

Creating a Waldorf Centered Co-op, Pod, Learning Group or Cottage School

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Introduction

Years ago, when I came to Waldorf as a homeschooler, I found that it could be a very lonely road. There were plenty of homeschoolers around, but none that held the same values I was trying to learn about and bring to my family. After much searching, I found a group that was lovely and seemed welcoming, but I failed to meet their expectations at the time for membership. “Our group is full,” they told me. After the initial sting wore off, I decided that I would not be deterred. I looked under every rock until I found more families. Once I found them, I realized just how good it felt to have a community. Our city at the time lacked a Waldorf school, but gathering as families for circle time and festivals became the highlight of my week and something my children really relied on. I was very much in a place of learning and there were other moms with more experience than me willing to guide me. Willing to tell me why plastic was not an ideal material for toys or how they found reducing media saved their family life – they were willing to be my community, my village. I loved it. Then my husband lost his job and we were forced to leave the city we were in for a smaller one. Finding Waldorf families was hard in a big city, what on earth would I be able to do in what seemed like a tiny Idaho town of 50,000. Surely there would be no others interested in this method. My first month in our new home, I felt prompted to visit my local La Leche League chapter. I was instantly attracted to the leader and we became friends. She had just discovered Waldorf and was happy to meet me. We began to gather weekly for play dates and later decided we needed to let the greater homeschooling community in on our lovely Waldorf secret. Most of the families in our town that were homeschooling were using classical methods, Charlotte Mason or Thomas Jefferson. Waldorf was very different. The spiritual context was too liberal for some of the families. I found myself being tossed out of the Charlotte Mason gatherings, despite the changes they had seen in their children because of my developmental suggestions. After a time, my friend and I just decided to start a co-op and those that wanted to join us would. Sticking our neck out was just the beginning. Soon we had a group of about eight mothers and we had close to 20 children between us. We were quickly outgrowing houses and had to meet in church buildings in the colder months. Our children grew, the co-op thrived and we were able to give each other the support we needed with this education. These women stood by my side when I went through a nasty divorce, they watched my children when I needed to visit the doctor, they came to my wedding when I remarried, held my new babies that were born and many other life events. When we left Idaho for Utah, in many ways I was sad that I was leaving, but comforted that I created it once and could absolutely create it again. I wasn’t in Utah long before we had a festival group, Thinking Feeling Willing gatherings and weekly play dates for the children. When we moved to a space that could accommodate us in the colder months, we met weekly, painting together, modeling together, holding Waldorf conferences and building momentum. Part of that momentum thrives there now in the Waldorf school movements of the Salt Lake City area.

My next move took me to San Diego where I again gathered women together. Community building feels natural to me. We need each other.

This guide was born in the strides I have made in learning how to manage and bring together groups of women desiring Waldorf for their families. Now we are at a time when we are seeing more than women!

Mothers and fathers, parents are standing side by side and growing groups, supporting each other and sharing memories.

In this guide, I give you resources, themes and topics, peaceful resolutions and much more. These resources were cultivated with the women I was blessed to serve with. With each group, I could not have been successful if it wasn't for the ladies who were my co-leaders. It is to them that I dedicate this work.

For Heather and Jenny, we started this journey when we were so young. My! how we have grown. Children are adults, now off with lives of their own. Thank you for loving me in times when I didn't think I could be loved. Thank you for the strength we built in each other. Thank you for holding my hand and helping me mend my heart.

For Amber, Kelly and Debbie, my co-leaders in Utah, we had so much fun, shed so many tears together and watched our children grow. I am forever thankful for your friendship and love. I wish you well on your journeys, wherever they may take you.

For Kimberly, my co-leader in San Diego. I cannot begin to adequately express my love and appreciation of all the time and effort we put into the co-op and into our friendship. Thank you.

What is the difference between a co-op, pod, learning group and cottage school?

First, let's discuss why it is even important to define this. It is really easy to get super excited about starting a group, then you start talking to others and recruiting members and help. At some point you are going to need to define what exactly your mission is, otherwise things can easily go in directions that some members didn't intend, feelings get hurt and boundaries are often crossed. Knowing what you want upfront allows you to attract the right families and sets the tone. You can always change your mind later, but for now, define what you are wanting to create.

Co-op. A co-op is a community of families that have come together for the common purpose of creating community and educating their families. Often this will begin as a playgroup and as it grows, members might want more structure and then it becomes a co-op. Each person in a co-op plays a vital role. This is very different from a homeschool class, pod or learning group where a parent drops off a child and comes back for them after the class is over. In a co-op, parents generally all stay and many of the members have tasks that help the co-op run smoothly. A co-op is generally run by moms but not always as more dads are stepping in to contribute to the membership as well as the leadership of co-ops. In a co-op, members might occasionally hire someone to teach a lesson block or specific class, but the largest portion of the teaching is coming from the parents. Co-ops might go on field trips together. These families might also share meals together during co-op as well as celebrate birthdays or festivals together. Co-ops might start small with just a few families and grow to 20+ families depending on the direction the leadership chooses. A co-op can be a nice addition to your schooling, generally meeting only once or twice a week for a few hours.

I have seen many alternative homeschooling programs that call themselves a co-op, but often this is in name only, a pod or learning group might be a better description.

Pods. A pod is generally run by one family or one teacher who then sells a service to families where they come and drop off their children for a specified period of time, they might also have some duties but the largest portion of the teaching is done by the teacher(s) and the families are generally paying a price for this service.

There are times when a pod and a co-op might mix, for instance, if families in a co-op are gathering for main lessons and are all using the same curriculum at home, their pod/co-op days would be for group work. This generally replaces work done at home. Often parents are still facilitating the teaching but children in a pod are separated by age or by the tasks they are doing.

Pods are a great option if you have several self employed or flexibly employed families that can rotate so that families trade off when they are teaching and when they are working. It just takes a little coordination.

Learning groups. Learning groups would be more specific. These might be a farm school or a forest program where parents drop children off for several hours one or more times each week. These are great additions to your homeschooling even if you are participating in a pod or co-op and a great way to get in extra work time if you need to have that flexibility.

Cottage schools. Think of your old time, one room schoolhouse. This is generally an alternative school, often teaching several age groups together. Parents or teachers might separate children' into groups for age appropriate activities. Parents are not involved at all or only partially and students are dropped off for a school day or specified time.

All of these options are great, you just have to choose which is right for what you are trying to accomplish. Who are you serving?

Do you have many homeschooling parents that just want some extra social each week?

Then a co-op or learning group might be the right choice for you.

Do you have parents that want someone else to help with the teaching all the time or some of the time?

Then a pod or learning group might be the right choice.

Do you have parents that need to work and don't have a very flexible schedule?

Then a pod or cottage school mixed with some learning groups might be best.

Once you have decided, now what? I want to grow this! How do I do it? What is involved? Who will help me? How do I keep it Waldorf centered? What about size?

The guidelines I am about to give can be used fully or scaled back. It is always better to start small and grow. Don't try to do everything your first year, take your time and really build. If you are in a situation that feels like an emergency and need some help, do not be afraid to reach out and ask for it. Our members get help for free and if you aren't one of our members we are happy to help you become one or give you an hourly rate.

Remember, when you grow at a steady pace, then you have strength in your ranks and a community you can rely on, so take a deep breath.

Leadership & Logistics

Let's begin with leadership. While it is a fun idea to do this all yourself, **don't try it!** I have been in that position more than once and it was always a load off when I had at least a co-leader. I have at times had two co-leaders, where we were together a governing body. I believe that either can work well, two or three leaders. The benefit of at least two is that chances are one of you will always be able to attend and represent the governing body of the group. The beauty of

three is that you can each carry a smaller load. Regardless of how you decide to structure your leadership, be sure you choose co-leaders that allow you to feel equally yoked – carrying the burden of governing together. In my last co-op, I had one co-leader. We worked to govern equally. She governed our locations and field trips as well as partnering with me to make sure our lessons are covered, while I helped tend to lessons, as well as planning and executing the handwork portions. Don't discount temperament when selecting your co-leader(s) - it is pretty vital in understanding each other. I have worked well with my past co-leaders because we did our best to leave our ego at the door so to speak and focus on the needs of the children and the members. All temperaments have different strengths and understanding temperament can really help you work well together.

Now that you have your leaders chosen, where in the heck will you meet? While it is very tempting to meet at someone's home, **I highly advise against it.** Children become very territorial of their space and parents, and inserting more people on a regular basis into the family dynamic often poses challenges. In my last co-op, we met at parks all around our county. It worked well because weather is rarely a problem. It didn't work so well in Utah or Idaho. We could meet outside well into fall with children bundled up, but there were some months when it was simply too wet or cold. In Idaho, we made use of a local church and in Utah we were lucky enough to have a clubhouse in our condo complex. Brainstorm together with your co-leaders to find a space.

When choosing to meet at parks, I try to keep a few things in mind:

1. A nice grassy field for extended free play, imaginative play and circle time.
2. Plenty of picnic tables for lessons and snack/lunch.
3. If there is a playground, is it fenced? Close to a major road? Far enough away from the lesson area that it won't be a distraction?
4. Distance to everyone. Our co-op covered San Diego and surrounding counties. There are families willing to make the drive to be with us. With that, we try to vary our parks so that no one is forced to drive a long distance too often. We generally have a rotation of about four parks. We had more than one family that wanted to be with our community so much that they drove two hours to come.
5. Access to water for painting days.

Take some time to consider when you will meet.

Co-ops are often once or twice, while a pod or cottage school might be 3+ times each week and a learning group just once. What will work for what you are creating? Maybe you want to start light with a weekly play group? Or a festival group? Decide, will you meet through the summer? Our last co-op met once a week and we counted it as a school day as we covered topics as a co-op main lesson each week even though we were generally not doing the same things at home. We also met through the summer. This allowed for cohesion within the group and we didn't have

large gaps, making us feel like we needed to start totally over when school began. We tended to have more fun topics in the summer and spent many more free days at the park or beach.

Attracting Waldorf Friendly Families

While it might sound incredibly exclusionary, attracting the right families is very important when setting out to put together your group. You've gone to great lengths to choose your co-leader(s) and where you will meet, now you'll need to find some families to gather with. Many co-ops and pods begin with just a few families. Those families bring in a few more. Things might also grow from local Waldorf school attendance. There are always students that don't seem to be thriving in the school setting or parents that love the curriculum but not the school setting. Often schools are happy to be able to turn those families to a local group when there is one available. In some cases, you might look into local parenting groups – if I hadn't gone to that meeting so many years ago, I would have never met the wonderful women that would later be my co-leaders.

It is a good idea to interview families before welcoming them to your group. When I look back on the group that refused me so many years ago, I can see right away that I had been interviewed – even if they were not forthcoming about it! I prefer to be open about our interview process, and while we haven't always done interviews, once we started, it has saved us a lot of headache.

We first required parents to meet with my co-leader and I in a child free space. Child free because we didn't want children bonding if it wasn't a good fit and because we really wanted the attending parent to be able to focus on our interview. For us, it worked to have a prospective members meeting once a month on a Saturday morning. We went through the main guidelines of our group and we asked them the following questions.

Some of our questions are:

1. Where are you on your Waldorf journey?
2. What temperament do you consider yourself to be?
3. Are you using Waldorf at home or do you plan to?
4. Do you understand the guidelines?
5. Are you willing to hold the space for your child?
6. Are you willing to take a regular turn teaching once you have gotten settled?
7. Are you okay with the driving distance?
8. Do you have any questions for us?

The answers to these questions help us decide if the family is a proper fit for our group. Asking them in advance of them joining us keeps children from getting upset if they don't end up staying with us. After the gathering, my co-leader and I went through all the answers and looked at the ages of their children and whether or not they will be a possible good fit for the group. Then we asked them to come to two gatherings. We made sure that we observed during those

two weeks of visiting. Did they engage others in conversation? Did they encourage their children? Did they ask for help if needed? Did they seem comfortable? We didn't want to exclude anyone that can grow from the group, but we also don't want to include anyone that is very obviously out of sync with our core values as a co-op. A copy of my last co-op guidelines and post interview form is included in the appendix.

I like the idea of being slow to hire and quick to fire. It helps things be cut and dry. By requiring a parent to attend that first meeting with just us, it really helps us see if we want to make the next move in inviting them to join us. Seems like a lot! It helped so much when we properly screened families. We didn't want to encourage anyone to come that might otherwise not be comfortable.

Should We Charge?

YES. The questions really are how and to what capacity.

Co-ops - even though these are generally parent run, you will still have expenses. We charged \$30 a month per **family** in my last co-op. We found a per family fee to be more fair than a per child fee and it fostered a greater sense of community. This money went to supplies for lessons and it paid for most of our field trips. We purchased good quality Waldorf supplies and asked families to bring supplies like paint boards and brushes for their children whenever possible. My co-leader and I did not pay. We were very upfront about that.

If you are planning to lead a pod or starting a cottage school, you should consider all of your expenses and if you are the primary leader then you should make sure you are charging what you need to as you are teaching AND babysitting children. Consider your expenses and do your best to look at every angle. What if you are sick? What if you need to hire help? Will lunch be provided? All the things. Do not be afraid to charge what you are worth, you are providing an important service.

Conflict Resolution

From time to time conflict will arise within your group – do you know how you will handle it? I have always found it incredibly important to lay out the guiding principles (core values) from the very beginning, this will allow you to have a document to fall back on if conflict arises. The guidelines from my last group are in the appendix. These evolved over time, yours will too. These were born out of trial and error, out of struggles, and out of love for the families we served. When conflict arises with another adult, it is best to face it head on. If you are involved then ask your co-leader(s) to weigh in on the disagreement. Remember you checked your ego at the door so you should be able to listen to criticism with an open heart. Once you can identify it, then work to use non-violent methods to discuss it. Work with phrases like “I feel” rather than

“you made me feel.” When we can be in control of our emotions then we can build bridges, even if the other party is out of line. Do not be afraid to remove someone from your co-op if they are not following the core values. While it sounds harsh and even frustrating, saying “Sally, we need to talk about our core values. I understand you have been talking behind our back and that goes against our core value of being in INTEGRITY. Can we please talk about that?” This allows Sally to open up about the incident(s) and also opens the door if you will have to dismiss her later. While it isn’t fun, it is part of being a leader. When we have the burden of protecting the good of the whole community then we have to make hard choices at times.

Resolving conflict with children is sometimes much harder. As moms, our feelings can easily get in the way. As a mom with special needs children, I have become adept at realizing my child(ren) don’t always behave as I expect them to, with that in mind, I try to examine the situation. Try to ask everyone involved what happened. Was an adult there to see or hear? Is it a matter of children excluding others? A matter of one child having a bad day? I like to get parents involved from the beginning.

“Lucy, I wanted to grab you for a moment, there seems to be a disagreement between the girls, can you assist me in helping them find a resolution?”

Lucy then needs to come with you to the playground to open a talk to the children. As a leader, hopefully you’ve been interacting with all the parents and some of the children that day. Maybe Lucy mentioned her little one not getting enough rest the night before or not eating well at breakfast, etc. These factors play into conflict. By remaining peaceful as a leader, you can often work to smooth feelings. To help these conflicts stay at a minimum, we work to remind families that co-op is **not** an individual play date and that everyone needs to feel included – sometimes that means changing the game so everyone has a place. In our large co-op of about 40 children, these conflicts rarely arose. In very rare instances where perhaps parents are not willing to help with the resolution, a family will need to be dismissed from co-op. Fall back on those core values and do not take too long to manage the situation. Taking too long breeds resentment in the group and more drama than you need. Nip it. I have faced this situation with a child, and with a parent, it is never fun.

If you and your co-leader do not agree on the action that should be taken or you are challenged with a specific incident, do not be afraid to talk to other parents in the group. Remember, you are a community.

Holding the Space

Space holding is vital in any group setting and while we do not want to helicopter parent, we do want to be eyes and ears on children - especially young ones. When you are running a co-op with parents involved, it should go without saying that each parent should hold the space for their child, this includes leaving for the day if needed. I have one general rule - everyone should have

fun - if your child is keeping others from having fun then it is time to leave. There should be no shame in this. We have all had bad days and our children need to see us leave and then rejoin the group when we have composed ourselves. Space holding also means that you should be able to count on the other families involved to work together. Each parent should feel comfortable letting another parent know when something has happened. Deal with it quickly and do not let bad feelings fester.

If you are running a pod or cottage school, remember not to take on more children than you can hold space for and consider having a co-leader or teacher with you at all times. It doesn't take much to be overrun!

Class Management

This topic is always fun. Managing your own brood can be a task, but managing six or eight rowdy six-year-old boys can feel like trying to keep fleas in a bucket! What is a parent to do? Be honest. We had a large co-op and I worked to get to know all the children. Some I love to pieces and others I might not have clicked with as deeply. I always make it clear who the teacher is in the group. **Children need to know which ego to follow and they will often follow the one that feels the most dominant – that should be YOU or whoever the teacher is!** With that in mind, it is okay to separate children or ask that their parent attend your circle. When I step into a group for the first time or maybe after a break of teaching, I always remind them how much I love them and love teaching them. I tell them that they are welcome to sit near anyone they'd like unless it becomes a problem. If it does then I will mix them up a bit. (This works VERY well for the awkward 10-14 year olds who have zero desire to sit next to the opposite sex.) If they are younger and struggling to keep still, then look at your offerings – are you giving them enough movement? Are you engaging them? Do you make eye contact? In some cases, you might need a helper or two, don't be afraid to ask the other parents for help! That is why they are there.

Food

Will you be eating together? We generally held a weekly potluck lunch. Our co-op met from 10:00 a.m. until 1:30 p.m. We broke for our lunch at 11:20 a.m. Everyone brought a potluck dish to share as well as their own lunch foundations (sandwich, protein, etc.) this ensured that your child had a balanced meal. We had many families with food allergies/differences in our co-op so we tried to label dishes and were very open about sharing contents. I have also been in groups where everyone just brought their own lunch, both scenarios tend to work well.

My last co-leader had the wonderful idea of having stone soup for our kindergarten group each week. Soup wasn't very practical in our situation, so we instead chose a fruit salad. Each child brought a piece of fruit that they could cut up for a snack in their class each week. It gave children such a sense of accomplishment when they could contribute - even the children that didn't enjoy fruit!

Blessing the food is an important part of breaking bread as a community. In our group, families signed up to oversee the blessing that month. A food blessing can be a blessing song or verse or it can be a prayer. We welcomed all faiths at our table and looked forward to each family's blessing in their own tradition.

Festivals and Birthdays

Festivals are one of the hallmarks of Waldorf education and a group is a beautiful place to celebrate them. Some of my fondest memories are of dancing the maypole or walking the Advent Spiral with my co-leaders as well as my family. Festivals really knit a community together. We tried to include both parents when possible. There are several festivals throughout the year that we celebrated in the evening so that both parents could attend. It gives them a time to get to know each other and see the wonderful support their family has.

We asked that parents sign up to take on a festival and the co-leaders were responsible for making sure they had the support (and at times funding from the dues) that they might need.

Birthdays are special – especially for children. We had one parent as the birthday chair for the year. This person makes sure that each child has a gift on the proper gathering day, has the community birthday crown to wear and is sung to. We had a budget of \$5-10 per gift that came out of the co-op fees. We also celebrated the attending parent's birthday as well. We sang and gave their gift during our opening circle.

Training Your Parent Team & Dividing By Age

It is likely that your group of parents are all in different places on their Waldorf journey. The last two groups I ran felt a bit intimidated by me with my Waldorf background but I assured them that there was room for everyone in our group, that we were all learning and that we would bear that yoke evenly.

If you are starting a **co-op**, then begin by deciding what you will cover. Are you just setting out and maybe focusing on park play dates, circle time and festivals the first year? Maybe painting or modeling here and there or will you be jumping in with classes and lesson material? Either way, these simple guidelines can help you in determining material for each age group.

Whenever possible, bring circle time as a story, with a theme that weaves the songs and verses together. Make natural transitions to the next content so it flows.

“In our last song, we moved our arms like birds flying. Today we are going to talk about other things that fly. Can you think of things that fly?” is an example of transitioning.

Know when to close your circle. Even if you aren’t done, there are often cues that tell us the children need a breathing out or in. Holding the space and being aware will let you feel those cues.

Ages 0-4 we called them Toadstools

- Opening verse – simple
- Shorter circle – 3 to 5 songs tops
- Short, age appropriate story
- Consistent closing verse

Ages 5-6 we called them Acorns

- Opening verse – a bit more complex
- Slightly longer circle – 5 songs tops
- Longer, age appropriate story
- Consistent closing verse

Ages 7-8 we called them Saplings & 9+ we called them Oaks (different content, same guidelines)

- More complex opening verse
- Less songs – more verse work
- Lesson/story will be longer and more complex
- Consistent closing verse

These guidelines might still be frightening! We have included a co-op planning page in the appendix as well as one filled out for each of the age groups listed. You might be wondering why we decided to split in groups? Remember that we really want to bring age appropriate content to these children and they are at very different stages. Also, we had many weekly activities that we did together like meals, birthday celebrations, festivals, morning gathering, etc.

It is important to remember your audience when you are preparing lessons. At age three, the fantasy world awakens for your child, they are full of awe and need plenty of movement. Keep your circles full of big and small movements and very fantastical. By age four, they can listen to some simple fairy tales. Five- and six-year-olds can have more complex fairy tales. These children are still very dreamy but their limbs won’t stop moving so be sure to move with them. This is where those fields for them to run can be very helpful. Children that are seven and up are

ready for academics and really need a teacher that they trust. Connecting with them is very important. You should consider these children in your stewardship and take the time preparing lessons that you would want someone else to take preparing for your child.

If you are planning a **pod**, ask questions like:

- What curriculum will everyone use? Does the curriculum provider have a group discount and support? (Hint: Waldorf Essentials does!)
- Will I teach them daily and will the parent teach them at home the rest of the time?
- Will I stick to Waldorf centered main lesson content or instead focus on different topics and bring it age appropriately?
- What things can I bring the entire group regardless of age?

In a **cottage school** setting, you will want to decide if you are responsible for the primary learning of the children or if parents are expected to homeschool on the off days.

In a **learning group** setting, you may still want to keep our co-op guidelines in mind for age appropriateness or at the very least let parents know what age group your content will be aimed at so everyone has the same understanding, then you can always adjust your content up for the older children or down for the younger ones.

What Will You Teach?

For **co-ops**, what will you teach these children and how on earth do you keep it Waldorf centered with all these ages and topics? You want topics that are broad enough to fit everyone yet you will be tasked with keeping the content age appropriate. Remember that Waldorf education is as much about *how* you bring something as it is *what* you are bringing. You can bring just about any topic in a Waldorf friendly manner. Perhaps you will find the right picture book or story to memorize. Perhaps you've got a wonderful idea for a painting or drawing. Maybe your idea will flow into some planned handwork? Or maybe you want to focus on teaching flute? The considerations really are vast. Narrowing it down might be the biggest challenge.

In my last current co-op, we had four age groups. We had one theme that carried us for about two months. It allowed for us to have a field trip that supported the topic and gave us plenty of time for festivals without taking away from lesson time. I have included our past topics with some notes in the appendix.

Each child in our co-op had a small main lesson book to record drawings in or any writing (for the 7+ groups) that the teacher might assign. We expected that each teacher carefully planned out their lessons just as they would be expected to at home. They took care to select resources that

were age appropriate and activities such as painting, drawing or modeling that go with the lessons. I have included a supplies list in the appendix.

Handwork

One of my favorite parts of having a co-op has been teaching handwork to the parents and the children. Handwork is often a part of Waldorf that can feel intimidating and doing it in a group can then sometimes ensure that it will also happen at home. When introducing handwork, you should take all the ages into account and be sure to bring everyone up to speed with appropriate amounts of time to master each skill that is age appropriate. It can be a big task. Below is a sample table I used to get all the children in their proper handwork groups.

Age Group	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5
0-4	Dye shoe laces for lacing cards & beads.				
5-6	Dye yarn Begin using lucet or knitting tower.	Learn a more difficult stitch and begin a communal weaving project.	Continue with project.	Finish project and learn to finger knit.	Learn to finger knit (or finger crochet, these terms are used interchangeably.)
7+	Dye yarn Make knitting needles Make needle ends.	Learn to cast on and begin knitting a square.	Continue knitting. Squares can be for a communal project like a new baby blanket.	Finish project. 8+ or those that are ready can begin to purl.	Finish purling sample and decide on a personal project, animal, purse, ball.
9+				Purl sample. Work to master purling, casting on, binding off, some shaping.	Learn to single crochet.

The idea here is that you are bringing each child up to speed for where they should be with handwork. I found that about half the students in our co-op were doing handwork at home and that left them able to do their work as well as assisting their classmates as needed. Once everyone is caught up, then it allows you to keep each group going with new, age appropriate

projects. In our co-op, we dyed yarn regularly, instructions are included in the appendix as well as in the Waldorf Essentials Instagram highlights.

Mom Time/Parent Gatherings

Continuing support and education is an important element of these types of groups. Our group had a once a month mom only gathering that allowed for us to craft together, discuss a book together, do planning or just hang out and support each other. I find this gathering time to be vital to the group's energy. We also reserve two meetings per year for co-op planning meetings. My co-leader and I went over the guidelines paragraph by paragraph and discussed any changes from the year before. We also discussed upcoming lesson topics and have an opportunity for families to sign up for the ones they might be interested in.

In Closing

In the appendix, you'll find some forms we used, some topics that we studied over the years and as well as the structure of my last co-op group.

Perhaps the hardest part about growing a group is leaving it. There will be a time when you have to step away, move, or your children simply outgrow the space. Leaving my San Diego community was bittersweet. We were moving on to new adventures while leaving a thriving group of families that birthed together, protested together, held each other during difficult times with spouses and exes. We laughed together and loved each other's children. When we begin something, we don't often think about how we will end it. Only you will know when it is time. I wish you much love on this journey.

Every member of the Waldorf Essentials team has experience working with groups of their own. We are happy to help you on this path. If you are looking for a homeschool curriculum to follow as a group, we offer group discounts, mentoring and training. We also have a virtual school option that might be especially helpful for families wanting a pod setting. With this option you will still be a homeschooler but one of our teachers will deliver the lessons. Having several children working with our school through a pod would give your group the flexibility to focus on herding the cats ;) rather than teaching them as well.

WaldorfEssentials.com - Waldorf centered homeschool curriculum, training and mentoring.

SeasonsOfSeven.com - Waldorf inspired virtual homeschool

Appendix

Topics & Themes to Consider

Topic/Theme	My Notes
Fairies and magical creatures	<p>This was perfect to go along with our summer solstice & fairy festival. It easily hit all age groups and the little ones had plenty of fairy and gnome stories to choose from while the older children enjoyed discussing their favorite fantasy creatures and creating their own. It gave the big kids an opportunity to write about their creature as well as draw. We also made fairy houses – the fairies LOVED them and shared some of their pixie dust with us in return.</p> <p>We have also done a variation on this theme and used only magical water creatures, also a big hit.</p> <p>Field trips included our botanical gardens.</p>
Music	<p>We spent a month exploring music. We had several musical parents in our group who were happy to bring instruments for the children to try. Children made their own musical instruments – a huge hit for all ages. We had a recital type day where children that wanted to share had the opportunity to. Lesson book drawing could include instrument design or writing a song.</p> <p>Field trips included a local music museum.</p>
The Night Sky	<p>This was an annual lesson for us. The sky in our area was very alive in late summer so we took advantage of being able to view meteor showers and get to know the stars. The very young might focus on what they see or hear at night, knowing when it is morning, simple stories of jolly Mr. Sun. We had a lot of fun painting the night sky and modeling stars from beeswax. We also made window stars.</p> <p>Field trips can include a planetarium for older kids or a star party for families.</p>
Animals	<p>This is a broad topic but gives many opportunities for exploration and could easily</p>

	<p>cover several months, animal husbandry, using skins and hair for clothing and wool, etc. The little ones loved the stories from Thornton Burgess. For our children that were grade 4 and up it was a great opportunity to explore head/trunk/limb animals in our local area. There are many opportunities to draw, paint, model or write for this block.</p> <p>Field trip ideas can range from the zoo to a wild animal preserve.</p>
Water conservation & pollution	<p>This is another very broad topic and one that is easily done for all age groups. You can talk about very simple ways to not waste water for the younger crowd and get very detailed about conservation for the older kids.</p> <p>Our field trips included a water conservation garden and a water treatment plant.</p>
Botany	<p>This topic is always a favorite. Children love to get their hands in the soil – most children! We focus on Mr. Sun helping plants grow and how we give them good water to drink for the littles and really digging into how they grow and taking care of them for the big kids. This is a great way to cover the Waldorf botany block in a co-op setting. We also thoughtfully covered pollination with the children. We had a local beekeeper come and talk to us about her bees. She played games and the children got a great lesson on different kinds of bees and what their jobs are. We had a mom that was a botanist and she was super helpful for this block.</p> <p>Field trips included several botanical gardens.</p>
Cultures	<p>Look at the cultures within your co-op, ask different families to present their culture for the entire group.</p>
Physics of flying and birds	<p>We spent a lovely two months on this block and the groups covered everything from watching the wind and making kites and windsocks for the younger children to understanding how wind affects kite flying for the older children. Lift and wind speed were</p>

	<p>covered in an age appropriate and creative way. As well as studying different birds.</p> <p>Field trips for this block included a flight museum as well as a nature preserve to listen to and spend time with local birds.</p>
The ocean	<p>Being in San Diego, this was always a fun block for us and we tried to fit it in each year. Field trips included the local aquarium as well as tide pools. We watched for dolphins and seals, seahorses and sea slugs. There is a wonderful Thornton Burgess book about the sea, as well as several books by Holling C. Holling on the subject that are completely appropriate for many ages.</p>
Dinosaurs	<p>Because this is typically covered in class 5 + in Waldorf, we took great care to be creative with it for the little ones. They have a natural interest in these creatures and we work to foster it without giving too much technical information out.</p> <p>Our field trip was to the natural history museum.</p>
Space	<p>This topic can be combined with the night sky if you have older children that want an opportunity to cover it together.</p>
Folk tales, fairy tales, myths and legends	<p>This is such a great topic because you can easily just put each one with an appropriate age group, there is a rich well of stories to pull from. There are many opportunities for art and writing in this block.</p>
Seasons	<p>This is a fun block to have in the fall or the spring when the seasons are changing. It goes well with seasonal festivals.</p>
Festivals	<p>We spend the entire month of December with festivals. The month is full of many traditions and we welcome them all.</p>
Gems and geology	<p>Little ones love rock collecting and bigger children enjoy sorting and classifying. The lessons can be as tame as simple stories about the rocks and their elements to a deeper understanding of the earth and our connection to it for the older children.</p>

	Another trip to the natural history museum or a gem and geological society.
Sheep & animals with knittable fiber	We spent a whole month talking about wool. We went to a sheep farm and had the opportunity to spin wool. We had a lovely time dyeing wool and spinning/knitting what we dyed.
Farming	This is another rich block, full of possibilities. We tied it into spring and many of the U-Pick opportunities we had. The children talked to cattle farmers and strawberry growers and much more.
Navigation, orienteering, survival skills	These were done over a three month period with a planned camping trip at the end so the children could put to use some of the things they learned during the block. For handwork we also made nature bags for them to use during the block.
Dragons	We took our mythical creatures block a bit farther and spent a month on dragons. This was fun for all the ages and included the big kids needle felting dragon eggs and also designing their own dragon.
Dairy animals	Going beyond cows and sheep to camels and others that give milk.
The healing power of crystals	We could have done geology all year! This block allowed us to focus more on the healing properties that we didn't get to in our previous geology block.
Local history	This was so much fun. We try to do this block anytime we have a few fourth graders in the mix. It allows for us to see many local treasures as a group and allows those grade 4 parents to have a little break. We included Native Americans of our area, their tales and way of life, etc.

Handwork Ideas to Consider

Age Group	June	July	August	September	October
0-2 yrs	Continued lacing & beading				
3-4 yrs	Simple weaving & lacing cards				
5-6 yrs	Continued lucet. Include finger & handknitting (four fingers) all for our community weaving project.	Dye yarn. Begin jump ropes to felt.	Finishing jump ropes.	Weaving or knitting comb.	Finish weaving or knitting comb project.
7-8 yrs	Intermediate knitting Review cast on. Continue knitting for those that are still having trouble and introduce purling for those that are ready. Purl a sample Review binding off.	Dye yarn. Choose a knitting project with some shaping, purling for those that are ready. Gift for new babies.	Continue the project.	Finish project for new babies.	Pick a holiday gift project, a gnome or animal or bag.
9+ yrs	Intermediate knitting Review cast on All will be purling. Purl a sample Review binding off.	Dye yarn Choose a knitting project with some shaping, MUST include purling. Gift for new babies.	Continue the project.	Finish project for new babies.	Learn to crochet, single crochet. Crochet washcloths for new babies in co-op as a holiday gift.

Age Group	November	December	January	February	March
0-2 yrs	Continued lacing & beading.				
3-4 yrs	Holiday weaving.	Finish holiday projects.			

5-6 yrs	God's eye holiday ornaments.	Finish holiday projects.	Plastic canvas box project.	Work on a plastic canvas box project.	Finish project.
7-8 yrs	Continue holiday project.	Finish projects.	Dye yarn Pick a project for themselves, a gnome or animal or bag.	Continue	Finish projects for themselves. Begin to discuss holiday gifts and who they will make it for.
9+ yrs	Continue crochet projects.	Finish up and deliver projects.	Dye yarn. Make a gem bag.	Finish gem bag.	Self-guided project.
10+ yrs					Dye embroidery thread. Plot out cross stitch design. Work on design.

There are endless ideas for handwork. After years of running the handwork myself, I handed the handwork reins over to a permanent parent-teacher in our group. She had 2-4 helpers depending on what the need was for the group. She maps out 6 months of handwork at a time. Children are expected to do handwork at home throughout the week.

Our current group guidelines follow on the next few pages. Feel free to use these and tweak as needed.

Three Fold San Diego's Co-op Guidelines

Who We Are

Three Fold San Diego is a Waldorf centered and inspired cooperative. Our co-op is run by two co-leaders. Kimberly and Melisa. It is NOT run by consensus, but all families work cooperatively on running tasks set for the day, and sharing the responsibilities of the offerings the co-op has. Families contribute to group planning, ideas and some decisions by consensus for the group and most importantly the health and wellbeing of the co-op. The real power in the co-op comes from everyone working together and helping the children have a good, Waldorf centered experience. As leaders, we arrange location, set up field trips, manage accounting, interview new members, and oversee final lesson plans, final festival preparation, etc. We also oversee the daily operations and administration of the co-op, including the group website. All final decisions regarding lessons, festivals, new members, finances, etc. lie with Kimberly and Melisa.

Our co-op relies on the parents as teachers. We plan together at mandatory meetings twice a year and each take turns teaching the children. **Volunteering and teaching is a requirement for this group. When we all take turns teaching, our burden as parents is lighter and we grow together as a community.** It is okay if you are new and haven't mastered Waldorf, we are all learning. It is helpful to attend the Mom Time sessions so that you can learn and in turn take new skills to your children or our group. It is also strongly recommended that you continue your own Waldorf education at home.

Fees

The co-op is \$30 per family per month. Co-op fees include: quality supplies, park entrance fees, birthday gifts for all the children and mothers, festivals, reimbursement of fees and most field trip fees. This does NOT include handwork supplies. Handwork tends to run between \$5-\$15 per child per semester. We work to order in bulk to get the best prices. When there is an opportunity to bring your own supplies, it will be welcome, those times will be mentioned on our group message board. Unless otherwise stated, please plan to use the supplies we provide.

We are in the process of examining the possibility of charter school reimbursement for fees. We will continue to keep our members updated on this process.

Once accepted into the co-op, monthly dues are expected by the second co-op day each month. The months are planned based on the dues collected. It is important that every family contributes. If you find yourself unable to contribute the full amount please see Kimberly or Melisa to make arrangements. If you are in a position to donate extra for another family, please see Kimberly or Melisa.

Payments can be made either by check, cash, Paypal or charter funds. There will be a \$20 surcharge for any returned checks.

Quarterly statements of finances will be made available on the Shutterfly group site September 5, December 5, April 5 and July 5. If you have any finance questions, please speak directly to Kimberly or Melisa. If you should have trouble paying your fees, please speak directly to Kimberly or Melisa. Do not engage in financial discussions on our message board.

Interview Process

You must attend a meeting with Kimberly and Melisa before being asked to attend our co-op for your trial weeks. The meetings happen about once a month and are a requirement. At the meeting, we get to know each other and discuss the co-op, our core values and go over any questions that arise. Not all meeting attendees will be invited to join our co-op for a trial. We keep the overall health of the group in mind when asking families to join us. Kimberly and Melisa work to keep the classes/ages balanced as well as the boy/girl ratio balanced. Once you have been invited to join us for a trial period, you must attend at least two co-op days. It is possible that you will not be invited to two consecutive days if we have a field trip or special gathering planned. We will let you know in advance so you can properly plan. Once you have been twice Kimberly and Melisa will together make a decision.

We have a wait list and so we ask that if you are invited to join in, you make your decision within a week's time. If you turn down a spot in our group and later change your mind, you will have to be placed back on the waitlist.

If you are invited to join and you accept, be advised that we have an online group through Shutterfly.com. Participating in the online group is mandatory as all calendar events are there and we communicate on a message board within the site. After you have been invited to join we will add you and then you will have access to the group's pictures and our monthly calendar with park locations.

COMMUNICATION IS MANDATORY. YOU MUST BE WILLING TO TEXT AND USE THE GROUP SITE.

Exiting

Occasionally there will be a family that begins with our group that for one reason or another needs to be released from the group. As hard and sad as that can be, Kimberly and Melisa reserve the right to ask a family to leave if they feel participation is lacking or the child or parent brings too much conflict to the group dynamic. When a family is asked to leave, they are welcome to join our waiting list again after one year.

General Instructions

Our co-op meets on Tuesdays from 10am to 1pm. We begin the circle by 10:10 am. We invite families to come as early as 9:30 if their children want to play before co-op. That being said, it is important that you arrive at least TEN minutes early to get centered and ready for the day.

If you will be late, please text Kimberly or Melisa and let them know. If you will miss a day, let them know. Remember this is a community and communicating is very important. Intending to only come a few times a month is not supportive of the community we are building. We need active, supportive families. This is NOT a drop-in park day.

****Lesson and handwork time, as well as lunch is affected when members are late and we don't start on time. On the occasion that a leader is late, members should still begin on time.****

At each gathering (unless otherwise specified) you can expect to bring a potluck dish to share and lunch foundations for your family. We generally do NOT have potluck on field trip days. Bringing your lunch foundations ensures that if there are food intolerances it is still easy to have something for our own children to eat. Potluck contributions need not be big, they should be something that can be used during our snack/lunch time. We gather for our lunch at 11:20 am and we have one family per month say a blessing over the food. This blessing is at times religious but is not required to be, each family should feel comfortable giving a blessing per their own family tradition. **All spiritual traditions are welcome.**

All children in the 5-6 kindergarten class are asked to bring a piece of fruit to contribute. Their class will be making a communal fruit salad for their class to share.

Guidelines

We intend for the co-op to be a safe place for everyone, parents and children alike. **This means that parents must hold the space with their children.** We need loving kindness to prevail if this co-op is to be successful. While strong friendships are the goal of gathering, we also want everyone to feel loved and included. If a strong bond has formed within the group, please nurture it with additional play time for them outside of co-op and that during co-op your children are inclusive of all the children.

****Co-op is not an individual play date. We are all friends. Being inclusive is foundational to a strong community.****

Rough play is to be expected but we still need to hold the space so it doesn't get out of hand.

We understand that this group might not be a fit for all of your children, in those cases please arrange for care outside for those that are not participating. **ALL co-op children must regularly participate in their lesson and handwork groups.** Our leaders and teachers put a lot of work into making co-op fun for everyone and participation fosters community. Of course we understand that children have bad days from time to time and that the very young may be hesitant. We allow grace for those days.

We understand special needs and want any children with autism spectrum issues to feel welcome. In order for that to work well for the families, we need to be open and honest with each other. Open communication about your child's needs will help things run smoothly.

We need to have moms holding the space with their children. Holding the space means that we are present with our children. We are not on our phones or engaged in deep adult conversation with another mom. It means we know our children, **we communicate struggles and issues with the other parents.** In the end we want everyone to have fun and we want this to be a good supplement for your child's school year. If you don't understand what it means to hold the space, please see some of the resources on Melisa's site at waldorfessentials.com or she is happy to direct you.

When your children are on the playground, the expectation is that there is parental supervision. If you cannot go, please ask another parent to go in your place.

Many Waldorf families are very health conscious and choose alternative health and no vaccination or altered vaccination schedules. Please be aware that with vaccine shedding, recently vaccinated children can pass along live viruses to non-vaccinated children. We ask that you respect all group members and choose to sit out two weeks of co-op after vaccinating your child.

Location

We meet at parks around San Diego County. We have families from all over San Diego and neighboring counties so we all try to keep that in mind when we are driving. Sometimes we have a longer drive and sometimes shorter. Kimberly schedules the spaces and tries hard to accommodate everyone.

Breakout Group Ages

Children break into age/grade groups for co-op. These groups are taught by moms in our group. We generally have 4 different groups for lessons and handwork. Our co-op follows Steiner's guidelines for the grades. If you have questions about your child's placement please see a leader.

The age groups are split as follows:

0-4 years old ~ *the preschool years* *Toadstools*

5-6 years old ~ *the kindergarten years* *Acorns*

7-8 years old ~ *first and second graders* *Saplings*

9 years old + ~ *grades three and up* *Oaks*

Group Rhythm Guidelines

We generally will start promptly at 10:00 if you come later please wait for an opportunity to join circle quietly. If Melisa or Kimberly are not there or late, **PLEASE BEGIN WITHOUT US.**

10:00 Song, announcements

10:15 Break into enrichment classes: handwork, music, movement, painting/modeling for the Acorns, Saplings and Oaks. Toadstools go with their teacher (one constant teacher all year) and rejoin us at lunch.

11:20 Lunch

12:00 Enrichment classes

12:30 Main lesson

1:00 Closing circled



Week 1

Week 2

Week 3

Week 4

Circle Songs/Verses

○ self evaluation. How did it go?

Co-op planning

0-4 group

Flying

THEME

Week 1

The grouchy ladybug
Paint with red
Find ladybugs in nature
Fly like ladybugs & eat
some yummy aphids
(snap peas or green veggie)

Week 2

The Hungry Caterpillar
look for caterpillars or butter-
flies in nature
Fly softly like a butterfly or
move on the ground like a
caterpillar.

Week 3

going for an airplane
ride
My First Airplane Ride by
Patricia Hubbell
Airplane yoga pretzel
watch for airplanes in the
sky

Week 4

Jan Brett's Hedgeie's Surprise
do chickens really fly?
waddle like a chicken
what gift do chickens
bring us?

Circle Songs/Verses

I can reach so high
Finger Fairies
Oola Woola

○ self evaluation. How did it go?

Co-op
planning
5-6 group

Magical Creatures

THEME
DRAGONS

Week 1

Tiptoes ch. 1 & 2
Dragon pose yoga pretzel
Play dough dragons

Week 2

Tiptoes ch 3 & 4
Dragon pose yoga pretzel
Drawing dragons

Week 3

Tiptoes ch.
Dragon pose yoga pretzel
Painting "dragon" color
exercise (yellow & blue)

Week 4

Michaelmas!
Dragon pose yoga pretzels
Super Sam & St. George

Circle Songs/Verses

The Earth is firm
I can reach so high
I See Said the Bee
Going on a Dragon Hunt

○ self evaluation. How did it go?

Co-op
planning
7-8 group

Sea creature
THEME

Week 3

Selection from Burgess
Seashore Book
Talk about crabs (lightly,
age appropriate)
Draw crabs
At home write a short
piece about when you were
crabby.

Week 4

Selection from Burgess
Seashore Book
Bring a collection of
sea shells to explore
what kind of story would
the clam tell?

Week 1

Little gray's great
Migration by Marta
Lindsey

Talk about our local whales.
Who's got a "whale" of a
tale?

Draw whales
Write a whale of a tale at home

Week 2

Begin the Burgess Seashore
Book

Discuss their last trip to
the tide pools.

Bring some tidal friends to
visit.

Draw favorite tide pool animal
At home: observe & write about
the tide.

Circle Songs/Verses

There Lives in me an Image

Yoga Pretzels: dolphin
shark
fish
crab walk

○ self evaluation. How did it go?



Week 1
 Favorite magical sea creatures
 Discuss project: after
 our studies of magical sea
 creature, create your own.
 What does it look like? Eat?
 Where does it live? Drawing &
 written description.
 Discuss tales of Nessie

Week 2
 check in on project
 Talk about Selkies &
 the Kraken

Week 3
 check progress on project
 Talk about Mer-folk -
 fairy tales, super heroes
 that live in the water, etc.

Week 4
 Project presentations

Circle Songs/Verses
 There lives in me an image

○ self evaluation. How did it go?

Supplies

These are just ones we have used, you'll want to add or take away things that we don't mention or may not feel relevant.

Individual muslin drawstring bags, 10x12 size, perfect for handwork - [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Silks & laces to dye – [dharmatrading.com](https://www.dharmatrading.com)

Yarn, we use bulky bare yarn – [knitpicks.com](https://www.knitpicks.com)

Stockmar crayons, 2-4 boxes, one for each of the younger groups – [meadowsweetnaturals.com](https://www.meadowsweetnaturals.com)

Lyra pencils, 2-4 sets, one for each of the larger groups – [meadowsweetnaturals.com](https://www.meadowsweetnaturals.com)

Cutting boards & child friendly knives for the kindergartners to make the fruit salad.

Small main lesson books, 6x9 or so seems to work well for the group settings, you could always go bigger for the little ones – [meadowsweetnaturals.com](https://www.meadowsweetnaturals.com)

Beeswax – [meadowsweetnaturals.com](https://www.meadowsweetnaturals.com)

Paint & painting supplies, we use the Circle Colors by Stockmar – [meadowsweetnaturals.com](https://www.meadowsweetnaturals.com)

Kool-Aid, for dyeing! We use a solar method and put the dye bath in mason jars, lids on tight and in the sun for a few hours.

The following page details our schedule and how our rotation works. Keep in mind that our Toadstools (0-4) are not included here because they are not included in our breakout and they stay with the same teacher for the entire year. She does a short lesson with them and then they spend most of their time in free play.

	Music/Movement	Handwork	Painting/Modeling	Main Lessons	
10:00 AM	Opening Circle				
10:20	saplings	oaks	acorns		
10:50	oaks	acorns	saplings		
11:20	Lunch				
12:00	acorns	saplings	oaks		
12:30				Main Lesson Oaks	
				Main Lesson Saplings	
				Main Lesson Acorns	
1:30	Closing circle - play				