
How to Create a Neighborhood Babysitting Cooperative

Yes we can!

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A **How-to Guide** for neighborhood leaders working to make life better for people in Battle Creek



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Busy parents often need a few hours of their own time — whether to go out or simply to get things done around the house. Mostly, parents rely on paid babysitters or a limited set of friends and family for childcare during those hours. By joining forces with neighbors in similar situations, parents can work together to provide free babysitting virtually whenever it is needed. It's called a babysitting cooperative (or co-op).

A babysitting cooperative consists of a number of families in a community who decide to share babysitting among themselves without the exchange of money. Members agree to share responsibilities for keeping records and for providing and using services. Babysitting co-ops usually are intended for occasional — not regular — childcare. If regular childcare is needed, other arrangements are usually made.

What Are the Advantages of a Babysitting Co-op?

A babysitting co-op allows neighbors to get to know one another. Children become comfortable among adults and other neighborhood children, and parents come together. By organizing as a co-op, parents expand the options available to them for babysitting, and they can turn neighbors into friends.

Here are just a few more advantages of using a babysitting co-op in your neighborhood:

- Children can make new friends and develop social skills.
- Children can become close with many families in the neighborhood.
- No money is spent on babysitting.
- Occasional day, evening, or emergency overnight care helps families.
- Parents get some free time.
- Parents get the opportunity to see their children interact with others.
- Neighbors get to know one another and create a stronger community.

In your neighborhood, there already may be parents who babysit one another's children informally. A babysitting co-op builds on this informal network and creates a larger pool of parents, making babysitting services available on a more regular basis. Coming together in this way around a common need helps parents organize and plan — and save money — rather than depending on chance to find a paid babysitter.

How It Works

Because a co-op is a give-and-take system, it is important to keep records so that everyone can benefit. Here are three example systems used in co-ops that may help you in designing your own.

Example systems for your co-op

30-point start secretary system

- Each member begins with a 30-point base and is charged one point for one child per hour.
- Members who do the babysitting earn points.
- A secretary debits (minus points for using babysitting), and credits (plus points for provided babysitting) the member "accounts."

Zero-point start secretary system

- Each member earns points when acting as the babysitter and uses points when using a babysitter, starting from zero.
- A point scale might be: 2 points per child, per hour; 1 point per child, per meal; 1 point per child per hour for overnight care with specified hours (for example, 10 p.m. to 7 a.m.).
- A secretary debits and credits "accounts."

In both secretary systems, the secretary position **rotates** and the person in this position is "**paid**" a certain number of points for keeping the books.



The secretary keeps a **record book** with one page for each family with parent name(s), address, phone number, and names and ages of children at the top. Below, columns can be set up for dates when babysitting occurs, other families involved in the transactions, credits, debits, and balance. Every time a report is made to the secretary, it is recorded on the sheets of both families.

The secretary should be **phoned** by members when they require babysitting for certain times and dates. The secretary locates a sitter, doing his or her best to find a member who owes the most points. The secretary calls the member and sets up a babysitting arrangement. After the care has been provided, both the person receiving the babysitting service and sitter agree on the number of points that must be exchanged, and these are reported to the secretary, who records them.

30-card system

- An initial volunteer makes a set of cards to be traded.
- Each member receives a total of 30 hours' worth of cards in one, one-half, and one-quarter hour increments. She/he "pays" whoever babysits her/his children using these cards.
- Rules of thumb: Once a member has a total of 15, it is time for her/him to start babysitting. Members with totals of 60 or more are urged to get others in the group to share the babysitting.

A parent that requires a babysitter finds someone on the list who might be available and makes the call and arrangement his or herself. **Cards** are given to the babysitter according to the pre-arranged point system. **Parents** must keep up with the cards, but this system eliminates any confusion or inconvenience that may result from working through a third party (a secretary).

Early Decisions

Before you begin your babysitting co-op, you must join other parents in a kick-off meeting. In this first meeting, you will make some important decisions about how the co-op will work. Use the following questions as your guide.

1. How big will our co-op be?

Your co-op could be as small as three families, and as large as necessary to make it of use to the families involved — but you should **set a maximum number of members**. In some cases, co-ops may become so large and impersonal that families don't know one another and regularly use only the same few parents. If this becomes the case, it is probably time to divide the big co-op into smaller ones, which allow people to know and be comfortable with one another.

If your co-op group seems too small for your needs, you can find members just about anywhere in your community. Approach other parents in your neighborhood when they're dropping their kids off or picking them up from school or play groups. Create a flyer and hand it out to families playing in the park. Check with those who attend your place of worship or other activities. Early childhood community education programs such as Head Start can give you a wealth of connections to possible members. Most parents are excited when they learn of this idea.

2. Will our co-op be selective or open to all?

You will want to decide ahead of time whether or not to have "selective" membership. Participants in a co-op with selective membership decide which families may join. Deciding whether to make the co-op selective or open to all involves two basic considerations: hurt feelings of applicants who are not accepted into the co-op or members who refuse to use new participants as childcare providers. This can result in an unbalanced co-op, in which some families give more than they receive.



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3. Can young people get involved?

While co-ops are primarily geared towards parents sharing responsibility, some choose to allow young people to be involved, too. Perhaps neighborhood teens who need babysitting experience could assist parents scheduled to babysit, thereby gaining experience and building connections with neighbors who the young babysitter might not otherwise get to know. Older children may be able to help with scheduling and maintenance of a record book, allowing them to develop organizational skills, all the while learning to conduct a co-op of their own when, someday, they become parents.

4. How will our co-op work?

It will be important for your group to talk about and decide on how often and where you will have regular meetings. These meetings will allow you to discuss progress, problems, and membership. The number of meetings will depend on members' needs — meetings could take place monthly, every two months, or quarterly. Make sure some of these meetings include social events to continue to strengthen your babysitting "community" and make things comfortable. Sometimes it is a great idea to bring the kids along!

It is also important to discuss whether or not your co-op will have a secretary, use a card system, or use a certain point system (these are described on the previous page). If you are using a secretary, decide who that will be, as

well as when the responsibility will change hands. Gather information for membership lists.

You should also use your first meeting to set up other general guidelines, which might include:

- Each member has the right to refuse the services of a particular sitter and should communicate this to the secretary when requesting a sitter.
- A child who is sick cannot be taken to a sitter's home and a sitter with sick children should not accept other children for babysitting.
- If a secretary is used, arrangements can be made between the two parties in case of an emergency or if the secretary cannot be reached.

Each parent will need a membership list with parent name(s), address, phone number, names and ages of children, emergency contact person and number. Some lists also include the name and phone number of the children's doctors and the number of the poison control center, and names of members who may be willing to babysit evenings and weekends. The first meeting is a good time to get this information down in writing.

Creating a babysitting cooperative can make life better for your family, your neighbors, and your community.

National Resources

National Network for Childcare — general information regarding childcare and child development
www.nncc.org

Smart Mom's Babysitting Co-op Startup Kit — organization and setup examples
www.babysittingcoop.com

Local Resources

Kellogg Community College Child Development Education — provides training and certification to aspiring child care providers
Dawn Larson 965-3931

Red Cross Certified Babysitting Instruction — offers classes to youth and adults on safe and effective babysitting practices
Sarah Potter 962-7528

Child Care Resources — provides referral services for licensed child care and day care providers in Calhoun and Kalamazoo Counties
962-2525

Feel free to share this guide with friends and neighbors. Call 269-969-2228 for additional copies and for other guides on a variety of how-to topics.

Sources: D. Labensohn, *Babysitting Cooperatives*; PageWise, Inc., *Organizing a Babysitting Co-op*

Yes we can! is a collaboration among Battle Creek residents and organizations working to help kids achieve in school and build a solid economic future for the people of our community. *Yes we can!* is funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

For general questions about *Yes we can!*, call 269-969-2228 or visit www.wkkf.org/yeswecan. To apply for a mini-grant to support your neighborhood or community project in Battle Creek, call the Battle Creek Community Foundation at 269-962-2181.



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