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# How to Build a Successful Babysitting Cooperative

Free babysitting?! It's possible in a cooperative. Here, the biggest challenges and advantages to setting up one in your community. [...More](#)

By Amanda Abrams

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For the first year of my son's life, going out was a luxury my husband and I rarely indulged in. Mostly, it was a money issue. [Hiring a babysitter](#) would cost roughly \$50, and once we added in dinner or a show, the bill for the night invariably topped \$100. That's a lot to spend on a getaway with someone who, let's face it, I see every day.

But the other problem was [finding decent sitters](#). We don't have family in the area, and while my urban neighborhood is teeming with strollers and ride-on vehicles, there aren't a whole lot of teenagers here to push trucks around with our son for a few hours.

So we decided to start a babysitting cooperative, and it's been a huge win for us. No cost? Check. Available sitters who we trust? Check. Plus, it was the ticket into a cozy little community of like-minded parents with kids around the same age as ours. Nowadays, we bump into

them at the park and the farmers' market, and several have become close friends. And our neighborhood feels a lot more like home.

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## Lay down the ground rules.

Babysitting co-ops have been around for decades, but they've experienced a resurgence in recent years. That's partly because so many young families are staying in cities these days and, like us, are struggling to find sitters.

The concept is simple: A group of parents babysit one another's kids, exchanging points or other currency with each sit and meeting regularly to build relationships within the group. The details—like how to award points, keep track of activity, or add new members—are easily customizable. For example, in my co-op, we use a Google spreadsheet to monitor members' points, but a lot of groups use [SittingAround](#) or [BabysitterExchange](#), popular websites that simplify point management.

The good thing is that a co-op is usually pretty informal, so you can adjust the rules as you go, depending on what works.

## Bigger is (generally) better.

The ultimate goal is to maintain a relatively high level of activity within the group. After all, the co-op is like a little economy, so you want people regularly spending and earning. But achieving that can be tricky.

"When you're starting out, one of the hardest things is getting it off the ground and getting people to use it," says Amy Suardi, who runs the Frugal Mama blog and has founded a few co-ops. "If you're starting it with people who don't know each other well, it can be hard to get them to actually request sits or even to fill them."

To boost involvement, Suardi suggests starting a co-op within an already-established group like a preschool, church, or civic association. And she thinks a large group—with up to, say, 30 families—will probably be more successful than a smaller one.

That said, don't try to grow the group too quickly. If members don't feel a sense of connection with one another, they might not respond to child-care requests. And unfilled requests are the kiss of death for a co-op.

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## Build a community.

It's also important that new members understand what they're getting into—that is, that they're expected to watch other people's kids, perhaps at times that aren't perfectly convenient for them. Sometimes, for one reason or another, new co-op members simply fail to jibe with the group. People usually drop out within their first year if the cooperative isn't a good fit for them.

Those who remain tend to be open-minded and sometimes willing to compromise for the good of the group. "Yes, it's free babysitting," says Monica Lasky, a longtime member of a Chicago co-op. "But we're also trying to create a community. It takes literally a cooperative spirit, something more communal."

Turns out, that whole community-building thing is one of the biggest advantages of a babysitting co-op. Most groups meet in person on a regular basis so members can get to know one another and feel confident about who's watching their kids. Whether they occur twice a year or once a month, these social events can be a great way to come together, share some snacks (or adult beverages), and bond over the kids.

The kids form relationships, too. "My daughter met one of her very best friends through the co-op," says Michelle Quirk, member of a Philadelphia co-op. "It's a very good way to get to know other families from the community. Everywhere we go, we see other families."

There's something about knowing so many other people in a similar boat, and having to rely on one another, that breeds a feeling of connectedness. It sure does for my husband, son, and me. There are a couple of families in the co-op who we've gotten to know particularly well, and I know we can rely on them if we need help in a pinch. And if that's not what a community's all about, what is?

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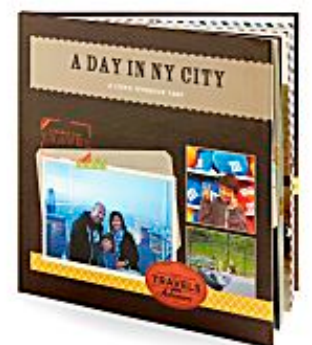


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