



The
**Babysitting Co-op
Guidebook**

Building a
Community
Support
Network

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*By Patricia
McManus*

You will never have to pay a babysitter again. The freedom to come and go, lost the moment you gave birth, will return.

Here in your hands lies the answer to your childcare needs.

With this guidebook, you can create and organize a babysitting cooperative in your community. It offers a step-by-step program, from recruiting members, to organizing meetings and formulating rules. Soon you may find yourself out on the town, in a library, or finally getting some work done.

A cooperative, or co-op, is a group of parents who babysit for each other without the use of money. Parents work together to fill their common need for babysitters. Other people feel the same way you do when parenthood has imprisoned them in the house for days, weeks, even months, fossilized.

We all need to get away from the kids occasionally to keep sane, but babysitters want money, and lots of it. Teenage sitters grow up, get new boyfriends, and go away to school. Sitters from an agency are transient and very highly paid. These people may not be responsible, reliable, or even experienced. They're not with you for the long run, they'll leave just when you think that you've got your sitter problems settled. Then it's time to start that desperate search for a new sitter. If you want someone more experienced than a twelve year old, you might be asked to pay seven dollars or more an hour. That's a price too steep even for sanity.

In a co-op you get trustworthy care that



doesn't cost any money. This is a way to have free, qualified, long term sitters available to you whenever you need them. These are capable, familiar people who live right in your neighborhood. They are parents themselves and

they share the same concerns and experiences that only parents understand. They also come with built-in playmates and the usual arsenal of toys, books, equipment, and most importantly, experience.

Here's how it works. When you babysit you get credit hours. When someone sits for you, you pay hours. No money involved. The idea is to babysit just as much as you need babysitting. Simple. Take control of your time and turn it into free time.

You'll find the cooperative system works because members can't take advantage of each other. There isn't the vagueness of "who owes who" that ruins the more informal trades. The bookkeeping system records all the activity so everyone knows where they stand. If a member is getting into debt they have to make it up

within a certain time. If they have a positive balance they could plan to go out for an evening.

The organization will run itself. With the aid of forms, rules, and meetings a cooperative spreads out the responsibilities equally. This is the beauty of cooperating, no one person gets burdened with all the responsibility. Everyone has an equal share.

The children will benefit from the long lasting friendships with each other. The co-op kids enjoy a wider variety of companions. A co-op teaches social skills and is the source of many warm memories for the children. It is good for the children to see their parents actively cooperating with each other. Just like on Sesame Street.

You might not need the co-op very often, but the security of knowing your neighbors would be there for you is reassuring. The many opportunities to talk and get to know each other help the members in the cooperative trust each other and feel comfortable enough to call for babysitting. This support system provides freedom, community, and a sense of belonging for neighborhood families.

When children are sat for there will be other kids and different toys to play with. The children seem to keep each other company so well that the sitters have less to do than if they were alone with their own child. Children like to be with other children. They become so familiar with the other families in the co-op that they don't mind being babysat. It's fun for them. The children themselves ask to go over to a co-op kid's house or have someone over to play.

The parents in the co-op get to see other's children at different stages. It enriches the parenting experience by giving perspective on the common stages and problems that children go through. They can see how fast kids change and how fleeting the young years are.

The possibility of having so many responsible, free, sitters available for your children

makes parenthood much easier. A co-op brings a feeling of community to your neighborhood, people helping each other and looking after the kids. Children need connected, concerned, safe, communities in which to grow.

GETTING STARTED



Finding other people who need this service is the first step in creating a network of parents and children. It's easy. Just get up enough courage to talk to people in the neighborhood about your idea. They usually respond positively. People who do not need a co-op may know of parents of small children in the neighborhood who would. You'll find there are more than you thought.

It is a good idea to have a co-organizer who will share the initial responsibilities of finding interested parents and setting up the first meetings. When you have another person doing it, you have more courage and persistence than if you go it alone.

Talk to neighborhood parents that you see at school, the park, and playgroups. Tell them about your intentions to start a babysitting cooperative. Old friends, new friends, and friends of friends will quickly see the benefits of a barter system, especially in today's economy. See, it's a *good idea*.

The neighborhood playground is a good place to find possible members. It affords the opportunity to talk with other parents and see if they are people with whom you feel comfortable. The advantage of starting the co-op yourself is that you can form the group. You can structure the rules and develop the feel of the co-op. It can be formal, with voting on new members and home visits to qualify for membership. Or it can be a less formal and loosely knit group, open to anyone living in the neighborhood. Tailor it to your needs. If you can't find a big group, start with what you have. More members can be recruited as time goes on.

After you have gathered names and phone numbers of people who might be interested, start planning the first meeting. A morning playgroup with children and coffee is fine. However, to minimize distractions, children should not attend the second and third meetings, as there will be important issues to be discussed.

Call the parents on your list and inform them that there will be a meeting in two weeks to start a babysitting co-op. Two weeks gives enough time to contact all leads and prepare for the meeting. It could be held in your home or the co-organizers home. If there are many working parents, set the meeting for after dinner or on a weekend. Just make it convenient enough that most of the people could come. The first meeting will familiarize everyone with the idea and how it works.

AGENDAS



Initial Meeting

This will be an informal meeting in which you get to know each other, and outline the general procedures.

Introduction

- Introduce yourself and state your intention to start a babysitting cooperative in the neighborhood. A cooperative is a group of parents who agree to exchange babysitting services. There is a record of all sits and each member has a running balance. Hours are earned when you sit and deducted when you use a sitter.

Introduction of people present

- Have each person state their name, the names and ages of their children and where they live. Ask them what interested them about the cooperative and what their expectations may be.

Explain how a co-op works

- All members arrange for their own sits.
- Children usually come to the sitter's home.
- Monthly bookkeeper records sit in a central record book.

- After every month the bookkeeper balances the book with all credits and debits equaling zero.

Set boundaries & name co-op

- Boundaries should be within walking distance to save the hassle of driving unless, of course, you live in a rural area and the families live far apart.
- The co-op should be named. You could use the name of your town, neighborhood, or make up something original. This gives an identity to the co-op.



General questions and answers

- The more detailed questions can be answered at the second and third meeting.
- Coordinate schedules and set date, time, and place for the next meeting. This first meeting should be very loose and should create enthusiasm for starting the cooperative.

Organizational Meeting

After all the people who are still interested arrive, start the meeting. In this meeting you will introduce and fill out the forms, and explain the offices of bookkeeper and coordinator.

Also reintroduce the co-op by its new name and explain the following forms.

Member Directory

This form will give basic information on each family and expectations of availability and needs.

Member Information Sheet

This sheet contains more detailed information for reference when babysitting, including allergies, pets, emergency contact, etc.

Medical Release Form

This is to be left with sitter, or at children's doctor's office.

Tally Sheet

Used by all members to record and keep track of their sittings.

Rotation Sheet

Will list members names and the months they are in office, alphabetical order for bookkeeper and reverse for the coordinator.

The coordinators are in office for three months. They are in charge of coordinating meetings, handling questions and screening new members. The coordinators should plan social events while they are in office. For example, a pot luck dinner on the first Friday of every month. Having a coordinator gives continuity to the group.

These forms make up the notebook that each member should have at home. Members should keep all this information in a loose-leaf binder for reference when looking for a sitter or sitting for someone.

Appoint coordinator and bookkeeper, preferably the co-organizers, since they are the most familiar with this material. Make up rotation lists.

Each member will fill out the member directory and the member information sheet. Members should make photocopies for each other and for the coordinator's book. These sheets will be distributed at the next meeting. If you prefer one person to do the copying then you should have dues to cover the cost.

Coordinate schedules and set time, date, and place for next meeting.

Nuts & Bolts Meeting

In this meeting the bookkeeper's procedure will be explained, the rules read aloud and

chosen and the notebooks organized.

Distribute filled out member information sheets, bookkeeper and coordinator rotation sheets.

Read rules aloud and discuss which ones to choose. These

These rules are not etched in stone. Every co-op should feel free to make any changes they feel are appropriate for their co-op.

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Explain in detail bookkeeping method. Each member takes a turn recording the points that sitters report to them. For every positive hour there is a negative hour. The sitter is credited and the sittee is debited the same amount. All the balances add up to zero. Use the sample balance sheet to illustrate recording procedures.

Safeguarding Meeting

This meeting will address child proofing, procedures for emergencies, First Aid and CPR courses, insurance, etc. Now, don't be frightened by this material. It is better to have people prepared for any situation. No one likes to think about accidents, but when we do they are less likely to happen.

Review Medical Care and Home Safety section of rules and read aloud.

Discuss whether members' homeowners or renters insurance policy would be sufficient to cover co-op children when they are babysat.

Responsibilities of the Sitter

Parents wishing to use the co-op must:

- Be on time for arrival and pick up.
- Make sure the child has diapers, juice or anything else they might need.
- Leave a telephone number where they can be reached.
- Make sure the children are aware that the parents will be leaving them with the sitter.
- Have all children up to date on their immunizations.

New Members

There are no restrictions as to race, color, religion, etc.

Prospective member's names are to be submitted to the coordinator. There may be a need to have a waiting list when the limit of membership is reached.

Prospective members will be invited to a playgroup meeting. At the next business meeting there will be a vote by the membership and prospective member will be informed of their decision. This way prospective members do not have to be present at the vote, and the membership can make an informed decision.

New members will be responsible for copying member information, rules, and all other papers. They will fill out the member information sheets and distribute a copy to each member. A ream of paper may be bought by the co-op and may be used if anyone has a copying machine at work. This may be an easier way to handle the paperwork.

New members will be placed at the bottom of rotation lists.

New members may begin using the co-op on the first day of the month following their acceptance.

Involvement equals commitment. Try to get new members involved in the co-op at the start with playgroups and informal play dates.

Business Meetings

Business meetings should be held every three months. The coordinator for that quarter will organize and host the meeting.

Coordinators should inform membership of business meetings two weeks in advance.

The purpose of business meetings will be to discuss co-op business, and update membership and coordinator rotation lists. At the meetings the members review the book to check on their hours, discuss rules, and keep in touch with how the cooperative is working.

The previous coordinator takes minutes of quarterly meetings.

Members should inform each other of any change of address or doctor. All the members should bring their records and notebooks to the meetings so the information can be recorded and checked for accuracy.

Any member may bring up a complaint at the business meeting.

Members may vote to change or amend the rules.

Members who do not attend receive a penalty of two hours. These hours go to the bank account set up to balance the books. This encourages attendance and saves the coordinator time writing and distributing all the information that the present members received.

Members will discuss the coordinators suggestions for social events and should make some plans.

Business meetings keep the co-op organized and nip any problems in the bud.

Coordinators Responsibilities

The coordinator handles questions and is responsible for the smooth running of the co-op. The coordinator is in office three months and receives 1/2 hour credit from each member for the following services:

- Keeping co-op information up to date
- Screening and admitting new members
- Handling dues

- Auditing the bookkeeping book in second month of term
- Notifying members of upcoming business meetings
- Setting agenda and presiding at business meetings
- Organizing at least one social event
- Handling any questions or problems



Bookkeeping

The bookkeeper records and balances book. The bookkeeper is in office one month and receives 1 hour credit from each member for these services:

- Keeping a record of sits reported and verifying bookkeeping totals with members at the end of the month
- Balancing the book with all the credits and debits equal to zero
- Notifying coordinator if a member is accumulating excessive debt
- Passing the balanced book to the next scheduled bookkeeper
- The bookkeeper shall accept only a balanced book from the previous bookkeeper.

Bookkeeping Procedure

Members call bookkeeper to report the hours they sit. Sitter reports hours.

Bookkeeper records all credits and debits on bookkeeping spreadsheet.

Time is measured from when parents leave until they return.

Time is rounded off to nearest 1/2 hour.

Bookkeeper adds the previous balance, coordinator and bookkeeper hours, and all co-op activity for new balance at the end of the month.

All credits and debits of total membership should add up to zero.

For sits canceled less than twenty-four hours in advance (for reasons other than illness), credit scheduled sitter one hour and subtract one hour from member who cancels.

If two members use a sitter at the same time, each member pays regular time and the sitter receives double time.

Bonus Hours

Members may be credited for:

- Serving lunch in their home - 1/2 hour
- Serving dinner in their home - 1 hour
- Picking up or delivering the children they sit for - 1/2 hour
- Sitting past the previously established time and has been inconvenienced - double time
- Sitting at the child's home - 1/2 hour

Inactivity

Members should notify coordinator when they will be on vacation or unavailable.

If a member neither sits nor uses the co-op for three months the inactive member will be asked to balance out their hours and drop out.

Members may evaluate reasons for inactivity before dropping inactive member.

Members wishing to quit the co-op should get their debits and credits to balance.

A bank account receives the plus and minus hours of members leaving the co-op or penalized.

This account is set up to balance the books.

Members pay hours for coordinator and bookkeeper whether they have used the co-op or not.

Excessive Debt

No member shall accumulate a debt of over 20 hours. If a member does accumulate this much debt, they cannot use the co-op until their balance is under 20 hours. Members who reach 20 hours will be warned by the bookkeeper and the member must reduce the debt within one month. If the member fails to do so they will be dropped from the co-op and must pay membership \$5.00 per hour or the current babysitting rate.

Medical Care & Home Safety

The first rule in an emergency is to *stay calm*.

Medical release forms are left with the sitter they use or with the children's doctor.

A member shall neither sit nor ask for a sitter when there is an illness in the home. Any medical concern, no matter how insignificant it may seem, should be discussed. Members may at any time refuse to sit due to a child's illness.

All members must have smoke detectors and check the batteries monthly. All members should prepare a fire escape route, map it out, and keep it with their co-op information. Keep children away from the stove and keep all pot handles toward the back of the stove. Watch for dangling appliance cords. Set your water heater's thermostat to low, warm, or 120° F.

Keep the local poison control center's number taped by the phone. Members should keep Syrup of Ipecac at home. Keep common household poisons and medicines out of sight and reach of children.

Keep all small objects out of reach. Have older children store toys with small parts up

high. Familiarize yourselves with first aid for choking.

Prevent falls from furniture by never leaving babies alone on beds, changing tables, or sofas. Always strap children into high chairs and strollers. Keep stairs well lit and don't let children play on stairs. Use safety gates for infants and toddlers. Install window guards and 'stops'.

Move chairs and other furniture away from windows to discourage young climbers.

Unguarded windows opened only five inches pose a danger to children under 10.

Emergency phone numbers

should always be in sight and up to date.

Membership should take a first aid and CPR course. Check with your local hospital, fire department, Red Cross chapter or YMCA and YMHA for classes.

Playgroups

Set a time for one hour each week or two to get together. It can be in different members' homes, or in the playground, etc. One member is in charge of snacks. The children get a chance to play with each other while the parents can talk. Social playgroups and playdates help everyone know each other better. It is important to feel comfortable with each other. When there is familiarity in the co-op it works much better. People are more likely to call and use it.

House Rules

Have your house rules set in your mind if not on paper, such as, no jumping on the furniture, or no eating in the living room. Some things that are perfectly acceptable to one par-

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ent may make another swoon. Get the important things straight and you will not have to make as many judgment calls.

You'd be surprised at how well a child behaves when in an other's home. They know what they can get away with at home but they are not so sure with someone else. So if you firmly set rules for the children, your own included, there is less negotiation and restating why. They are just the house rules.

Running the Cooperative

Let the co-op run itself. The cooperative will become self generating when the members are ready to use it. The bookkeeping system is so simple that there is usually no problem that can't be figured out with frequent auditing by the coordinator. The coordinator keeps the continuity while the bookkeeper balances the book.

The initial organization and paperwork are the only things that the founder has to do. Since everyone carries their share of the load, it's success will not depend on the efforts of just one person. Eventually people may move or decide to drop out, but there will be more people joining.

The cooperative can last years. After the original children grow up, the co-op serves other families and keeps going. It becomes a neighborhood institution and elevates the quality of life for the people who inherit it. ●



Patricia McManus is a writer, community activist, and full-time mother. She has been participating in, writing about, and forming cooperatives for five years. She has a firm belief that cooperation between parents will enhance the quality of life for American families. She lives with her husband Tim and children Andrew, Sam and Rachel in Northern Liberties, Philadelphia.

Notes



A series of approximately 18 horizontal lines, evenly spaced, extending across the width of the page, intended for writing notes.

Member Information Sheet

Parents (last name)

Address

Home Phone

Father's Work Number

Mother's Work Number

Children's Names

Birthdate

School

Doctor

Phone

Office Address

Allergies

Instructions

Handicaps

Instructions

Pets

Instructions

Preferable sit time

Best time to call

Additional Instructions

Emergency Contacts

Phone
