

Co-ops Worthy of the Name

Co-ops are a newer development in homeschooling. In this session, we're going to get right down to work discussing what a co-op is and how it differs from group or resource center classes. After we have defined true co-ops, we'll explore briefly the benefits of co-ops, and then get down to some nuts and bolts of starting a co-op.

I'm going to speak really fast for about 30 minutes, then come to a screeching halt and take questions for the rest of our time together. Because I'm going to speak so fast, I've given you a pretty detailed handout here. This way, you can go home and chew on all we've said, and then take it from there.

What exactly constitutes a "true" co-op?

- The term "co-op" can apply to as few as two families or as many as a hundred. The term derives from the word "cooperative" and simply means that families join together for mutual support and accountability in their homeschooling venture. What makes a group a true co-op is that each family contributes time and effort to the group endeavor. Though some money may exchange hands, what makes a group a "true" co-op is that *all* the parents are *actively* involved in fulfilling one or more key roles in the overall enterprise. No one just writes a check, drops kids off at the door, and then goes shopping!
- Each co-op needs a leader, who serves the group by making sure all the members work together well and remain informed. She need not do all the administrative work, or all the teaching. She simply serves by leading. Large co-ops need a plurality of leaders who work together to serve the group.
- Co-ops can meet any number of times, but regularity is the key. Some meet weekly, some monthly, some two or more times per week. Meeting frequency generally depends on the purpose for the co-op. After there is a statement of purpose, new co-ops can decide out how many times to meet.

What makes it different from "drop and shop" classes (sometimes called co-ops) or Resource Centers or University Model schools?

1. Many moms don't feel capable of teaching all subjects to all children through high school. This can be because of their own lack of previous schooling, time concerns with a big family, or other family challenges—like health problems or learning disabilities. When parents sense that they are unable to teach all the subjects their students need, they often turn to group classes. There are at least four categories of these:
 - a. True co-ops (that I just described)
 - b. Individual group classes offered at a nearby Christian school, another mom's house, in your community (sports programs), or even over the Internet.
 - c. Resource Center classes
 - d. University Model School classes
2. Let me briefly go over the last three of these:
 - a. Individual group classes:
 - i. This category involves group classes offered at a nearby Christian school, another mom's house, in your community (sports programs), or even over the Internet.
 - ii. In this situation, parents are not teaching any course content, nor do they probably have much control over what is taught beyond the initial decision to sign their student up for the class.
 - iii. Outside of class, students typically work on "homework" assignments independently of the instructor and the parent.
 - iv. Parents typically have the ability to shop around for the best instructor available. (Unlike the Resource Center or University Model School options).
 - v. They pay money for the class, and the instructor, typically, will set assignments, grade work, and average a final grade for the class.
 - vi. This kind of class gives parents a feeling of security because they feel that a qualified teacher is giving their child what he or she needs in the discipline.
 - vii. They are also attractive because busy parents can just check this subject off their "to do" lists.
 - b. Resource Centers

- i. A relatively new development, Resource Centers have developed and multiplied over the last ten years specifically within the homeschool movement.
 - ii. These come in a variety of forms, but quintessentially, parents sign up their students to take one or more group classes for which they pay money.
 - iii. Because there is an overall program involved, there is usually little to no choice of instructors or classmates.
 - iv. Parents typically have no supervisory responsibilities whatsoever in the execution of the course: teachers assign work, correct it, and grade it.
 - v. Parents do not generally have any input into the class content, other than the initial decision of allowing their student to participate.
 - vi. Some resource centers present a wide variety of classes and have no limits on how many a student may take, others limit the number of classes, or have a smaller selection of classes.
 - vii. One last essential aspect of resource centers is that they tend to meet only on one day per week, so students work largely independently from home, and at least nominally under parental supervision, though, again, most busy parents are almost totally unaware of actual course contents.
 - viii. Again, busy parents find this option attractive because they can check these subjects off their lists and feel that their students are well served.
- c. Then, there are the University Model Schools.
- i. These are like resource centers in that they assemble paid teachers and offer group classes.
 - ii. They tend to involve students who take more than one class per week at the school, on more days than one (as with the resource center) but still work independently at home. Most Jr. High students take a limited number of classes—say, up to three. Most high schoolers involved with these organizations take a full load from these paid teachers.
 - iii. The idea of these schools is that students are studying in Jr. High and high school in similar time frames and using similar methods to colleges, and so will be better prepared for that environment.
 - iv. As with resource centers, parents have little input, control, or involvement with class content or administration in University Model Schools, though they may have some choice of teachers in the bigger University Model Schools.
3. You can readily see that the dividing line between true co-ops and all the other options falls mainly in the areas of parental involvement and parental control.
- a. In true co-ops, parents tend to be involved in actually teaching a portion of the course content. This means they stay more involved with their student in general, since they must prepare lessons and have some knowledge of what is going on in the classes.
 - b. In true co-ops, you're likely to have other parents (not "experts") teaching classes by teaching themselves a manageable segment of the course material. This means that there is less of a tendency to "check it off" the mental list. Again, the parent usually stays closer to a co-op situation than the other group class options.
 - c. Depending on the curricula chosen, students of all ages can be working on similar subjects and then attending age-appropriate classes that enrich home studies. This means that (especially older) students don't tend to get as isolated from siblings and parents even though they attend group classes.
 - d. Co-ops are often much more affordable than other group class options, and parents reap the added bonus of learning right along with their children instead of becoming more just chauffeurs and task masters.
 - e. For all these reasons, I like to distinguish between "true" co-ops and their "drop and shop" counterparts. There is nothing *wrong* with drop-and-shop... but there are some real benefits—tangible and intangible—to true co-ops.

What are the benefits to involving my children in true co-ops?

1. Co-ops keep students (and their parents) accountable in one of the most enjoyable and motivating of ways. Students generally look forward to coming to class and sharing what they've learned with others.

2. Parents obviously benefit because they can split the load of lectures and hands-on activities according to mutual strengths and raise the overall level of teaching significantly!
3. Because moms who are teaching only have a portion of the overall group effort to prepare, they will have actually had time to put thought and prayer into their lessons (unlike many moms trying to do it all alone) and therefore students often feel better served, more interested, and more motivated to prepare for classes.
4. Co-ops can often motivate students to do their best work because of the "audience" or socializing context.
5. Skills home schooled students often lack are developed, especially those associated with group classes: raising hands, respecting others' speech, supporting/participating in a discussion, giving oral or visual presentations (including debate, video, and drama), and team work.
6. One of the essential elements of high school is discussion. By this I mean thinking on one's feet; taking a position and supporting it out of one's own thoughts and the evidence one has gleaned from one's research. This is, to my thinking, an essential element of historical and literary studies, and without a group context, your high school student will miss it, unless, of course, you engage in regular discussion with him.
7. Group writing classes give the student the chance to have others enjoy (and critique) his writing. At first, I recommend the instructor do the critique, unless the group knows each other well and can offer constructive and gracious comments.

Costs?

1. Parent-teachers lose a little freedom in this process: they must become good "team players," agreeing to require the agreed upon work be done in a timely and thorough manner.
2. When joining a pre-existing co-op, know what you're getting yourself and your child into. One needs to carefully explore the goals (academic and spiritual) and characters of pre-existing co-op leaders and participants
3. Thinking of starting a co-op? Be sure to fully and carefully communicate to other members of a start-up co-op your vision, expectations, and practical concerns well ahead of committing or starting.

Do co-ops benefit younger children? Less is definitely more!

1. Children in grades K-5 probably don't need any co-op experience, so don't sweat the program.
 - a. However, they will definitely enjoy crafts and moms will benefit from the one-another aspect common to all co-ops, so if you have time/energy for co-ops for youngsters, go right ahead.
 - b. I don't think it's necessary to strain yourself to co-op if all your kids are in 5th grade or younger!
 - c. Looking back, we'd say that regular nap times and meals are much more important than lots of activities and lessons. Guard the consistency and regularity of those early years! ("Tips for Teaching a Houseful" addresses this aspect more fully.)
2. We recommend that Elementary Level co-ops (if formed) should focus on fun (like simple associated hands-on crafts or group projects), group skills (like raising hands to answer questions, etc.), and writing assignments.
3. Keep them light; make attendance the "dessert" that rewards diligent independent reading/writing work at home.

Practical suggestions for younger students include:

1. Try to have your teachers/students car pool and schedule your meetings so that younger siblings don't have to be dragged out if they aren't being actively taught. Here are some ideas how to accomplish this:
 - a. If at all possible, generally schedule your upper level co-op in the afternoon so that you don't give up an entire school day to it. (I have found that those co-ops scheduled in the mornings leave little energy for any independent work once kids and moms return home.) Afternoon co-ops mean babies and toddlers can often nap during these times.
 - b. Don't try to include younger and older siblings in a concurrent schedule. Schedule older students for, say, two discussions a week on Wednesday and Friday afternoons, when little ones are

napping, and use car pools as much as possible so that only one teacher needs to be at the meeting place and little ones can stay home and nap.

2. A variation on the above point: you could have a meeting for younger siblings in the morning, and then leave the older students with one teacher while all other moms take little ones home for lunch and naps. Then, moms could pick up older students after little ones were awake.
3. If you want to include younger siblings in group settings and/or on the same day(s), at least separate ages so all can get the most possible good out of their meetings. To do this:
 - a. Use a church building, and have moms divide up: some watch younger kids, who enjoy an unstructured play time, or even a light treatment of the subject of the week.
 - b. Use two nearby houses, and accomplish the same goal.
 - c. Use car pooling, so that moms who aren't teaching stay home with younger children (perhaps one of them baby-sits the teaching mom's toddlers) and meet in homes.
4. Meet around the lunch hour, so that kids can use the hour before lunch and the hour after lunch for "work" and still enjoy fellowship and play time together during the lunch break.

Are older kids going to suffer unless I enroll them?

1. God is more than able to meet your older child's needs without co-ops.
2. That said, older children (jr. high and especially high schoolers) benefit the most from well done group classes, and true co-ops are the variant I would most highly recommend.
3. Dialectic Level co-ops can begin to focus on discussion. Once a week for History or Literature discussion and writing accountability is usually sufficient. If you want to, you can elect to meet twice a week, once midweek to discuss history concepts and once at the end of the week to read writing assignments and do a craft. Do the history discussion in a half-hour, the writing in another half-hour, then spend an hour on crafts.
4. Rhetoric Level co-ops are perhaps most rewarding. Focus is on growing together in discussion skills, apologetics, literary analysis, team projects, and writing skills.

I want to start a true co-op... where do I begin?

There are several crucial things to consider when starting any co-op:

1. Like-mindedness. We would say this is the single most crucial aspect of forming a group. Far better to start small—with two like-minded families—than advertise widely and end up with mismatched members who are constantly distracted by strife. Like-mindedness should include these important things:
 - a. Agreement on basic theology: we would not recommend that you begin with a mixed group of Christians and non-Christians.
 - b. Agreement on academic standards: to what schedule do you plan to adhere? How many assignments/hours of study will you expect of students?
2. This goes with the above: define your purpose, methods, and procedures as fully and carefully as you can. Commit them to writing and update your "rule book" as you go. You may not need such things as a statement of faith, application for new members, course contracts, an oversight board, a bank account, etc. in the beginning, but you will eventually, so why not start early and perfect these as you go?
3. Set up procedures for when things don't go well before you begin meeting. (Student conduct, teacher commitments, academic expectations, and the consequences of failure to meet group standards should all be spelled out in writing before the year begins.)

How to avoid common problems inherent with beginning a co-op:

Start with your own heart/expectations:

1. Bathe this new endeavor in prayer.
2. Expect and prepare to welcome observations concerning your heart attitudes, your parenting choices, your kids' behavior, and your academic pursuits.¹
3. Move slowly in choosing whom to include in your co-op. We strongly suggest you find only like minded individuals to share your lives with. Be cautious about yoking yourself unequally with unbelievers, and

¹ We highly recommend as required reading for all co-op members: buy and read Ken Sande's *Peacemaking for Families*, and access and read "The Cross and Criticism" article linked to the www.peacemakersministries.com website.

even those Christians who believe very differently about theology, daily conduct, or academic goals. Less is more! Personally, I'd choose one like-minded family that I could share my homeschooling years with than a 30-family co-op filled with difficult relationships and strife.

4. Recognize that you will have conflicts, and prepare for them by recognizing that cravings cause conflict (James 4:1-2). Conflicts will come, and you need to be prepared to deal with them biblically.

First steps to take after finding yokefellows:

1. Let's say that you find three like-minded couples who agree minimally on the following:
 - a. Their theology is basically the same as yours, and they are committed to biblical standards for relationships. They are committed to conflict resolution when it occurs.
 - b. They want to do the same Tapestry year-plan for the same number of weeks, and can agree which weeks on a calendar those school weeks will be.
 - c. They are parents you respect: they are not perfect, but generally, they parent wisely and their children are good peers for your children to be in company with.
2. You would be wise to sit down as couples (as in, with your husbands present) and come up with agreements that will be committed to writing. These agreements should probably include (but need not be limited to):
 - a. A name for your co-op.
 - b. A statement of faith which all members shall sign.
 - c. Two codes of conduct for members: one for parents and one for children. These codes should contain clear procedures for what happens if these codes are broken. (See Matthew 18)
 - d. Outline of the application process for those who may want to join your group at a later date.
 - e. Officers of your co-op: you need an administrator who serves by leading (but is not the owner of the group), a treasurer, and a secretary/administrative assistant.
 - f. General guidelines concerning money—how much, and on what general types of things shall money be spent, and possibly plan to open a bank account.
 - g. Academic goals for the group, and possibly general outlines of how you plan to reach these goals. (For instance, we plan to use Year 2, we plan to do the Rhetoric level, we plan to meet twice a week, and we will discuss History and Literature assignments during those meetings.)
3. After this initial meeting, if all seems good, proceed to hold your first "down and dirty" parent meeting.
 - a. Husbands might want to attend this one as well, for their wives will be making firm commitments involving time, resources, and your children. If husbands are not present, wives should obtain an agenda for the meeting and get as much pre-approval of what she is likely to volunteer for as possible.
 - b. At this meeting, the four women in our model group would divide up the 36-week teaching schedule. There are many ways to do this.
 - i. Each take a 9-week block teaching one subject.
 - ii. Rotate so each mom teaches once a month.
 - iii. One mom always teaches History; another always does Literature, a third does all the correction of Writing Assignments, and a fourth provides all the planning for, and executes one field trip per month.
 - c. At this meeting, finalize some details you didn't decide at the first meeting. Members might come with:
 - i. A bank account secured, or at least the ability to collect any funds needed for the first unit.
 - ii. The statements of faith, conduct, consequences of failure to perform commitments, etc. agreed upon previously all typed up and ready to hand out. Get signatures at this time if necessary on all these documents.
 - iii. Statements of meeting frequency, assignment requirements to be maintained throughout the year, etc.
 - iv. Agree on accountability checkpoints for teachers for things like hands-on project preparations, writing assignment corrections, etc.
 - d. Finalize your calendar for the year.
 - i. Agree on the weeks you'll meet and those during which you'll take breaks.
 - ii. Agree on four parent meetings and four Unit Celebrations for the year.

- iii. Block out any major field trips and set dates aside.
- iv. If you'll need a larger room for any Unit Celebrations—especially for the first one of the year (for instance, a Medieval Feast in the case of Year 2)—discuss possible sites and assign someone to research and get back to the group by a specific date.

Once you're up and running:

1. Solomon wisely said, "It's the little foxes that spoil the vines." (paraphrase of Song 2:15) Catch small problems early. Don't avoid them and allow them to grow into big problems.
2. Guard your heart against wanting comfort and ease. Seek, invite, and embrace observations and corrections of your life and the lives of your children as the year unfolds.
3. Seek to serve the other ladies—but serve by leading. Sometimes leadership means being the one to do the unpleasant work of confronting someone who is not living up to their promises. Don't fear this task! Pray, read Peacemaker materials, and then go to attempt to win your sister! This is part of what God is doing in the homeschooling co-op: His great work of sanctification. You have a golden opportunity to model maturity and Christlikeness in relationships to your children as your year unfolds.
4. ENJOY the gift of your co-op. Seek to see evidences of God's grace, and seek to point them out to one another as you see them in class or on trips.
5. Continue to add and codify rules and procedures as you go. If your group grows, the more you have on paper and working well, the easier it will be to know if like-minded people are seeking to join you. If they are not likeminded, why not encourage them to start their own co-op that is fashioned in the image they see in their mind's eye?

Why are we doing this again?

You may be thinking, "Wow, sure sounds intimidating. Lots of work. Lots of interpersonal conflict. Rules?! Yuck." Well, if that's your reaction, you might want to think twice about forming a co-op. Co-ops can be incredible blessings, but the above pitfalls are real, and I would be unkind to not warn you of them so you can avoid broken bones and splintered school years.

Again, you should only be contemplating a co-op if you honestly feel led to do this by God and your husband supports you in the endeavor. You really will change the way you school when you join a group. There will be less freedom—you must keep to the agreed upon schedule and topics. There will be more hassle: interpersonal conflicts will develop. But there can also be a richness that your family alone could never hope to achieve for your students. From projects, to discussions, to field trips, to activities, co-ops provide opportunities, accountability, and fellowship. These are the reasons we undertake them. They are good reasons, but because we are still in a fallen world, we need to remember—almost daily—why we are doing this, and Whom we ultimately are attempting to please by joining and creating co-ops.