

A SUCCESSFUL CO-OP – The Icing on the Cake

By Diane Geerlinks
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Its 9:00 on Wed. morning and four families are arriving any minute for our weekly 'KONOS' Day. Excitement is in the air in our home as final preparations are being made for our Bridge Contest. We are in the midst of a Bridge/Canal/Dam unit, all part of the KONOS Determination Character Study. All 12 children, ages 3-13, were given the same assignment for this contest – build a bridge with spaghetti, string and hot glue. On this day, we will test whose construction will hold the most weight before collapsing. As the families arrive with their custom bridges, there is much comparing of styles and predictions of who will win, considering the physics of what has been studied in the past weeks at this coop group. And I stand back, smile, and savor the moment. This is what homeschooling is all about. This is one of those moments that make it all worth it!

In our family's 20 years of homeschooling, I have been a part of quite a number of coops. A homeschooling coop is just a group of families coming together to share in their educational experiences. How this exactly plays out is dependent on the desire of the parents involved and the options are limitless. It is important for the parents to share the same philosophy of education, making sure their styles are compatible with one another. In all the coops I've been a part of, there are certainly some common threads that I think are essential for a positive experience for all involved.

1. Keep it Small – You can do way more exciting activities without dealing with classroom control.
2. Do Hands On Activities – Do things you wouldn't or couldn't do at home.
3. Use KONOS or an already prepared unit study – It is very helpful to keep you focused.

As families arrive at our coop, there is always lots of chitter-chatter. Kids run off to play while moms gather in the kitchen for coffee, tea and a quick powwow about what the morning's plan is.

We gather all the children together in the living room and begin our morning's topic. The moms each take a turn doing this teaching and we try to remember to use many different teaching methods to address the variety of learning styles in our group. On this day the mom tells the story of the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, from the design through to its construction, including the details of the problems that were encountered and how many lives were lost. Then we follow her into the office and look over her shoulder at the computer screen to see a detailed explanation which will solidify this teaching into our minds.

“When can we test our bridges?” The children are anxious to see who will win the competition.

We go back to the living room and everyone brings in their constructed masterpiece. We examine each model carefully and have the student(s) tell why they think there's will be the strongest. What were their intentions as they built it? Did it turn out exactly as they had planned? We all predict a winner. And then the testing begins. We straddle the bridges between two chairs and begin to add the weight of soup cans and apple juice cans, one at a time, tabulating how many pounds it will hold until it breaks under the pressure. And the tension rises as we wait to hear the first crack. We were sure to prepare the children that these creations would be demolished to prevent too many tears. We are surprised at the outcome and we analyze the factors that may have contributed to the success and failures of each bridge construction.

We tidy up the mess quickly and divide the children into three groups. Each group goes with one mom either to play a review game- matching definitions, or to add pictures of the most famous bridges to their scrapbooks or to play a Fact Finding game. Each group will take about 15 minutes, and then they will switch to another room, until they have all completed each of the three activities. As the morning draws to a close, the moms quickly discuss who's doing what for next weeks' class.

The model that I have described has been successful many times over in various settings with a variety of children. These coop days have been the glue that has held our homeschool intact. It seems that preparing for other children besides our own has kept me accountable. And knowing that ALL the children have the same assignment has kept my children accountable. It has been a joy to study various topics with other families, using the strengths of each mom and sharing our resources. I whole-heartedly agree with Jessica Hulcy, author of KONOS, when she says, 'The fact that I do not know anything about a subject or how to do something has never stopped me from teaching the subject or doing the skill! I am a great proponent of tapping other people's talents. Never in a million years could I pull off some of these fabulous events as one family, but many families co-oping together allow us to stage events in an exhilarating, memorable way.'

I would be amiss if I didn't mention a few other important benefits of this weekly coop meeting. One is SUPPORT from other moms. We are able to give each other input on some of the challenges of parenting that we all face. We have spent time sharing together, crying together, praying together on these co-op days. These moms have developed deep relationships with our children for which I am extremely grateful.

In my opinion and I believe, my children's too, co-oping with other families was the icing on the cake. We were able to do the 'hands-on, the over and above activities on those days and do the normal reading, writing and simpler activities on the other days of the week. These coop days kept us all accountable, parents and students alike. But more importantly the lessons learned, the projects created, the memories made will be with us forever.

Diane Geerlinks, is homeschooling her youngest of five children and is still involved with a coop. She is the KONOS-CanadaEast representative and speaks at support groups and conferences encouraging homeschool families.

For those who do not have other families nearby to coop with, check out www.homeschoolmentor.com for a virtual coop with Jessica Hulcy.