

## Co-op Classes, Ages, and Stages



candidly  
Katie did

I think we can all agree that children are all different and go through life at their own pace. We can also agree that there are some consistent expectations for each of the stages of life:

toddlers want to be independent, kids want to push boundaries, adolescents can't find their brains, late teens want a challenge. Each stage of life is interesting and exciting, with its obstacles and rewards.

So when we teach young people, we have ways that we like to split them up so as to maximize their learning experience. It helps us target our lessons and set educational goals. It helps us choose learning activities. And it gives us very easy parameters for our classes. Schools, for example, use this method quite rigidly, setting expectations for each grade and time periods within the year.

For homeschool co-ops, it's important to know your kids and their abilities. It's also important to remember your vision and your priorities. Let me share some things that I've seen and done that have worked well.

# Large Group Learning

It's very important to the co-op I'm in now to have multi-age learning. Therefore, we make sure to offer at least one class that everyone takes together. This sounds overwhelming and tricky, but we have some strategies for making it go smoothly. First, we choose a focus that has many levels of learning, usually history. We've done specific time periods and broad topics, both with great success. We try to mix up the teaching methods so that each class is different. It's important to assess each time what went smoothly and what needed to be done differently. Using a lecture or video is great, but then you need a busy or creative activity afterwards. One thing that we nearly always do is ask our older students to partner up with a young one. This accomplishes two things: the little ones get one-on-one help, and the bigger ones get experience in leadership and teaching. I'm sure you've noticed that you learn something better when you have to explain it to someone else.

The buddy method works really well for a lot of our activities. Another thing we do, especially if we are creating something to take home, is ask the students to get with their family groups. The siblings then work together to do or make whatever it is. Then parents only have to deal with one craft project, always wise. We will partner up single-kid families with larger ones if we're doing a team game or something.

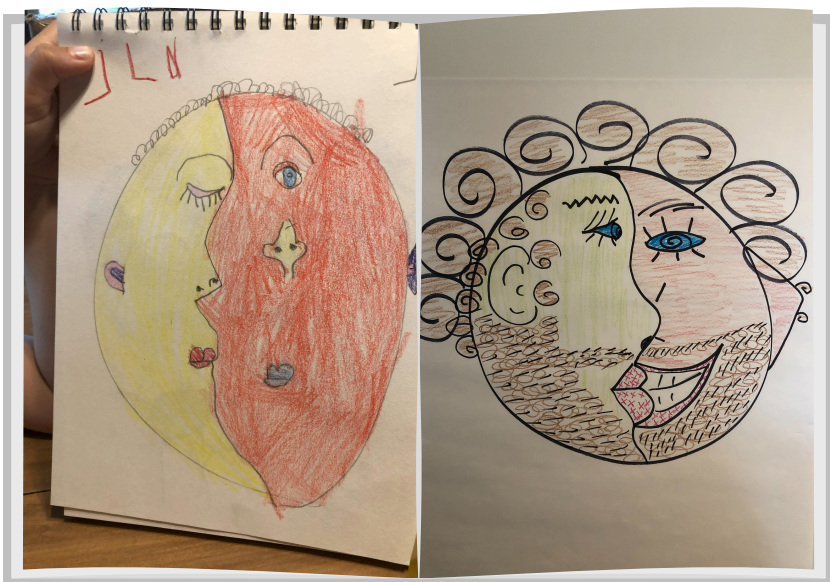




Of course we will break kids into smaller groups when doing learning activities. We've discovered that it's very easy and fun to have the other moms in the class each take a group for small lessons. Depending on the activities, we will rotate the groups or rotate the materials. Usually we keep the age mix for this, but if we are doing something that definitely can use age-appropriate learning, we break up by age. When we did colonial education, we broke up by ages to show what each stage of learning would be. When we did the history of industry, we were able to give our oldest students material that was too heavy for our little ones, who focused on experiential and fun activities.

## *Ability or Interest Based Learning*

We've done this for art, but you could do it for anything if you know how to write class descriptions clearly. It's perfectly acceptable to have flexible ages for different levels of learning. You might want to have a class, but not specify the age so much as the content. So you have Dabbling in Art and Watercolor Intensive. Or Messy Experiments and Geology Rocks!



Our co-op breaks our Gym and Health class into broad age categories so that no one gets hurt during games. We also offer broad age ranged classes as an elective, so that we can get everyone into a class that they'll enjoy [or their mom will make them take].

# Age Classes

It probably sounds like I don't appreciate this approach. But I do. Right now our highschoolers don't participate in our large group classes so that they can have something that will actually count toward their diploma programs. I grew up in a co-op that was pretty large, and we had to have aged classes, especially for our more academic classes.

The thing is, almost everyone is familiar with this model. Schools use it, churches use it, after school programs use it. I don't need to describe it to you. There is a time when this is absolutely the right call. Different ages of kids have different levels of ability and understanding and readiness for information. Use age-based classes as a tool in your co-op, but I would encourage you to look at your vision and see if it should be your standard and your constant.



You're probably not surprised to read that I recommend a co-op to use a combination of these strategies in the course of their day or year. One reason we homeschool is we'd like our family to be together. One reason we co-op is for community. We create community with intention: we want our children to be comfortable with kids and adults in a variety of situations. I find that schools often miss out on the beauty of this because of the setup they have. We have the freedom to choose something quite different. Let's have fun and make the learning environment we want!