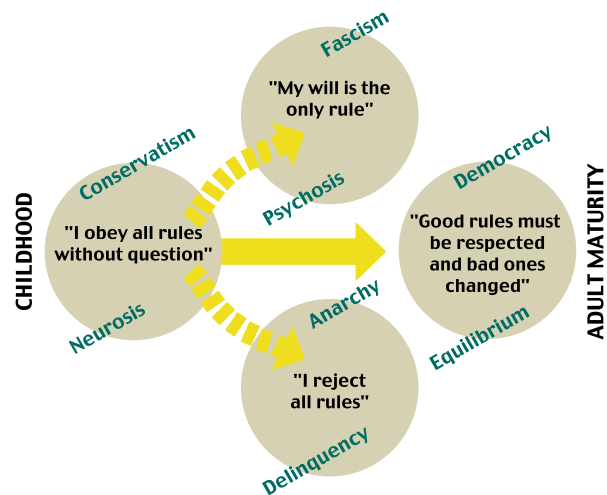


Fig. 1 - The evolution from a child's conception to an adult's conception of laws and rules, and possible deviations

*reverse – a series of "Don'ts". "Don't", of course, is the distinguishing feature and motto of the old-fashioned system of repression, and is a red rag to a boy. It is a challenge to him to do wrong."*

We cannot understand Scouting if we ignore this essential aspect of our Founder's thinking: Scouting does not impose nor repress: it invites the young person to make a personal commitment concerning his/her own personal development. Here is another quote from Baden-Powell:

*The two main methods of training are :*

*1 – By education : that is by "drawing out" the individual boy and giving him the ambition and keenness to learn from himself.*

*2 – By instruction: that is by impressing and drumming knowledge into the boy.*

*Number 2 of these is still too often the rule. In the Scout Movement we use Number 1."*

(Headquarters' Gazette. October 1913.)

It could not be clearer! The Law is a positive appeal to do better and to develop oneself, and the Promise is the young person's personal response to this appeal.

### The concept of Law (rules)

Psychoanalysis has shown how the concept of rules becomes established at around 3 years of age when the young child emerges from a relationship of fusion with the

mother, accepts the father's presence and "internalises" parental authority (the "superego", which represents rules).

Until the superego is established, rules are not internalised: the child remains in a state of fusion in which he/she is the object of his/her impulses. The only law is that of his/her own wishes. In extreme cases, this can lead to sociopathic dysfunctions, i.e. the individual is incapable of putting him/herself in another person's shoes or experiencing any feelings of altruism or compassion (fig.1).

This situation is increasing in modern societies in which there is a phenomenon of single-parent families devoid of a father image, and educators are faced with children who have never encountered anything that is forbidden and who rebel against authority from a very early age.

There are other cases in which people remain blocked at a primitive stage with an all-powerful law to which they must automatically submit themselves. This is the punitive law, the old system of repression that Baden-Powell denounced.

Fig. 1 shows the route towards an adult understanding of rules.

- In the beginning, the child submits to any rule. If such an attitude persists into adulthood, the person will, at best, be highly conservative and, at worst, be enclosed in a neurotic world of prohibitions and guilt.
- The aim of Scouting's education is to bring each person to an adult conception of law: respect for laws (rules) as well as the capacity to criticise those which appear bad or insufficient in order to change them in a democratic way for the good of all, in the name of more fundamental values.
- A possible deviation is one which brings the person to impose the law on others for that person's benefit or for the benefit of his/her group: "I am the law!". This is an authoritarian or fascist attitude. It is also the delusion of power that affects some psychotics.
- A second possible deviation is the rejection of all laws. Any rule is considered bad: "it is forbidden to forbid". This is the self-centred attitude of the "spoiled child" who cannot bear any frustration. Rejecting all rules leads the person to consider the satisfaction of his/her impulses as the only valid law and can lead to crime.

### The Law-Promise duo: a motor for development

In Scouting, the Scout Law<sup>1</sup> is an invitation to live according to fundamental values: uprightness and loyalty ("to be trustworthy", "to be loyal"); respect for, and solidarity towards, others ("to be a friend to all", to help others"); protection of life and nature ("to protect plants and animals"); a positive attitude to life's ups and downs ("to smile under all difficulties"); respect for work and to strive to do one's best ("respect the work of others", "to do nothing by half"); a sense of one's own dignity ("to be clean in thought, word and deed").

#### The Law: an invitation to grow. The Promise: a free and voluntary response

The Scout Law does not forbid anything. It is an invitation to develop oneself, to become more humane. It is a reference for one's life.

Even though the Scout Law is positive, it is not a matter of imposing it on young people. On the contrary, it should be proposed to young people and they should be helped to discover it through group life. The Promise thus becomes the free and voluntary response of the individual who, in a sense, declares to the group: "I have discovered the values that you wish to live by and, with your help, I agree to try and live in accordance with them as well."

The Promise is thus the starting point of the young person's personal progress: it is because he/she wants to live according to the Scout Law that he/she will set personal development objectives to reach through Scouting activities and everyday life.

It is through the Promise that the young person truly becomes an actor in charge of his/her own development.

#### The Law and Promise in group life

The Law must not be an abstract reference document stuck on the wall in a dusty frame. It has to be given substance in the group's experiences through the unanimously adopted rules governing group life. Figure 2 summarises this process.

Life in the unit inevitably involves issues, discoveries and problems. After each major activity, one should take time to note and discuss the important points and events that have affected group life. First in team councils, then in the unit assembly (see LGS001 and LGS005). What has been observed? Some have not fulfilled their roles correctly; others cheated at a game; or a team was unable to agree on

<sup>1</sup> Here we refer to the terms of the traditional Scout Law for young adolescents aged 11-15 (the Scout section)

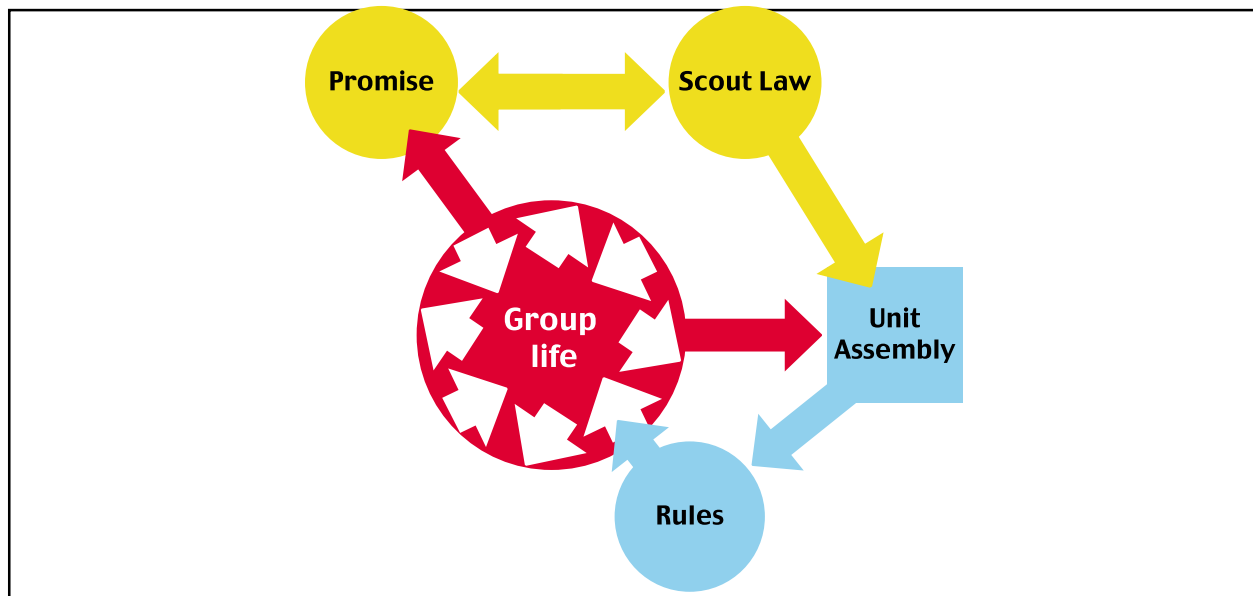


Fig. 2 - The Law and Promise take on substance through evaluating group life and agreeing on common rules

an activity. There will also be positive experiences: a team persevered with their mission despite the difficulties; another team exemplified the meaning of sharing and friendship; etc. What does this mean in terms of the Scout Law? How can we live better together?

If the adult leaders know how to facilitate discussion without imposing their own point of view, the young people will themselves propose rules concerning group life. These can be discussed, modified if necessary and adopted. For example: "Here, everyone has the right to express him/herself and to be listened to"; "No one can use force to impose their views"; "We share with everyone"; "Assembly decisions must be respected"; etc.

Thus, rules inspired by the Scout Law will arise out of the experience of group life evaluated at the unit assembly. In turn, these rules will shape group life and help everyone to discover the values underlying the Scout law through concrete experiences. Thus, the desire to commit oneself to living according to these values by making the Scout Promise will come naturally to new members. For the others, it is an opportunity to understand the Scout Law and their own commitment better.

### From rules to values, the stages of development

We can see how common rules - decided upon as a result of what the group has lived through - can be a jumping board to a deeper discovery of the values represented by the Scout Law. This can easily be observed in the child's development.

Before 5 years of age, a child has no sense of rules. He/she is still too engrossed with the desire to affirm him/herself, and is still unable to put him/herself in another's shoes so as to truly accept a rule. He/she imitates elders' rules but cannot respect them. There is always a player who cheats because the desire to win is too strong; so everyone argues, play stops, new agreements are reached; play resumes but stops again after a few minutes in the midst of new arguments. As of 5-6 years and until 9-10 years, rules are considered sacred. Children think that they "come from" adults and that they have no power to change them. It is only as of 10-11 years that things change: rules are considered to be the outcome of consensus. From then on, the opinion of the nation of youth is that rules do not "descend" from adults: they were invented by young people themselves, and they can be changed if they agree to do so.

### Moral autonomy and training in citizenship

From the rules governing games, we move to the rules of morality. Until 7-8 years, children do not judge acts as such: they label them according to cultural norms: "good or bad", "wrong or right", etc.

They consider that the more a lie is far-fetched, the worse it is. Doing something naughty is more or less serious depending on the extent of material damage. The intention does not matter. Punishment is considered as expiatory: punishment must be severe enough to make the guilty person aware of the gravity of the act.

The next stage is that of conventional morality. The child



conforms to the role that he/she perceives is expected of him/her by parents or the social group: “a good little boy/ girl”, etc. “Law and order” and respect for authority are considered as absolutes. Some adults never emerge from this stage, no doubt due to an insufficiently rich experience of life in society or because they were subjected to an overly rigid and authoritarian education (fig. 1).

As of 10-11 years of age (as he/she becomes capable of logical reasoning), the child slowly develops moral autonomy. He/she becomes able to evaluate people through their acts and becomes more aware of their personality traits. He/she is thus able to perceive their faults and weak points and no longer has blind confidence in their authority. He/she starts to judge his/her own acts and those of others. Moral principles are personally accepted as a way of sharing rights and duties in the group to which one belongs.

Towards 12 years old, the child accepts rules as a kind of contract between people. Rules are not intangible and can be changed by mutual consent. Slowly (and especially in the second half of adolescence - towards 15 years), the young person becomes able to understand the concept of universal values: justice, reciprocity, equality, dignity. A “right” is defined according to personal and conscious adherence to moral principles. This is the stage of access to an “adult” conception of the Law (fig. 1).

### **The Law and Promise: tools to succeed in this evolution**

The two elements which will enable the young person to progress towards moral autonomy are, on the one hand, the example set by older people (senior members and adult leaders) and, on the other hand, peer group interactions.

The harmonious development of the young person - especially in adolescence - and his/her progression towards moral autonomy require both influences. On the one hand, the young adolescent needs models with whom he/she can identify and who exemplify life's values; on the other, he/she needs to experience a process which allows discussion and the development of rules within a peer group.

This evolution, however, is not automatic. There are many stumbling blocks that can prevent a person from truly becoming morally autonomous and developing an adult

conception of the Law. Some people who are educators make the matter worse when they have not themselves reached a sufficient level of maturity vis-à-vis the Law. For example, an excessively authoritarian or controlling attitude can perpetuate a childlike, submissive attitude on the part of the young person (fig.1). An overly protective attitude, which reduces social interaction in the peer group, can lead to the same result. Often, excessive authoritarianism or overprotection can make young people suddenly revolt and reject all rules. Out of defiance, the rebellious adolescent will behave antagonistically and take part in risk-taking activities.

On the other hand, an excessively permissive attitude will not enable the young person to structure his/her personality. Such an attitude will leave the young person blocked at a stage of non-differentiation, in which impulses and personal pleasure are the only “law”. Some people who have been brought up in an overly authoritarian way tend to have a “laissez-faire” attitude towards their own children. This is just as bad...

What is interesting in the Scout Method is that it proposes two effective “tools” to help the educator and the young person progress in the right direction.

The Law summarises a number of essential values that the adult can thus propose to young people in a way that is adapted to each age group (this is why the Cub Scout Law is different from the Scout Law). Group life and the institutions that evaluate group life and decide upon common rules (team councils and unit assembly) enable these values to be explored concretely and facilitate the young person's personal commitment through the Promise. There is thus a two-way process: the adult proposes the Scout Law; the young people experiment with it and adhere to it personally. This is how Scouting can achieve with millions of members what Jean Piaget advocated for experimental schools:

*By developing the rules governing school discipline themselves, by electing the government in charge of applying these laws and by constituting the judiciary power whose function is to deal with offences, children acquire the possibility of learning through experience what obeying rules, belonging to a social group and individual responsibility mean.*

(Moral Education and School, Payot, 1997)