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Chapter Four:

Your First Planning Meeting

You have decided to take the plunge: you are going to start a homeschool co-op! Good for you. Your efforts and willingness to take initiative will be a benefit to many homeschooling families. Hopefully you understand that the benefits of co-oping far outweigh the disadvantages. I hope that you have been inspired by some of the stories from Chapter Three and have started contemplating your co-op's unique purpose. The next chapters on planning and finding a mission will help you determine the specific characteristics of your co-op. A good way to start is by thinking through your first planning meeting.

Gathering Help

In this and the following chapters I will make several recommendations. Treat these as *suggestions* based on my personal experience and reading from others' knowledge. These are *not* rules; there is no "one way" or "correct way" to start or run a homeschool co-op. I have read many web sites about starting a home school co-op that state specific rules, such as "Do not let your co-op be more than five families." That may be good advice if you want a small co-op, but it is not applicable to everyone.

Homeschool Co-ops: How to Start Them, Run Them and Not Burn Out

Flexibility is one of the beauties of homeschooling. You have the freedom do what is best for you, your family and your homeschool group. Since I do not know your particular needs, I could not properly tell you what to do. Since I am merely offering advice I will try to keep the “do it my way” attitude to a minimum. Now for my first bit of advice...

First of all, *do not do this alone!* Having a small group of people to help you is absolutely essential in running a successful homeschool co-op. Some people say, “If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.” That kind of thinking will be to your detriment because you will burn out. You may even regret the day that you thought you wanted to start a homeschool co-op. In order to counteract this desperation, you need other like-minded people to share this burden. Before announcing the start of a new co-op, gather help and seek out people who might be interested in a co-op as members or leaders.

There are several ways to find families interested in starting a homeschool co-op. Many co-op leaders started out very small with only a few friends and with a short-term commitment of only one to two months. A short-term commitment allows everyone involved to see if they like being a part of the co-op. Before you begin, have a definite closure to the trial co-op so that families can feel comfortable leaving if they wish. If enough families enjoyed the short-term experience, then they may be open to planning a longer term co-op experience of several months. During this time, you can also determine members’ strengths and gifts. Some parents may enjoy leadership while others may prefer classroom teaching or assisting.

Another way to find co-op partners is to talk individually to other homeschooling parents. Call or e-mail them and ask, “Have you ever belonged to a co-op? Would you like to be in one? Would be interested in helping me start a new group?” When you ask for

their help, be sure to emphasize the reason you called them. Emphasize their talent, experience or personality such as “You’re always so calm,” or “You’re so organized that I know you’d be a great help to me.” Who can resist an honest compliment? Also seek out parents that have belonged to a homeschool co-op before. Their experience will prove very valuable.

Some homeschool co-ops start when the leader makes a general invitation. A few years ago, a homeschooling mother with co-op experience sent out an e-mail to my homeschool support group stating she was having an information night about the possibility of starting a co-op in our area. She invited any interested parents to attend. About ten homeschooling mothers showed up that night, and I was one of them. Ironically, I decided not to become involved in that co-op because I thought my children were too young at the time. Eventually I did join this co-op and still belong five years later!

On the other hand, be aware of the potential problems in making a general invitation at this early stage. You will receive lots of ideas, both good and bad! You may encounter strong personalities who dominate your group with their opinions, possibly killing the group before it is born. I recommend that you save the large-group invitation until after you have made some basic decisions and can answer common questions. I suggest you start with a small group of three or four interested parents. Work out the details of time and place. Then announce to the entire homeschool community the exciting news that a new homeschool co-op is starting. This chapter on planning and the following chapter on finding a mission should be discussed and solidified in a small group of leaders, not a large body. Here is some great advice about gathering help from Nancy Carter, a veteran homeschool parent and group leader:

I’d just say to really pray about it and to pray that God would guide you and affirm any decisions by bringing enthusiastic

Homeschool Co-ops: How to Start Them, Run Them and Not Burn Out

volunteers. Each group is so different with different needs & dynamics. People are all in different seasons of their lives. Start out by thinking what would really be great for your family and then let your group know what you're willing to do. You can't please everyone, but if you are pleasing the Audience of One that's all that really matters.¹

Nancy has excellent advice about determining what your family desires in a homeschool co-op. Here is a short exercise to get you started thinking about your individual needs and your willingness to serve. You might want to copy and hand out this short survey to a handful of potential helpers. Their answers will help you discern who is willing to help you start a homeschool co-op.

What do my family and children need from a homeschool co-op experience?

What do we NOT need?

What am I willing to do?

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What am I NOT willing to do?

Potential helpers:

Name	Talent/Experience	Phone/e-mail	Response
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Decisions, Decisions

Once you have gathered some like-minded people, set out some cookies and coffee and get to work! I recommend you print up a simple agenda like the one following, and hand it out to every

person attending. Having a plan will keep you on track and focused on making basic decisions.

It will be very easy to digress as people share ideas and expectations. Most likely you may find your group trying to focus on too many details, sometimes called “majoring in the minors.” At this preliminary point you are working on the big picture, the basic issues. Leave the details for a later meeting. Get used to saying, “We’ll postpone that discussion for a later meeting,” and then write yourself a note to that effect.

Some groups mistakenly tackle an issue that should be considered and discussed outside of the group meeting. One example is location. Assign one person to seek out a location and report what she finds. The entire group may go and see the chosen building, but only one person needs to do the initial scouting.

Expectations

Before your meeting, do some initial planning by asking the attendees to share their expectations with you. Use a form like the one following, and either e-mail it or ask the questions directly to potential members. I think the answers will be very revealing. If there is a consensus of needs and expectations, then you have a great start and can move ahead swiftly. Conversely, if there are conflicting needs or expectations, then you will need to discuss those issues before progressing. Here is how one homeschool group gathered input on the expectations of their members:

When our group was just getting started, with about 20 families, one thing we did at a parent meeting was to make a “wish list”—what things would you like a support group to do or offer? There was no promise that our group would do these things, but I wrote them all down on a white boards as we talked, and then published the list in our newsletter. It was really helpful to see what people wanted from a group; and

over the next several years, just about everything on that list came to be!ⁱⁱ

Expectation Worksheet:

What do my family and children *need* from a home school co-op?

What do we NOT need?

What do I hope for as a *result* of belonging to a home school co-op? (friends, support, academic classes, etc.)

Notice that this exercise focuses on needs and results, not the “nitty-gritty” of when and where. In thinking and talking initially about needs and hopes, you will focus on the main goal of your co-op and instead of getting lost in the details. You can read more about goals in Chapter Five, What’s in a Name? Names, Missions, and Purposes.

Agenda for First Planning Meeting

Expectations: If you have gathered results beforehand, summarize them here or record expectations during the meeting.

Common expectations: _____

Four W's and H:

- What
- Who
- When
- Where
- How much

List of Initial Classes to Offer:

The Four W's and H

As you see on the sample agenda above, your group needs to discuss the Four W's—What, Who, When, Where and one H—How much. These are crucial issues to be determined early. I will elaborate a bit on each.

What

This topic addresses the question, “What will we do?” The goal in asking this question is to focus on a particular mission. Since you cannot be all things to all people, you must focus your

mission. Chapter Five, What's in a Name? Names, Missions, and Purposes, will help your group focus on a mission statement which will probably require another meeting to discuss fully. For now, discuss broad, general ideas. Use the expectations worksheets to find a common goal. Put off the discussion for the next meeting if it goes too long or if there are vast disagreements.

For your first planning meeting, aim to come up with a general list of classes that you would like to see offered initially. Your group size, mission, and age focus will help you focus on a list of classes. If your co-op is fun-oriented then your classes might include Art, Music, Drama and Crafts. If you are academically-focused, you might have Math, Spanish, and Creative Writing. Try and come to agreement on a few classes. You can focus on specific curricula later.

Who

Discuss whom your co-op will focus on. Will it be age restricted? Some co-ops want to offer classes and activities for elementary students while others focus on junior and senior high school students. Most co-ops focus on entire families from nursery to grade 12. Will your co-op be limited to those with a shared faith? Many homeschool co-ops develop a statement of faith for their group. I discuss statements of faith in Chapter Six Leadership.

Do not feel pressured to accommodate everyone. You simply cannot meet everyone's needs. You will be more successful and avoid burn out if you can define your target group from the beginning. Inevitably, some people may complain if their desires or wants are not met. Encourage them to start a group for their specific needs (hand them a copy of this book!)

When

Homeschool Co-ops: How to Start Them, Run Them and Not Burn Out

Discuss when and how often you will meet. Most co-ops meet weekly, but some gather every other week or only monthly. In contract, some groups with high school academic subjects meet twice a week. Also discuss the day and time. Is morning best? Is afternoon better? Some groups prefer holding co-op in the afternoon because parents can still manage to get a little “school work” done in the morning. On the other hand, afternoon co-ops interfere with babies’ and toddlers’ naps. Furthermore, some co-op members find if they meet in the morning, the day is “shot” and parents cannot get the children to refocus on school subjects when they return home.

The day of the week for a co-op’s meeting may be driven by availability of space. If the church that rents you space is available only on Fridays, then that is when your co-op will meet. The decision is made. Alternately, if you have a choice of days then you will need to discuss which day of the week is best. I am familiar with co-ops that meet on every day of the week (except weekends!). Some prefer Monday and start the week off that way; others prefer Fridays and end the week with co-op! There is no perfect choice, but when your co-op will meet needs to be discussed.

Also discuss the duration of the co-op. Will it meet for the full school calendar or only for a semester? Some co-ops meet for only six- or eight-week periods twice a year. This schedule gives everyone a break. If you are offering high school level classes for credit, you should probably consider a longer duration of 14 to 18 week semesters.

Where

Many co-ops meet in churches, libraries and parks. Naturally, the size of your group dictates the space needed. Perhaps your group is small enough to gather in a house, but beware of problems

in meeting in homes. Too many unsupervised children can damage a house. Also be aware of pets in a home as they can trigger allergies. Since I am allergic to cats, my family could not participate in a co-op held in a home with cats. If you must search for a place, start with your members' connections in your community. You could ask for each member to approach two or three churches, libraries or community organizations that might have space.

Because all of the W's—What, Who, When, and Where—are interconnected, deciding one issue will influence the others. For example, if you want a family-oriented co-op for all ages, meeting weekly for three hours and expect 20 families, your space needs will be significant. If, instead, you limit your co-op to five families from your church and they all have children under ten years old, you could meet every other week at a park. Perhaps one parent can agree to hold a class in her home for an hour while everyone else is at the park. A co-op might decide to use the same book to study animals in a monthly science co-op. The possibilities are endless and can change as your group evolves.

How much

Early on in you planning meetings, you must discuss how much the co-op will cost. No one likes being surprised when it comes to paying bills. Naturally, the scope of your co-op will determine your expenses and the fees you will charge members. Some groups set a fee and then keep their expenses under the amount of fees collected. For example, a small co-op could keep expenses to a minimum by only charging \$10 per family for supplies. Conversely, because a larger group must rent space, buy insurance, provide clean up, etc, they might calculate their total expenses and then divide them among all families equally.

Some co-ops charge fees by the family while others charge for

each student. Although charging by the family is easier for your treasurer to track, charging by the student seems to work better for some co-ops. Furthermore some classes are more expensive than others. For instance, an art class usually involves more costs than a writing class. Should some parents pay an extra supply fee based on each class or should everyone pay the same amount into a general fund? Discuss these options. The Veritas Homeschool Co-op in Lebanon, Ohio charges a family fee and an additional fee for individual high school classes. This two-tier structure works for them and the possibilities are numerous.

Involve your treasurer in these discussions (I hope you have already asked someone to consider being a treasurer). His or her opinion on the fees charged should weigh heavily, since the treasurer will create the budget and control expenses. See Chapter Eight, “Money Management,” for help in designing a budget. For your initial planning meeting, try to reach a consensus on what families are willing to pay. Determine what other co-ops in your area charge to get a feel for the market. After you make these basic decisions, the treasurer can create a budget.

Starting a homeschool co-op should not be a solo endeavor. You should begin by finding like-minded, gifted people to help you lead and make decisions. During your first planning meeting you will cover many important topics starting with a discussion of expectations. In addition the details of starting a homeschool co-op — What, Who, When, Where, and How much—should be firmed up. I hope you will feel a strong sense of accomplishment. These are important issues that will lead to a positive successful co-oping experience for both the leaders and the co-op members.

ⁱ TOSHSN_Leaders_Group

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TOSHSN_Leadership_Group/message/1213 June 23, 2006.

ⁱⁱ TOSHSN_Leaders_Group

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TOSHSN_Leadership_Group/message/1959. Sept 6, 2007.

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