

Homeschool Enrichment Idea ... Starting a Small Co-op

By Nancy Manos

Would you like to add a little extra “spice” to your homeschool? Do you find that you don't get around to those interesting hands-on projects you envision? Have you found yourself wanting to develop friendships with other homeschoolers and just don't know where to begin? Consider starting a small co-op. It can be an enriching, rewarding experience in the home education journey!

What is a small co-op? It is a cooperative learning experience with a small number of families. Parents work together to share the teaching responsibilities as well as their gifts and talents.

The two pillars of homeschooling are “parent” and “home.” One of the reasons my husband and I teach our children at home is because we do not want to delegate the training, teaching, and discipleship of our children to someone else. A co-op, by definition, is not a “drop and shop” class situation. It implies parental involvement. Doing a small co-op allows us to participate in a group learning experience and remain intricately involved in the learning/teaching process with our children.

A small co-op can be an exciting and motivating way to study a particular topic as well as opening the door to building lifelong friendships! I surveyed about two dozen homeschooling moms who have done co-ops. Their responses and experiences are reflected in the following questions and answers.

What are the benefits of doing a co-op?

- Opportunity to develop friendships.
- Fun to study and learn with others.
- Parents learn and glean from one another, sharing their talents, strengths, areas of expertise, and ideas.
- Celebration of peer achievement; chance to be a cheerleader and encourager of others.
- Sharing faith and excitement of learning.
- Public speaking skill development opportunities.
- Motivation to do hands-on projects.
- Provides accountability - More apt to stay on track and follow through if others are depending on you.
- Character growth opportunities for students and parents alike.

A small co-op can be a great addition for most homeschooling families. However, there are some reasons a family should **not** do a co-op.

- Stressful if a family is already overcommitted.
- Disruptive to families with little ones, interrupting nap schedules, etc.
- May be too much time away from home.
- If it interferes with mom's ability to manage her home and take care of her family or in getting regular schoolwork done at home.
- If someone doesn't want to do the work but wants to drop their children off and have someone else teach them.

Enrichment activities should be rewarding and enhance the home education journey. They should not be a burden or a drain. We each have a limited amount of time, energy, and resources. We need to be wise in our decisions and in the things we choose to add to our lives. It helps to remember that it's okay to say "no" to the *good* and the *better* so that we have room for the *best* things.

With whom should I do a co-op?

It is important to find people who are like-minded in their educational philosophy, parenting style, and worldview. Choose families with children that are similar in age, gender and interests.

Consider the group dynamics. Ask yourself if you are happy with the role your children will have in relation to the other children. Think about if your child will be the only boy or girl, the youngest or oldest, etc. Are you happy for your child to spend time with the other children there? Is it going to help your child grow and mature? Can your children help the other children grow and mature?

Where do I find people to do a co-op with?

If you don't already have a group of homeschooling friends, look for homeschoolers at church, at homeschooling activities, or at a local support group. Be purposeful about making friends in the homeschool community. Don't just sit back and say, "I don't know anyone." Get out there and meet people. If you know one other family that you might like to do a co-op with, ask if they know another family or two that might like to join you.

What's the best number of children/families for a small co-op?

This varies according to the families involved, the type of study you'll be doing as well as other factors. In general, two to four families with a maximum of eight to ten children are good numbers.

Look at the space you have available, the interaction between the children and the types of activities you might do. This will help you decide how many to invite. A co-op doing a science unit study, for example, requires table space for each student and plenty of room for experiments and activities. Fewer students would be better in that situation. A monthly literature club, on the other hand, could have more students because, as a discussion group, table space may not be a factor.

How do we get started?

1. Plan a play date for the families being considered. Observe how the kids and moms get along and interact with one another. Everyone should understand that this is just a time to "test the waters," and that they are not committed just because they come to the play date.
2. Pray on your own and with the other moms.
3. Share your hopes, goals, and expectations for a co-op. Be open and honest. Talk about philosophies of education, parenting styles, expectations for children's behavior, etc. Be willing to speak AND hear the truth in love. If you have concerns, share them humbly and gently. Ephesians 4:2-3, 15 says *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."*

...speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ.”

4. Brainstorm topic ideas to study in your co-op. See if there are any common interests or topics that everyone would be interested in studying together.
5. Be willing to opt out of participating if you are not comfortable with or excited about doing a co-op after the play date/inquiry meeting.
6. If one of the moms already has too much on her plate, be a caring friend and talk to her about this. Express your care and concern for her. If she really wants to participate, ask what she could give up or scale back on to make room for the co-op. Our families are our first priority. We do not want to add something – even if it seems like a good thing – if it will cause stress or strife or take away from the family.
7. Schedule a second time to get together. Go home. Pray. Talk to your husband. See how you’re feeling about the possibility of starting a co-op after the initial play date. Remember, it is okay if you decide not to participate.
8. The older your children are, the more important it is to talk with them about your plans. Don’t make it exclusively their decision, but make sure they are “on board,” committed to participate cheerfully and work on friendships.
9. Once you decide you want to do a co-op and who you’re going to co-op with, it’s time to start talking about the details and making plans.

Planning your co-op:

You will want to decide the following things:

- **What to study:** Brainstorm. Find common interests. Choose a topic or topics that would be most beneficial to the families involved. Talk about goals. Ask yourselves, “When we are done, what do we want to have accomplished?”
- **When to meet:** Decide how frequently you’d like to meet (weekly, every other week, or monthly). Decide what time and how long you’ll meet each time (morning or afternoon; 2 hours, 3 hours, or all day).
- **Set an end date:** Unless you’ve worked with these families before, start with a short commitment (6 weeks, 8 weeks, or 12 weeks), rather than launching into a full-year co-op. Whether it is a short-term co-op or a full year, setting an end date gives everyone the opportunity to choose to do another co-op together or bow out gracefully when it’s over.
- **Plan time for any work to be done outside of co-op:** Each family must be willing to schedule time for any outside work that is assigned. It is important that all agree in advance how much outside time they are willing to commit.
- **Where to meet:** Decide if you’ll rotate houses or meet at one home.
- **Younger siblings:** Make a plan for managing younger siblings. Decide what is expected. (Will they be kept busy in another room? What activities will be provided for them? Who will be responsible for them?) Incorporate younger children when possible, but do not let them be a distraction for the older children, detracting from the learning experience. Older children participating in the co-op should not generally be expected to take care of younger siblings during the co-op. They should be able to participate fully in the co-op activities.
- **Discipline issues:** Talk about expectations for any discipline issues that arise. Parents should be responsible for their own children, but all parents should be able to gently walk in their authority as an adult and address issues as needed. Do not let irritation build or resentment simmer. Be quick to talk to one another about concerns or problems with the purpose of finding a resolution. This should be done away from the co-op setting and away from the children. Guard unity in the group.
- **Division of labor:** Every parent should participate in the co-op. Ephesians 4:16 says *“From whom the whole body joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the*

effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.” Decide who will be responsible for teaching various parts of the lesson, who will provide supplies, snacks, etc. If a parent is nervous about teaching, a co-op setting is a great place to gain confidence. It is also a wonderful way to learn from others and benefit from their strengths.

- **Designate a leader if necessary:** If the committee format isn't working, it's okay to have one parent take the lead as long as everyone is in agreement.
- **Alternative approach:** Rather than starting with the people, you may want to choose a particular topic you want to study, then recruit people who want to join you.

Advice from moms who have done co-ops:

- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Have clear expectations for parents and children. Have clearly defined objectives.
- Relax and have fun.
- Go with the flow.
- Have a purpose for your co-op. It should be a valuable, beneficial experience.
- Choose people wisely.
- Let your “yes” be “yes.” Do what you say you will do. Show up on time. Be prepared. Follow through to the end of the co-op. Do not make other plans that interfere with your co-op commitment.
- Realize that conflict and disagreement are not necessarily bad. If we respond appropriately, it can be a great opportunity for personal growth and stronger friendships.
- Have a common commitment level.
- Enjoy learning with your kids and other families.
- Pray and pray some more! Pray individually. Pray as a group.
- Be humble and flexible.
- Learn to forgive quickly.
- Voice your expectations and concerns. Listen to what others have to say.
- Let the moms and students share their gifts, talents, abilities, and strengths with the group.

To summarize, co-ops have enriched the home education journey for many families. If you decide that a co-op is right for you and your family, incorporate the steps outlined here to help you succeed!