

A **child care co-op**, sometime called childcare exchange, is an increasingly popular option for budget-conscious parents with a large circle of friends. In a co-op, parents take turns watching each other's children. One parent might watch another parent's child on, for instance, Mondays or two half-days, while another might watch the first parent's children on a weekend evening or perhaps on Thursdays. In some groups, parents take turns watching everyone else's children as a group, while in others they watch one family's children at a time. This keeps the cost of child care down and keeps kids in the hands of caregivers parents trust.

If you think you'd like to start a child care co-op, consider these factors:

- Can you and the other parents agree on a philosophy and goals? Will there be a certain number of organized activities?
- Is everyone in the group punctual and reliable?
- What would your behavior policies be? How can parents discipline other people's children?
- What will you feed the children? What will their eating schedule be?
- How will the group manage when one parent is away for vacation or an emergency?
- How often will the parents meet to discuss the future of the group?



Once your group is started, make sure each parent is doing the same amount of work. When another parent is in charge of the children, back off.

If you're interested in starting a co-op, find a group of people you trust, and work to create guidelines to which you can all adhere. How detailed your guidelines are depends on how much you want to control the group, the size of your co-op and how you plan to operate the group. Start your co-op off right with solid policies that protect each family.

These sample childcare cooperative rules allow you to pick and choose the guidelines you want to include for your own group:

Set Membership Limits for the Childcare Cooperative

An overly large co-op means you usually have a babysitter available at all times but it also means your chances of leaving your child with someone you barely know are even higher. Many co-ops limit the number of families who can participate at one time. This keeps members active, childcare time distributed evenly and parents and kids begin seeing familiar faces.

Consider putting a cap on how many families can join the co-op. After a limit of 20 families is reached, for example, the group should begin a waiting list. Only after a family drops out of the co-op is the next person on the list eligible to join.

Write Childcare Cooperative Bylaws

Some childcare co-ops have more structure than big businesses. Founding members write bylaws that include the group's objective, membership rules, general rules on how the co-op works, duties of the coordinator (if applicable) and how much you must participate to remain an active member. Each parent must agree to the childcare co-op's bylaws before they can join the group.

Bylaws are not a good choice for every co-op, though. They do make the co-op feel strict but bylaws ensure every member is on the same page when it comes to understanding and following the rules.

Accept New Members into the Childcare Cooperative

Will you accept any parent who wants to be in your co-op? You can open your group up to the public or start with recommendations from other co-op members. Anyone wanting to join should be open to a home visit. While some families can be scared off or feel their privacy is being violated, these are the people you will be entrusting your children to if they're accepted in the co-op.

Every member should go through the same procedures to keep the children safe. If accepted, new members will be taking their kids to another parent's house and they'll know you took every precaution to check them out too.

Ask Tough Questions of Potential Members

You wouldn't randomly drive down a street, choose a house, walk up to the stranger's door and hand over your child. Trust is a huge factor in any childcare cooperative. Potential members should fill out a questionnaire before their membership is even considered. You want to know as much about this person and their home as possible. Do they have guns in the house? Pets? Unlocked medicine cabinets? A swimming pool in the backyard?

These are some of the many questions any parent wants answered before they leave their kids in someone else's care. The children's safety should be the number one priority of any childcare cooperative.

Address Corporal Punishment

A lot of co-ops don't address the corporal punishment issue. You may not spank your children but the parent watching them tomorrow spansks hers.

Before anyone trades childcare services, everyone needs to be clear on how a child who misbehaves should be handled. This policy should be in writing for every member to agree on before they can join.

No matter how you discipline your children, the easiest way to avoid conflict is to ban corporal punishment from the group. Find alternatives every member feels comfortable following, such as a time out for the child or a time out for the toy the kids were fighting over. Leave the decision to spank or not up to the children's parents, as opposed to allowing another parent to spank your kids.

Establish Participation Rules for the Childcare Cooperative

Simple rules of a childcare co-op let each member know exactly how they should use the group. General participation rules can cover:

1. A minimum amount of participation time to stay active (per month, per quarter, etc.)
2. The childcare provider's permission rights to transport your children in her car
3. Extra childcare hours a coordinator will receive for performing administrative tasks
4. How your tickets or points system works
5. What happens when a parent who agreed to babysit now has a sick child at home
6. How a member can leave the childcare co-op



Learn CPR and First Aid Training

Having every member of your group pass a *CPR and first aid training* class will put everyone's mind at ease when they need childcare services or they're in charge of someone else's kids. Ask about a group rate for a CPR and first aid class at your local Red Cross Office.

Split your group in half. One half goes to the class, while the other half watches the kids. Switch when it's time for the next class so the group that stayed behind can now attend a training class.

Leave the Childcare Parent With Instructions

There's no such thing as too much information when it comes to leaving your children with another parent. Even in a co-op filled with responsible parents, emergencies still happen.

Give the childcare parent your contact number and any special instructions regarding your kids. Don't forget to include allergies, other medical conditions or medicines your child has to take at a certain time if you and the group allow co-op parents to dispense medicine.

Let the childcare parent know exactly what time you will be back. Since most co-ops charge you additional tickets or points if you're late, you have an extra incentive to pick up your child on time.

Be thorough. Give as *many details as possible*. Your childcare parent will appreciate it too.

Deal With Trouble Members

Unfortunately, you may end up with a member who causes the group trouble. She might want everyone to babysit her children but when it's her turn, she's conveniently unavailable. You may have someone in your group who happily agrees to babysit but your children come home in tears because they think she's mean.

Members should be able to report these issues and problems need to be taken care of for the co-op's sake. Tackle the complaints individually, tally them up and be aggressive about putting a member on probation or forcing them to leave the group. One bad member can ruin an entire co-op if parents don't feel their concerns are taken seriously.

Schedule Member Meetings

Members should attend monthly or quarterly meetings to discuss the co-op. New memberships, updated totals on childcare credits and any other issues that have come up since the last meeting can be addressed.

The meetings are also a good time for parents to meet other parents. Kids can play together while you meet so they will feel like they're visiting friends instead of being left at a babysitter's house the next time you have errands to run.

Have everyone bring a covered dish to make your meeting an afternoon or evening out. Talk about the co-op's business but also have a good time while you're there. A well-run childcare cooperative should be a welcome relief for parents, not added stress.

Starting a Child Care Co-op



Interested in starting a co-op? Contact CYSS Parent Central Services located on Main Post, Bldg. 244, DSN 475-6656, CIV 09641-83-6656 or on Rose Barracks, Bldg. 224, DSN 476-2760, CIV 09662-83-2760.



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