

# The Resource Guide to Babysitting Co-ops, Mother's Groups, Playgroups



...for Children

the region's leading resource  
in early education and care

## About 4C for Children

4C for Children, the pioneering leader, advocate and resource for early childhood education and care in this region since 1972, serves 23 counties from offices in Cincinnati, Dayton (Ohio) and Newport (Kentucky).

Each year this not-for-profit agency...

- assists over 8,000 families of all income levels in finding and choosing quality child care;
- enrolls over 20,000 child care providers in its workshops and trainings;
- works to increase the supply of high-quality early education and care in the region; and
- advocates for children and families at the local, state and federal levels.

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This listing of local groups that is attached is simply a compilation of some community resources. 4C has not interviewed or screened these groups and does not warrant or recommend any in particular. 4C believes that parents are best able to choose and evaluate child care for their children, because they know their children's needs best. Responsibility for selecting child care rests with each parent.

# Staying Home With Your Children?

It's a fact! Not all mothers are employed outside of the home. Some women, without the influence of economic factors, choose to take care of their own children, remaining "stay at home" moms indefinitely.

At 4C, we've found that moms who don't need child care still want some occasional socialization for both themselves and their young children. In addition, they sometimes want to connect with other mothers of young children, to formalize some regular babysitting arrangements.

Mother's groups, babysitting co-ops, and playgroups are usually started informally by interested women in close geographic proximity. Although they start informally, they often grow by word being passed from sister to friend to neighbor.

This booklet offers information on these types of informal groups, especially ideas for getting one started in your area. Although probably not comprehensive, 4C has developed a listing of some of these groups that exist in our community. We suspect this listing is not complete and hope you'll help us add to it when you learn of more, or better yet, start your own group.

# Shared Baby-sitting

*By Janice T. Gibson*

When my daughter, Robin, was a toddler, my husband and I attended graduate school at the University of Virginia. We lived in a tiny two-room apartment reserved for married students. Caring for our active one-year-old was fun, but it was also demanding. So was our academic program. We needed a little break once a week, but the cost of a baby-sitter was more than our budget could handle.

Fortunately many of our neighbors were in the same predicament. So we formed a baby-sitting cooperative, a group of fifteen families who shared in caring for each other's children. For every hour that my husband or I baby-sat with someone else's child, a parent in our group repaid us by baby-sitting with Robin when we went out.

There were many bonuses, besides saving money. All the baby-sitters were experienced parents. Many are good friends whom our daughter knew. My husband, who usually stayed with our daughter while I baby-sat for our neighbors, appreciated time alone with Robin. Since he often worked in the library in the evenings, it was a treat to spend an evening at home, give Robin her bath, and tell her favorite story as she snuggled down in bed.

## Setting up rules

To make the cooperative work, the group appointed one member to make the baby-sitting arrangements and to record all hours spent and owed. We set up safety rules, essential for all parents who leave their children in someone else's care. We kept lists of emergency numbers by our telephones, including the number where we could be reached when we were out and the numbers of the police and fire departments, the poison control center, the person we wanted to take charge in an emergency if we couldn't be located, and of course, the pediatrician. The cooperative also decided that every couple would make available to the caretaker a first-aid kit as well as provide written directions for giving medications or vitamins to their children.

We also realized that we had to take a number of steps to assure psychological well being of our children. Just as children differ in whether they like particular foods, activities, and types of attention, parents also vary in the ways they care for youngsters. We discovered that it was essential for each couple to make known their own routines and child-rearing methods, and we agreed that each baby-sitter would do his or her best to adhere to them.

## Sticking to routines

While it is comforting to all children when baby-sitters respect familiar routines, it is particularly important for toddlers. At an age when it is normal to be afraid of strangers and sudden changes, one-year-olds are happy when there are no surprises.

Whenever a new baby-sitter came to our apartment, we reviewed Robin's regimen. If we were going out before her bedtime, we told the baby-sitter what Robin enjoyed doing, including details such as what, when, and how she liked to be fed; how she liked her bath; and her favorite bedtime ritual. We also discussed limits we expected the baby-sitter to put on Robin's behavior by spelling out what was acceptable and what was not.

We tried not to go out before Robin's bedtime. Even when Robin knew and liked the baby-sitter, she, like most toddlers, did best when her parents shared with her the important ritual of tucking her in for the night. We were careful to let her know that we were going out after she fell asleep, what time we would be back, and who was taking our place in the meantime. That way, if she woke up in the middle of the night she calmed down quickly and wasn't afraid to go back to sleep.

Our family benefited greatly from our baby-sitting cooperative. Robin had fun, and so did we. Most important, setting up rules and abiding by them ensured that when we were out, our toddler was in good hands.

Parents, June, 1989 1989 Gruner & Jahr Publishing. Reprinted from Parents magazine with permission.

# Baby-Sitting Cooperatives

Joining a baby-sitting cooperative--a group of parents organized to share sitting services among themselves--provides an economical solution to the problem of finding reliable sitters. Time rather than money is exchanged, and members provide a ready reserve of experienced sitters. What is more, a co-op can be a pleasure as well as a convenience: Parents who unite to help each other in this way often become friends, discovering common interests beyond child rearing.

## Getting Started

Whether you join an existing co-op or organize one yourself, the first step is to look around your community for other parents of young children. Co-ops are most convenient when the members live relatively near each other, so check close to home first. You might talk with neighbors or parents you see at your local playground, scan the library bulletin board or consult the classified section of your community newspaper. If you are willing to go outside your immediate area, you could ask your pediatrician or perhaps the leader of a local childbirth class about other parents who may be interested in forming a co-op.

Co-ops vary widely in size; some include just a few families, while others stretch to encompass as many as 200. If you are starting a group, a membership of 15 to 20 families is a reasonable goal-- one that will provide plenty of sitters without requiring elaborate bookkeeping. You can begin with far fewer, however, and build to your desired membership size. Once you have located at least a few families, you will need to meet to organize the group and establish policies. At your first gathering, draw up a membership list that includes names, addresses, ages of children and times parents are available to sit. You may want to choose officers to run meetings, distribute the membership list and keep financial records, if you charge dues to cover expenses.

## Keeping track of hours

The way a co-op keeps track of its members' sitting hours is a major decision that affects the overall operation. There are many variations, but accounting

procedures fall into two major categories: One involves keeping an account book of sitting credits or debits; the other consists of exchanging some form of currency, such as tokens or scrip. In either case, to set our cooperative in motion, you need to advance members a number of sitting hours in the beginning. One reasonable way to calculate this amount is to average the number of hours the various members use sitters each month and credit each family that number of hours or equivalent currency.

If you choose to keep books, your co-op will need to appoint or elect a secretary. Each time a parent baby-sits he calls the secretary, who enters his time and debits the family for whom he has sat. The secretary keeps running tallies of every member's credits or debits. There is usually a limit on how far in debt a family may go before having to return services. Since the secretary knows who is most in need of earning credits, she is often in charge of arranging for co-op members to baby-sit for each other. The secretary's responsibilities can be quite time-consuming; therefore, many organizations rotate the job on the monthly basis and pay the secretary with extra sitting-hour credits.

For small co-ops in which members are in touch with each other frequently, exchanging currency rather than keeping books usually works well. Under this system you will need to print scrip or prepare a batch of tokens--painted pennies or poker chips, for example--to be issued to members at the beginning. The agreed-upon currency is then simply traded back and forth among members, who set up their own sitting times with each other. There is no need to maintain records, unless your co-op wants to have a central accounting system, as well.

## Policies and procedures

Your co-op will need to adopt certain policies concerning sitting hours--for example, whether families with two or more children will pay a higher rate than those with only one, whether members will earn more for sitting on holidays and at busy times of the day, and how to figure fractions of hours.

As for sitting procedures, decide how far in advance a member must engage or cancel another member's services. Consider where members will baby-sit; often a parent sitting in the day-time does so at her own home, while night time sitting takes place in the home of the family going out. Discuss, too, what kind of preparation and information a sitter should expect. Although parent members may be experienced in the care of young children, they will need to be shown around unfamiliar homes and guided in individual child-care matters.

## Keeping the co-op going

Finally, your group needs to consider how it will bring in new members when a founding member leaves or when you want to expand the size of the co-op. You may allow people to enter informally or you may ask, as some co-ops do, that an established member sponsor a new family.

A sponsor usually arranges a social gathering at which the new member is introduced. In some co-ops, the sponsor is also held responsible for covering that member's advance of sitting hours if it is not repaid before the new member leaves.

*When Others Care For Your Child, Time Life books, 1992*



# Starting a Baby-Sitting Co-op

Exchanging sitting duties ensures quality child care at little or no cost.

*By Annie Morton*

Whether in the work force or home full-time, more mothers find themselves left without the traditional network of relatives they once depended on for baby-sitting and emotional support.

For me, the problem was the occasional hour-long parent –teacher conference at my son’s school or the need to take a quick trip to the supermarket. It was nearly impossible to find a baby-sitter who was willing to watch my children for a short while. The baby-sitting services in our neighborhood, besides being expensive, required a four-hour minimum commitment.

For Judy, a neighbor who decided to quit work after her second child was born, finances were really tight, and paid baby-sitters became a luxury of the past. Being new to the city, Judy didn’t have a support group of friends or family available.

Unlike Judy, Barbie had her parents nearby, but her mother, like scores of other women, worked part-time and didn’t care to spend her leisure time baby-sitting.

Then there was Carolyn, who worked full-time and attended school two nights a week. She couldn’t deal with the feelings of guilt that came over her every time she brought her children home from the day care only to turn around and leave them with a different caregiver in the evening.

All of us found that life became more enjoyable and less hassled when we united to form a baby-sitting cooperative and traded our time watching one another’s kids. Co-ops like ours offer many benefits: The children are left with friends, not strangers, and the children enjoy the intimacy of being in another home environment. Parents also don’t worry as much if they leave their kids in the hands of an experienced mother. And because there are not baby-sitter fees, the time away from the kids can be justified for purely selfish reasons – the needed breather.

If you are a first-time mother and don’t have a list of people to call, you can begin by asking your

pediatrician to help you find other parents. Childbirth classes, nurseries, and friends are good sources of contacts. If you are a working mother, you could also try networking with other moms in your office. Even if only you and one other mother participate, the arrangement should work out fine. However, you may want to set a maximum enrollment number. We found the ideal group size to be twelve to fifteen people.

## Setting up a structure.

After you’ve gathered a list of parents interested in forming a co-op, call together an organizational meeting. If possible, arrange for someone to watch the kids so that this important meeting can be held without any distractions. After this, some meetings can work well with children around. Usually it takes several hours to hash out a structure and at least three people to take on the work of collecting dues and dealing with the necessary forms, as well as establishing rules and some method of exchange.

At our first meeting, Barbie, who had researched co-ops, became president in charge of meetings and organization, and Judy became treasurer. Because the group was made up of working and at-home mothers, we left the day and time of the monthly meetings up to the hostess, who then became the secretary who took notes at each meeting. We also discussed whether we should limit the size of the co-op or continue to add new members and whether we would require dues and, if so, how much those dues should be.

## Creating an exchange system.

After the structure of the coop has been established, the most important issue to address is what type of exchange method will be used for baby-sitting. We found that the best system is a ticket exchange. We agreed that we would require dues of \$5 to join the co-op, to cover the cost of printing one-sided business-size cards for the “tickets”. Tickets can be distributed after all the dues have been collected.

Each of us received 50 tickets, no matter how many children we had. Tickets were paid on the following basis to the mother baby-sitting; one child, two tickets per hour; two children, three tickets per hour; three or more children, four tickets per hour. The payments were always rounded up to the nearest half-hour: If a mother baby-sat for 3 hours and 45 minutes, she received payment for 4 hours.

## **Eight Essential Questions**

*After you've gathered together a group of parents interested in forming a baby-sitting co-op, you should discuss the following questions.*

1. Will you limit the size of the co-op or continually add new members?
2. How often will the group meet – monthly, bimonthly, quarterly?
3. Will meetings be held during the day, at night, or will that question be left up to the person hosting the meeting?
4. Will the group require dues, and if so, how much will they be?
5. What type of exchange method will be used?
6. What are the legal requirements in your state in regard to medical-authorization forms?
7. How should last-minute cancellations by the parent baby-sitting be handled?
8. Who will be responsible for mediating conflicts should a disagreement arise between two co-op members? (This does not have to be one person.)

Once the group has agreed upon a set of rules, they should be put in writing and distributed to every member of the baby-sitting co-op.

**-A.M.**

When one of the mothers in our group baby-sat more than the rest of us, she wound up collecting more tickets than she could use and then felt that she had been taken advantage of; thus, our co-op established a rule limiting the number of tickets any one parent could accumulate each month in order to prevent a situation in which one mother spends more time baby-

sitting than she does using the baby-sitting services of others.

It is a nice gesture to issue “free” tickets to mothers who are pregnant with their second or third child so that these moms can take advantage of the co-op to get some much needed rest. We also gave free tickets to a neighbor whose wife had died. The neighborhood support system helped him out with baby-sitting, and the members mothers who volunteered their tickets to him felt that they were really doing something useful.

Another essential issue co-op members must address is how to handle emergencies. If your child is hurt or injured while in the care of others, a medical-authorization form containing permission from the parents for emergency treatment will most likely be needed by the hospital (the form would be signed, dated, and notarized). Group members should familiarize themselves with the legal requirements in their state regarding medical-authorization forms, since they tend to vary across the country.

The form should also include pertinent medical information, such as any allergies; medical history; pediatrician’s name, phone number, address, and preferred hospital, (if there is one); insurance information (policy number, carrier, and the like); as well as the phone numbers and addresses of parents (home and work) and the names and numbers of people to notify in an emergency. The parent should be required to leave the original copy along with instructions each time she drops off her child with a sitter. Many people put the form in a brightly colored envelope to save time searching for it in an emergency. Some co-ops may require duplicates for each officer to hold on to as a backup.

### **Put it in writing.**

The final requirement for any co-op is a set of understood rules that are agreed upon, written down, and distributed to every person who joins. They should cover as many potential problems as possible. The specific responsibilities of both the parent and the baby-sitter should also be spelled out.

Some rules are rooted in basic common sense but can be the cause of friction if not clarified in advance. These include requiring written instructions about the

care of the child, information on where the parent will be, the expected time of return, how to handle cancellations due to illness (in our co-op a child should be over a fever for 24 hours before being dropped off), whether substitutes should be provided for last-minute baby-sitting cancellations, and how potential conflicts will be resolved.

As president, Barbie was responsible for resolving any disagreements that came up between co-op members that could not easily be worked out by the parties involved.

One extremely helpful rule we established is the right to turn down a request to baby-sit without giving any reason. The ability to say no without explanation seems to work very well, since it allows mothers not to feel guilty if they don't want to baby-sit. The mother who is calling doesn't know whether it is personal or because of schedule conflicts, but she can easily call another mother.

In our group, we did have a situation in which one mother and her rambunctious child proved to be very unpopular. No one wanted to baby-sit for the child. Eventually it became clear that the co-op was not working for this mom, and she ended up withdrawing her membership.

Baby-sitting co-ops are more logical for smaller families than larger ones, but they can still work well with large families when the co-op is used for one or two children at a time. A parent may want to spend special time with one child and send her other children to a baby-sitter for a short while. A parent can also

make use of the co-op to get housework done, spend time by herself, or go shopping.

Most important, our co-op discovered we could turn to one another not only for child care but for emotional support we needed as parents in today's busy world.

### **Expanding the Co-op Into a Mothers' Club**

A natural extension of a baby-sitting co-op is a mothers' club. You can set aside some time after your regular co-op meetings simply to socialize, or you can arrange to have informative discussions about child care or women's issues. Don't hesitate to contact community leaders who will likely be more than willing to speak to your group about their field of expertise.

Whether you choose to meet in between your regularly scheduled co-op meetings is up to the group. Keep in mind, though, that many mothers in your neighborhood who may not want to be part of your co-op would like to be included in your mothers' club.

**-A.M.**

**Annie Morton** is a free-lance writer and the mother of three children, ages seven, three, and one. The baby-sitting co-op she started with her neighbors is still operating.

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Parents, June, 1990

# How to Start your Own Mothers' Group

One day, while browsing in the corner stationery store with my baby, George, I met Hedy Campbell and her six-month-old daughter, Molly. And that's how I got involved in what would become the Riverside Mothers Group, a New York City neighborhood group of seven mothers who have even published two books together: *Don't Forget the Rubber Ducky* and *Entertain Me!* (Pocket Books, 1995 and 1993).

Our group has been meeting since October 1989, and in the process we've learned a thing or two about how to start – and maintain – a mothers' group.

**First, draft a notice announcing your intention to start a group.** Include your name, telephone number, and the age range of the babies you're inviting into the group. State how often the group will meet, whether it will meet in members' homes, and that it will be free (worth mentioning, since most professionally run groups charge a fee).

**Tack copies of your notice on bulletin boards in places mothers frequent.** Good locations include doctors' offices; childbirth classes; kids' clothing, toy, and bookstores; and places of worship.

**Try to get at least seven names.** In our experience, four to seven moms and babies make a comfortable group – any smaller and it could get boring, larger and it could become chaotic.

**Look for good chemistry in deciding who gets into the group.** If you end up chatting for an hour with an interested mother, she's a good candidate.

**In your first meeting as a group, set a regular time to get together; then stick to it.** You should also discuss some basic rules. For instance: If the group will meet at members' homes, will the host provide snacks just for the children, or for the mothers too? Are children with runny noses welcome? It's also wise to address the sensitive issue of discipline early. Remember that the child who is doing the hair pulling and toy grabbing one week will be the victim of such abuse the next, so create a policy that everyone can live with. In my group, we decided not to discipline each other's kids and to let the offending child's mother do the disciplining herself.

- Paula M. Siegel

PARENTING Magazine, November 1995



# Play Group Success Story

## Meeting with other mothers and kids provides friendship, support, and fun!

*By Judith Linscott*

When my daughter, Anna, was one and we lived in a strange city 400 miles from family and friends, the two of us had a firm weekly date. Every Wednesday for more than a year, come rain or shine, we went to play group. For me, a first-time mother, and Anna, who had yet to meet her extended family, that playgroup was salvation.

Why did I love it so? Because it was good for Anna and good for me. It provided Anna with new toys, new friends, and incredibly valuable lessons in sharing, separation, and group play. It gave me support, companionship, and information on everything from potty-teaching to where to find great kids' clothes. It also gave us the opportunity to learn from one another: She saw me interact with other moms; I watched her first attempts at socializing with other kids. She learned to respond to other adults while I learned to let her. Together, we had a lot of fun.

Today I can wax rhapsodic about that playgroup. I was a desperate woman at the time (what new mother isn't?), and it saved me. I've since met many mothers who've felt similarly. But there are plenty whose experiences haven't been as sweet, because playgroups aren't always easy to find, start, or run. As it happens, locating the perfect playgroup can be as daunting as finding a good school or a pediatrician. "It takes looking around and being clear and confident about what it is that you want, which is hard for a first-time mother," says Annye Rothenberg, Ph.D., a psychologist and director of the Child Rearing Program at the Children's Health Council, in Palo Alto, California.

My initial playgroup encounter fell flat. Alone in a new city, I jumped at the chance to meet regularly with two mothers whom I didn't know. It didn't take me long to realize that I'd made a mistake. Geographically we were too far apart and our schedules conflicted, so getting together was a

logistical nightmare. And three does not make for a varied or interesting group. Eventually I left, and soon after found a completely different sort of gathering: a group held on neutral territory that was run by a social-service agency and led by trained experts. For me and Anna, it was ideal.

If, like me, you find yourself in the market for a playgroup, it helps to know what to look for and what to expect. What follows is an overview of common mistakes parents make when choosing a play group, how to avoid them, and what you need to do to make your experience a terrific one for you--and your child.

### Starting out.

Before you begin your search, think about what sort of playgroup will best meet your needs. In its simplest form, a playgroup consists of parents and children who gather once a week for an hour or two, usually in the morning when everyone is freshest. Most parents take turns meeting in one another's homes. But there are many variations on this theme. Some play groups are sponsored by community organizations and overseen by professionals or trained volunteers; others are run by mothers but held outside the home, in a church basement, for example; some are even run by a "facilitator" hired by the group. While most groups meet on the weekdays, some gather in the evenings or on weekends to accommodate working parents. With the exception of "drop-off" play groups, where parents take turns caring for the children, the mother stays with her child.

**It can take months  
to find a group,  
so begin before you're  
desperate!**

There are two ways to find a playgroup: You can track down an existing one or start your own. Since it can

take months to be successful at either, begin your campaign before you become desperate. "There's no reason not to start your child in a play group at two or three months of age," says Rothenberg. "Babies love watching other babies." Many play groups, in fact, grow out of childbirth or prenatal exercise classes. Mothers exchange phone numbers and contact each other after their deliveries, arranging a meeting time. One Pittsburgh mother made a point of starting a group before her baby could crawl so that the mothers would have more time to get to know one another. That, she figured, would help make the group more cohesive. Her strategy worked: Three years later, it's still going strong.

If you're starting cold, however, the first obvious source is word of mouth; tell friends and other mothers that you're looking for a playgroup. Ask everywhere you go--especially in places where mothers congregate--whether anyone knows of a group eager to recruit new members. Good sources include the library story hour, the park, kiddies' classes at the Y, and the pediatrician's office. (These are all good places to find moms interested in a start-up group too.) Check local newspapers (that's where I found mine) and bulletin boards. Call churches or nonprofit groups such as children's health organizations, which often sponsor play groups or know about them.

### **What to look for.**

Once you've located a play group, make sure that the children are within six months of the same age. That way, they'll hit each developmental stage around the same time; many parents say that this makes it easier for kids to form friendships. But in rural Toland, Massachusetts--population 290--the town playgroup draws between ten and fifteen

kids, ranging in age from infancy to five years. Some would describe such a gathering as chaotic, but "for us, it's perfect," says founder Jacqueline Manard. (If you mix age groups, make sure that you designate a separate area where babies can play without being trampled.)

The ideal play-group size, say moms, is between six and eight parents and kids; an even number is probably better than an odd because that way, every

child will have a play-mate. Although most groups meet in the morning, successful ones do what works best for members. When the eight mothers in one Alexandria, Virginia, group had trouble agreeing on a time to meet, they settled on 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., precisely because it's everyone's worst part of the day. "That's when you really need support," says Joanne Pike, who spent three months putting the group together. "There's usually at least one kid who's a whiner, but we don't care!"

### **Going by the rules.**

Whether you're joining an existing play group or starting one from scratch, guidelines need to be established on everything from childproofing to illness to whether smoking, pets, and guests will be permitted. Will outside trips or activities be held? What's expected of host parents? In some groups, for instance, host parents provide food for other parents, as well as snacks for the kids. Other play groups stipulate that the host family supply only the basics, such as coffee and tea. What limits are set on children's behavior - or on adult discipline? Can an adult other than the parent bring the child to play groups?

Most playgroup members agree on a few basic rules: Sick kids should stay home (so that they don't spread viruses); food should be simple (juice and crackers for kids); dress should be informal and comfortable; precious toys should be put away to avoid breakage; and children shouldn't bring toys they can't share. Safety and cleanliness are top priorities. Two widely honored commandments are that abusive behavior or language won't be tolerated and that mothers don't tell other mothers how to raise their kids. You also need to find out what sort of resources will be available to you if the play group meets in a public place, such as a church hall: Will a trained first-aid person be on call? What food, if any, is provided? If you bring your own snacks, will there be access to a coffee machine and refrigerator? If you're forming a group, gather the other parents first--without kids--to settle as many issues as possible. And try to keep things diplomatic. "Make it clear in the beginning that everyone has an out," says Rothenberg. That way, mothers won't feel forced to participate. To help you get to know one another, pick a topic of conversation for the first session--a shared experience such as

childbirth or a problem such as toilet-teaching--that all of you can probably relate to.

Moms joining a pre-established group should make the first visit a trial run. If you're uncomfortable with the play group's style or policies, say so tactfully. "Trust your gut," advised Nancy Towner Butterworth, a mother and co-author, with Laura Peabody Broad, of *The Playgroup Handbook* (St. Martin's Press). "Be perfectly straightforward, without a lot of hesitation. If you don't feel the play group is the right one for you, this is the time to leave."

Don't be too hasty, however. "Often mothers say, 'I don't have anything in common with these people,' " says Cassa Palmer, coordinator of the Newborn to 3 Group of the Childbirth Education Association, in Tuscon, Arizona, which helps new mothers start play groups, "But these same women soon discover that there's such a strong bond because of this shared experience that they can work through any problems. Some times we learn a lot from people who are different."

Carol Fry, a Northfield, Illinois, mother of four and a play-group veteran, agrees: "The incoming mother has to realize it's going to take some time to feel comfortable. You have to hang in there for three or four sessions and really make an effort."

Children also need to adapt. Those who start out together in a play group have a real advantage over those who join later, says Cosby Rogers, Ph.D., a mother and associate professor of child development in the Department of Family and Child Development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, in Blacksburg. "The children create a communication system," says Rogers. "They know how to play together. A new child won't understand that." This doesn't mean that joining an existing group is out of the question; it simply takes time to feel at home. Rogers suggests that you help your child break the ice by bringing something to share to the first group she attends, such as animal crackers.

### **What kids like to do.**

Though it's tempting to think of your weekly gathering as parents' coffee hour, it isn't. It's a play group, and the needs of the kids should set the tone,

according to Ann Gold, an early-childhood teacher who runs play groups for the Housatonic Center for Mental Health, in Lakeville, Connecticut. To keep children occupied, make sure there are age appropriate toys available and, for older kids, enough outside activities to stimulate their natural curiosity. (For specific suggestions see "Toys to Have on Hand," page 129.)

Although many kids bring their own toys to play group or use the host child's toys, mothers can also purchase or donate toys that are used only during gatherings. The toys don't need to be elaborate or expensive, and there don't have to be dozens of them. You can even find most of what you need at yard sales. A good rule of thumb: Try to have two of each toy--two dolls and two ride-on vehicles, for example. Children learn to share more by parallel play than by fighting over toys, according to Rogers. (When you host the playgroup, respect your child's concerns about his or her personal property. Put away favorite toys, and don't be afraid to declare certain areas--such as your child's room--off-limits.) Always make sure that books, music, and art supplies are available, Gold advises. Mothers can take turns directing simple craft projects or leading a story-time or sing-along.

Be sensitive to children's changing interests. "As kids get older, there's a dip in excitement about play group," says Palmer. "At that point you need to ask, 'What haven't we done? What else can we do?'" Many play groups schedule occasional field trips to local museums, the library or a working farm. Visit other playgroups for new ideas or raid library shelves for craft and activity projects. *The Playgroup Handbook* has more than 200 fun, creative suggestions for kids over the age of two.

### **Making it work.**

A play group needs regular fine-tuning to go smoothly. That's why mothers in successful groups meet periodically, without their kids, to review issues ranging from the major (such as safety) to the mundane (such as schedules). Also on the agenda is a discussion of common problems, which typically include sick children, biters, older kids who may be disruptive, and mothers who shirk their commitment. "If you're open and honest from day one and continue

to bring up issues as they happen, everything will be fine," says Palmer.

The keys to getting along, according to play-group veterans, are diplomacy, commitment, and knowing when to cool it. Butterworth says her own expectations were too high when she was a young mother. When an incident occurred, "I learned to ask myself, 'On a scale of one to ten, how important is this? Is this an area where I should take a stand to benefit my child?' If I came up with a two, I knew it wasn't worth it."

When a sensitive issue erupts, it's best to delegate one member to deal with it quietly, outside the play group. But most problems are easily resolved. A mother in a big-city group, for example, was moving to the suburbs but wanted to stay in her group; the other moms couldn't face driving to the suburbs. The solution they came up with was to allow her to remain in the play group but trade her hosting duties for more cleanup.

Not all problems can be solved, however. One mother whose son was more rambunctious than the other kids in the group had to chase after him constantly to keep

him from disrupting fellow members' less "junior-proofed" homes. "We weren't about to specially childproof our houses just for her kid," recalls a member, "but we wanted her to stay in the group." The solution? "She still does a lot of chasing," says the member. "We give her plenty of sympathetic support."

And that's one of the lessons of play groups. Belonging to one won't cure Sally's shyness or help Johnny be more generous. Nor will the children always play together; there'll be days when they will fight. And some days will be outright boring. What's important is whether, overall, you're both enjoying yourselves. "If you're having fun, you're both benefiting," says Rogers. "If you're not having fun, don't do it."

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Parents, November, 1992  
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## Don't Stand For High Baby-Sitting Fees

How can you beat the \$3.50 - \$7 – an hour cost of babysitting? Try setting up a barter-system, co-op sitting service with a few friends in the same bind. You each take care of your neighbor's kids, as well as your own, either in your home or in theirs. Public relations specialist Andrea Pollinger of Sharon, Mass. and her husband Mark Baron, a garden-supply salesman are forming such a co-op now that their son Ricky is six months old. "Otherwise we'll never go anywhere," says Pollinger. "After paying the sitter, it would be just too expensive."

If you would like to start a babysitting co-op, follow these instructions from Marguerite Kelly, author of the *Mother's Almanac II* (Doubleday, \$12.95):

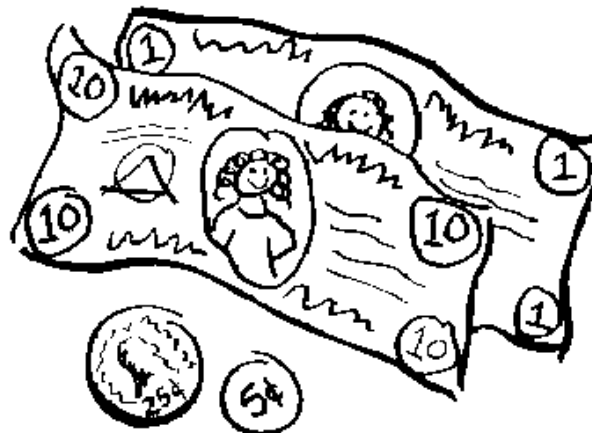
Recruit 10 or so families – for a large enough pool of sitters – and appoint a secretary to print up 1,000 chits that will serve as scrip currency. Have the secretary type a list of members' names, addresses, phone numbers and nonworking hours with plenty of blank space to keep tab of sitting schedules. Every co-op member might start out with 50 chits (a couple is considered one member), with each chit worth half an hour of sitting.

You can make sitting arrangements directly and notify the secretary afterward. Or, with 24 hours' notice, you can have the co-op secretary find you a babysitter from within the group. The secretary earns a chit for each half-hour of labor.

Kelly recommends making some sitting jobs worth additional chits. "You have to pay double between 5 and 7 pm., or you'll never get anyone to come," she says. You might give an extra hour's payment for sitting on a Saturday night after 1 a.m., as well as for watching more than one child (not counting your own).

Setting up sitters' co-op could complicate our financial life a bit. Although no money changes hands, you are technically required to pay federal income taxes on the value of services that you receive from the co-op, based on the going rate for sitters in your area. And you should also tell your homeowners insurer that you will be caring for other people's children in your house.

- Lani Luciano  
MONEY Magazine, August 1990



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Suggests guidelines to help assess your child's ability to self-care and gives tips for preparing your child and your home for this important step. Provides a list of community resources concerning a variety of school-age related issues.

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