

How to Start a Babysitting Coop

All parents need time away from their children, but for many the cost of babysitting makes going out a rare occurrence. Add to this the frustrating search for reliable sitters when needed, and the real advantages of belonging to a babysitting co-op become obvious. In this arrangement, a group of parents sit for each others' children for free, exchanging hours of babysitting instead of money.

If you'd like more free time and are willing to look after extra kids to earn it, then you should inquire about existing co-ops in your area. And there are other attractive benefits to consider as well—you'll likely make new friends, extend your support network, pick up tips on child rearing, and possibly exchange toys and clothes. Your children, too, will have more playmates and increase their sense of security within the neighbourhood.

If you cannot find a co-op in your area, here are some ideas to help you start one:

- You can start with as few as four families, but aim for no less than six and no more than 15. No one should ever feel obligated to accept a request to sit. With too few members, you may feel guilty if you say "no"; what's more, it can be discouraging if whenever you need a sitter, no one is available. With too large a group, members don't get to know each other.
- Co-ops work best when people are friends or at least know someone else in the coop before joining. Keeping the co-op within the neighbourhood avoids transportation problems and helps children become familiar with the other families and their houses.
- Each family will need a list of members' names, children's names and ages, any allergies, addresses, phone numbers, and hours when the member is available for sitting. An example in the last category might read: "afternoons; evenings except Tuesdays." Remember, if you won't sit on Saturday nights, don't be surprised if you can't get anyone to sit for you on that popular evening. Usually, children go to the sitter's house during daytime hours, and the sitter comes to the children at night.

- To record sitting transactions, many coops use tickets or tokens as currency. Pieces of coloured cardboard or poker chips will do. Basically, one hour of sitting is worth one ticket or token. Often, extra tickets or half tickets are charged for sitting after midnight, serving meals or looking after more than one child. Another way to keep track is to use a central accounting system of points earned and spent. Members take turns being the recording secretary to whom families report their transactions by phone or e-mail. This way, someone knows at all times who needs to earn hours and who might therefore be motivated to accept a request. Each new member receives a loan of tokens or points which the family must repay before leaving the co-op. Some coops charge a few dollars a year to cover photocopying and other minor expenses.
- Appoint a co-ordinator whose job will be to call meetings, draw up and distribute lists, answer questions from prospective members and interview applicants in their homes. The interview is the time to review coop rules and child proofing requirements. To avoid burn out, the coordinator position should rotate every six months or so.
- Since your child's safety and well-being are your prime concern, you may require that candidates be sponsored by one or two current members, or live in the neighbourhood for a certain period of time and provide personal references. Many coops require that all adults living in the household pass a police check.
- Hold a get-together at least four times a year to meet new and prospective members, show off new babies, and discuss co-op business. This is an important opportunity to get to know the people who will be looking after your children. It's also a good idea to hold events (summer picnics, winter tobogganing parties) where the children can meet one another.
- Children grow up and people leave co-ops as their needs change. To survive, a babysitting co-op must recruit. Look for opportunities to promote your group within the neighbourhood on a regular basis.

by *Betsy Mann*