

Organizing your Homeschool Co-op



You've got a dream. You've got a location. You might already have a vision and purpose. You've got some fellow families to form your federation. Now what?

candidly
Katie did

You need to know how you'd like your co-op to look. Each one has its own identity and flavor. Each group meets the needs of its members. You're never going to please every homeschool family in your area, and you should not try. Serve your families unapologetically, go ahead and be selective about who joins your group, and always be authentic to your mission.

Some homeschoolers are looking for a very familiar classroom and school-ish experience. These people are going to want a co-op that is very scheduled and has age-based classes. They might want professional or semi-professional teachers, homework, and something concrete to show for their child's efforts in class. A co-op like this, once you get the kinks out, runs like a well-oiled machine!

Starting such a homeschool group takes work and time and often, money. In my experience, the co-ops that run with rigid schedules and offer impressive-sounding classes have high membership fees, class fees, supply fees, teacher fees, or any combination of these fees [Geez!].

A co-op that meets near me has an extensive website and one can peruse their classes, policies, and list of fees that each family will incur. Reading their manual feels very formal and school-ish. A lot of families love this style! Educators who love the structure of their curriculum, checking boxes, crossing t's and dotting i's - this kind of co-op is certainly something to look into. A simple search for co-ops in any area is likely to help you find some examples of these; I find that they are the ones who go to the trouble of having nicely organized websites.

On the other end of the homeschool group spectrum, we have people who are a little more grassroots, family-style, and laid back. Co-ops like these might offer fewer classes, scrounge for materials, write their own lessons, and have more flexible policies. To get started, you only need a few things: someone to teach something, a space to do it, and willing victims participants. In a group like this, you will see multi-age classes, kids and parents sitting on floors, teachers with a baby on one hip, and hardly a scrap of homework in sight.

The co-op my family attends lands firmly in this category. We started small with field trips and simple classes, and have actually grown into quite a well-oiled



machine ourselves! We ask for one fee per family per year, which, though low, covers our rent, insurance, and all supplies. All our classes are taught by moms, though we've also invited trusted guests for special instruction or demonstrations! We've been very blessed to partner with a local church who offers us half-priced rent, and a ministry warehouse that often has school supplies and sundry available for free.

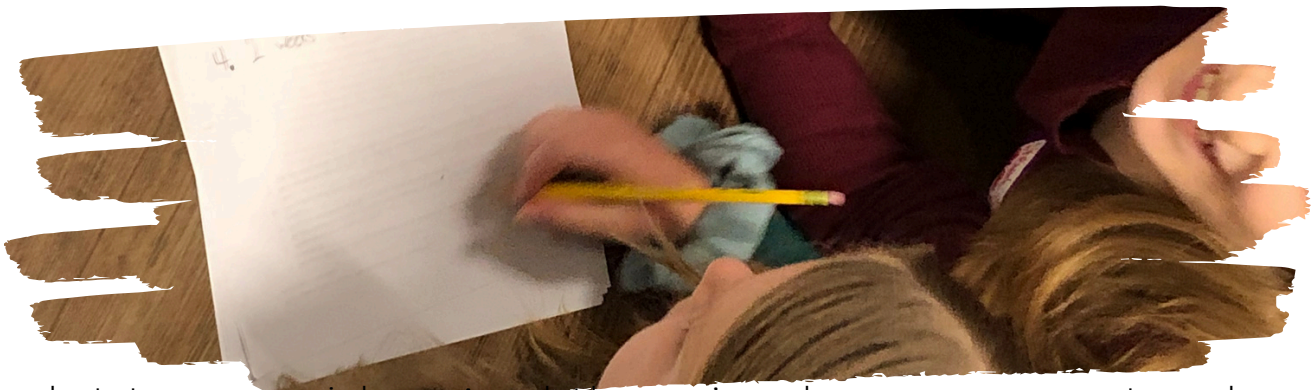
Currently we offer one multi-age history type class, a gym/health class where we do split into age groups for physical safety, controlled chaotic lunch, and then age-based electives. We do a kick-off picnic before the year starts [so the dads can see each other, mostly], an educational Christmas party, an end-of-the-year celebration evening, and three park days in the summer. We intentionally keep things as simple as possible, meeting twice a month and encouraging our teachers to keep things easy. We want to be a resource and a community, not a source of stress and busyness.



But we recognize that our style isn't for everyone. There is a lot of community between our kids of all ages, with big kids bonding with little ones and everyone looking out for each other. We love the freedom we've created to be flexible [one time half the group was out sick and we just told everyone else to bring board games]. We love our community of families that feels like a big family. But it comes with a dash of chaos that might make our cup of tea too spicy for some.

There is, however, lots of middle ground between these two extremes. A group of families I know decided to start small, with semi-formally organized gym days at their local church. They organized some of the play, and each mom took turns bringing a lesson or project. This is a nice way to ease into something more structured. They are looking to start a more elaborate co-op within the next year.

One of the co-ops I grew up in hired one teacher for a class as agreed upon by all families and paid her to teach for the year. Miss Judy was a wonderful and passionate science teacher and well worth whatever that dollar amount was. Her pay would have been included in the membership costs for families, as would anything we needed to contribute to the curriculum material. But to offset this, all of our other classes were taught by parents. Often, a parent would teach the same class to several ages, to maximize their preparation efforts. The tradeoff was a very careful schedule setup to make sure each class had the space it needed and the timing worked out for everyone. Our attendance fluctuated: in our biggest year we had classes by grades, ranging from preschool to high school. Other years, we had classes by age groups to accommodate our smaller size.



It's a lot to consider. And there's always room to change. What is it that you look for in a homeschool co-op? What do you want for one that you'd like to start?