

Working Together

Is a Co-op Preschool Right for You?

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When my daughter was in a typical, professionally run preschool, I followed the usual preschool-parent ritual: I would walk her into school, sign her in, maybe chat briefly with the teacher, kiss my daughter on the head, and leave. I knew I was an involved parent, confident that my child was being cared for by a professional staff.

But now I'm at a co-op preschool. I not only bring my daughter into the school, I also stay to put out the playdough, see if any laundry needs to be washed, sit down with the other kids to color for a bit, and talk to the other parents. If it's my work day, I sling my job card around my neck and get ready to teach or clean or prepare the snack. I never knew how involved I could be.

But co-oping is not for everyone. You have to ask yourself, am I willing to teach, play, clean, prepare food, fund raise, be around young kids, know the other parents, and take responsibility for the school? If you say yes, then you should consider a co-op.

What is a Co-op?

A co-op, short for cooperative, is an organization that is owned or managed by the members of the group. The first co-op preschool in the United States was founded in 1916 at the University of Chicago. The founding mothers' goal was to pool their resources to create a child care program that would allow them to participate in the war effort.

A co-op preschool is usually a non-profit organization. A professional teacher, director, and/or staff is often employed, but parents are relied upon to run the school.

"Parents are the teachers, the parents are the janitors, the parents are the fundraisers, the parents are the maintenance workers, the parents do almost everything," explains Sandra Westlie, director of the Peter Pan Parent Co-op in El Cerrito for 21 years.

Parents participate during the preschool day, at regularly scheduled night meetings, on work-party days, and occasionally during off-hours for special projects. All this participation keeps down the cost of running a school a key benefit to many parents.

Co-op preschools range in complexity. They can be as simple as a group of friends meeting on a regular basis and providing activities for their children, or as structured as a professionally run preschool. A number of co-op preschools are offered through local adult education programs, and parents can earn school credit by participating.

Educating Parents

Most co-op preschools have a component of educating parents on early childhood development a key difference from standard preschools. The parent education is usually provided by the school's director, who is often a trained educator with an early childhood development background. Directors use the night meetings to discuss topics such as developmental stages and maturity, effective discipline, nutrition, enrichment, encouraging independence, and constructive socialization. Parents then use this knowledge to interact with the children at the school during their workdays. Schools often bring in guest speakers to provide more depth on these and other topics.

Many parents feel that this education is one of the best benefits of being in a co-op.

Frank Biondi, a parent at the Redwood Parents Nursery School Redwood City and president of the California Council of Parent Participation Nursery Schools (CCPPNS), says he's benefited from this continuing education: he can now deal with situations such as "how to handle tantrums, why you need to read to your children at a young age, fine motor skill development. It's an ongoing thing. You can't just get a list of parenting skills and go home and think it's going to work. You need that continual reinforcement."

In fact, some preschools focus primarily on an adult education curriculum. Little Wonders, a parent-child co-operative in San Mateo, structures its program so that daytime meetings are actual learning sessions. Parents discuss various topics with the director while they observe the children playing in the classroom.

But no matter how much guidance and teaching is provided, parents will naturally have some differences of opinion about how to supervise the children at their preschool. Carol Mandere, director at the Campbell Parents Participation Preschool, says, "It's difficult for the parents to be on the same page. There are different sets of values from different families. In a group situation, you have to come to a meeting of minds and [put] what is best for the child first."

A Community for the 21st Century

Co-op preschools are, by their very nature, a close-knit community. This is something many people don't expect when they get involved. Robin Goebel from the San Anselmo Co-op Nursery School describes it this way: "It's like acquiring a new set of in-laws. It's an extra family commitment. You're all connected."

Frank Biondi says this sense of community let him share parenting experiences. "A lot of other parents go through the same challenges," he says. "It's very comforting to hear that and the way other parents handle it."

For many parents, this closeness is something they need to get used to. But it can also be a very positive experience, reminding parents of the power of participation. Says Meenakshi Srinivasan, vice president of the CCPPNS and a parent at Campbell Parents Participation Preschool, "It's about being part of the circle which we call community at any level, whether you call it the immediate neighborhood, the immediate next neighborhood which is your city, or your next neighborhood which is your state. You are going to become better participants of democracy if you are in this kind of a system. You actually see an effect of what you do or don't do in your immediate environs."

Making a difference really is possible in this type of community. Linda Tumulty from El Cerrito Parent Co-op says that when she had some concerns about the cleaning procedures at her child's school, she brought it up to the membership.

"It surfaced an intelligent, organized discussion in our school about alternative [cleaning] products what they were, how to use them, the differences among them, when they were appropriate," she says. "[We] created written instructions, posted guidelines, and [had] a parent education process."

Connecting with Your Kid

One of the most personally rewarding aspects of being in a co-op is the opportunity to be intimately involved with your children's education and their day-to-day interactions with the other kids and parents at the school. Sandra Westlie of Peter Pan says that at a co-op, "You know their friends, you know their teacher, you know their friends' families."

This familiarity gives parents a valuable opportunity to connect with their children, she notes.

"It's so important to be able to talk to your kid about school. Not just to say, 'How was your day, how did school go?' You can ask, 'Was so-and-so in your room today? What did they do, what did they say to you? Did they read this story? What was the story about?'"

So, Is a Co-op Preschool Right for You?

Co-op participation can be highly rewarding. It creates a strong sense of community, provides parent education, and can give you a valuable connection with your children.

But all this comes with a commitment of time and energy. It is the parent's participation that makes a co-op unique.

Some schools do allow a certain amount of "buy-out." If parents are unable to fulfill some commitments, they can pay an extra fee. But not all schools offer this option, and it's not available for all commitments. If parents are unable to participate in the work days, night meetings, maintenance, and all the other extras needed to run the school, a co-op will quickly fall apart.

Karen Pojmann, a parent with children at both a co-op preschool and a co-op elementary school, advises, "It's a huge time investment. I guess that's the only drawback, because it's an amazing experience and I know my child is benefiting tremendously from it. And it's great to get to know everyone intimately well. But it's a lot of work."

Be prepared to make the commitment to your designated job, and also to get involved in general: to jump in and fill a need, whether it's holding a board position or doing some extra laundry. You don't have to have any special skills, but you need to be able to contribute when and where you can.

So, if you are ready to teach, play, clean, prepare food, fund raise, be around young kids, know the other parents, and take responsibility for the school, then you are ready to join a co-op preschool.

What to Ask When Looking for a School

Here are some quick guidelines to determine if a school is right for your child and your family. (Many of these ideas apply to other types of preschools as well.)

- Always ask the basic questions about the philosophy of the school. How do they discipline children and resolve conflict? What are their goals in terms of childhood development? Make sure that the school's values match yours. If you are interested in kindergarten readiness, the school should know the readiness guidelines and have programs to reach those goals.
- Ask about the stability of the program. How long has the school been around? How long has the teacher been there? How long have the current families been there?
- What exactly are the commitments in terms of work days, night meetings, fund raising, and tuition? What are the penalties if these commitments are not met? What are the policies around parents' leaves of absence, illness, pregnancy? What sort of flexibility is offered when life changes occur? Make sure you are comfortable with these terms.
- What are the educational goals for the parents?
- Arrange to visit the school with your child. Any co-op should allow you to visit, either through a designated day or as a drop-in. Make sure that you are comfortable with the play area and classrooms and that your child seems comfortable as well. Talk to the other parents. You will be working with them.

Now That You're a Member

If you do decide to join a co-op, it is important to set appropriate expectations for yourself. Give yourself time to learn this new "job." Ask to buddy with an experienced parent. Remember that it takes a lot of energy to deal with preschoolers, so always eat a good meal before your work shift.

When you first participate at the preschool, observe, observe, observe! If you're not sure what a rule is, where something is kept, or why things are done a certain way, don't be afraid to ask. Misinformation can spread like wildfire in co-ops because there are so many parents responsible for day-to-day management.

Be sure to respect the ground rules set down by the school. You have to be comfortable enough to enforce all the rules. Consistency is absolutely critical with young children, and if you are not willing to abide by the rules agreed to at the school, you are going to be creating difficulties for the children, yourself, the other parents, and the director.

As with regular schools, you can call any time to determine if there are any upcoming openings or a waiting list. The standard time to start applying is February or March for the following September. But because co-ops tend to be community-based and require so much time from parents, openings do happen throughout the year.

Most of all, remember to enjoy yourself and the kids. After all, that's the reason to join a co-op.