

## Co-op Basics

By Lauren Howell

*"It takes a village to raise a child"*-- African proverb

Started over 50 years ago, the NSCC Cooperative Preschool Program offers a warm and gentle introduction to school and community life for young children and their families. Adults and children learn together, grow together, and actively build a community together.

For children, "co-op" is a safe and nurturing place in which to explore and have fun. Social, emotional and intellectual skills are learned through cooperative and creative play. For parents, it's a place to improve parenting skills, help shape their child's first school environment, and form lasting friendships.

For kids and parents alike, co-op builds self-confidence and competence. But most of all, co-op is fun!

## What Parents Are Saying About NSCC Cooperative Preschools

*"Preschool is the highlight of my daughter's week. It is a chance for her to meet other children and interact with other caring adults. There are opportunities to explore activities not usually provided at home and learn new skills in a stimulating and fun environment."* -- parent of a pre-3s child

*"My friends are always amazed at how calm, capable, entertaining and in control I am with groups of young children -- especially since I have only one of my own. It certainly doesn't come naturally -- I have four years of co-op to thank!"* -- parent of a Pre-K child

*"My co-op experience really prepared me to take on a leadership role at my son's elementary school. It gave me a jump start in so many ways: like knowing how to conduct a small group project and otherwise be an asset (instead of a pain!) to the teacher as a classroom volunteer. Having already worked within one school system, I'm eager and confident to get involved in policy making for this one, too."* -- parent of a Kindergartner.

## How Co-op Works

There are forty NSCC cooperative preschools operating from eleven convenient locations in North Seattle. Each school is an independent, non-profit entity run by a skilled preschool teacher, the childrens' parents and a parent educator from NSCC.

Teachers plan and implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Parents assist in the classroom and perform administrative duties. Parent educators advise teachers and help parents build parenting skills.

## The Parent's Role

Being a co-op member requires an extra bit of time and commitment. In return, families reap a whole lot of rewards: a high-quality preschool, lower tuition rates, parenting support and lasting friendships.

Co-op parents are required to:

- Work one day a week in the classroom (2-2.5 hrs/wk)
- Perform an administrative job (approximately 3 hrs/mo)
- Attend once-a-month evening meetings for co-op business & parent education (2 hrs/mo.)
- Provide a nutritious snack for the class on a rotating basis
- Support fundraising efforts (approximately 1-3 hr/yr)
- Take part in beginning-of-year and end-of-year classroom cleanings (4 hrs/yr)

Can parents working outside the home manage this time commitment? Absolutely. Many co-op members hold full- or part-time jobs outside the home. Many have more than one child in the co-op system. These

parents get creative with their schedules and often share co-op duties with their partners, parents, siblings and close family friends. The whole community benefits.

## **Working in the Classroom**

Parents work one day a week in the classroom. A rotating schedule is created and posted so each parent knows in advance when and where he/she will work that week: for example, staffing an activity station (sensory table, blocks, library, etc.), preparing snack or cleaning the classroom. School manuals outline the "hows" of each job. Parents who can't make their work day are expected to line up a substitute.

## **Taking on an Administrative Job**

Each new class elects a leadership "Board" (Chair, Treasurer, Secretary, etc.) and divvies up a standing list of administrative jobs (class photographer, supply manager, teacher's assistant, etc.). Incoming parents are trained by outgoing parents, the teacher and parent educator. Board members receive even more training at a special NSCC-sponsored "Board Training" seminar.

## **Fundraising**

A tuition scholarship fund exists to ensure that the co-op program remains open to all families. Each co-op contributes to the fund, and most co-ops fundraise to meet their obligation. Most co-ops also conduct fundraising to support their own projects, such as purchasing new play equipment. Co-op members are expected to support co-op fundraising efforts.

## **Parents Are Students Too**

Co-op parents are automatically enrolled as students in the NSCC Parent Education Program. The parent educator is the parent's "professor," a once-a-month parent ed meeting is the "class" and the preschool is the "class lab." Parents are issued a NSCC student ID card (good for discounts and access to NSCC student services) and receive 3 college credits per quarter.

## **The Child's Role**

For children, co-op is a safe and nurturing place in which to explore, engage and have fun. A skilled preschool teacher designs the curriculum, using cooperative and creative play to enhance social, emotional and intellectual development. Class time is divided into carefully designed, age-appropriate learning periods such as:

- Circle Time
- Free Play
- Small Group
- Outdoor Time

During Free Play times children are free to move about the classroom, exploring and experimenting. "Stations" are supervised by parents, who work as assistant teachers to encourage and support the children in play areas such as sensory table, art center, play-kitchen, blocks and table top projects.

At Circle Time, the teacher leads the class in singing songs, dancing, playing musical instruments and reading stories while Parent-led Small Group sessions provide more structured learning experiences.

Pre-K and Fives children are introduced to Kindergarten-readiness activities such as the natural sciences, math, pre-reading and writing.

Taken from the NSC website: <http://coops.northseattle.edu/coopbasics/roles.html>