

Meal Swapping- Simplify Your Dinnertime Dilemma by Co-op Cooking with Your Girlfriends

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The rain pitter-pattered on the roof as I snuggled under our old quilt on the couch with my toddler reading *If Your Give a Mouse a Cookie* for the fourth time. My stomach began to grumble as I realized that five-thirty had rolled around quicker than I had expected. My older children were diligently working on their homework and my son was playing in the playroom. I had no dinner on the table, and nothing thawing from the freezer. Was I worried? No way. I knew that in about a half hour, a warm, home cooked meal would be delivered to my door for my family to enjoy.

I am not wealthy. I have not hired a caterer. Yet three days a week dinner is delivered to my door. Like clockwork, the meals come, and my dinnertime stress is diminished. My kitchen counters stay clean, and my family enjoys wonderful recipes like meatballs and sausage with oriental slaw salad, or poppy seed chicken with broasted potatoes and applesauce.

It is really simpler than you might expect. The solution to my dinnertime dilemma is co-op cooking, or meal swapping. I am not a miracle worker, I am not rich, and I am certainly not a chef. I am a mom, who happens to know other moms who live life as

hectically as I do. We are girlfriends who were seeking an inexpensive, simple solution to our dinnertime dilemma.

Through co-op cooking, we share the cooking responsibility for our families. We save time, money, and stress, and build deeper friendships with one another through co-op cooking. For about one to two hours of meal preparation, and about thirty minutes of meal delivery time one day a week, I am blessed with four nights of homemade dinners.

It all started about two years ago when one of my girlfriends approached me about forming a cooking co-op. It almost sounded surreal at first, but since we were all struggling with dinner, we decided to give it a try. At a cozy table in a local restaurant we met to plan our meals. Over cold glasses of iced tea, we discussed what meals would work best for our families. Each of us picked a cooking day and delivery time, then with recipe cards in hand, we planned three months worth of family friendly meals.

That was two years ago, and my co-op is going strong. We have gone through many changes, and have been able to adjust our co-op along the way. Co-op cooking has a life cycle for some families, and they may choose to leave after six months or a year. My co-op has seen three families eventually leave and two new families join. Some families left because their schedule changed, their children are now in school, or they simply wanted to try and cook all of their own dinners once again. Each girlfriend that has left our co-op has expressed a future desire to join another co-op someday, and would strongly recommend co-op cooking to anyone looking to simplify dinner. My friendships with my

girlfriends who left the co-op are still stronger because of co-opping together, and I have built new friendships with my current co-op families.

Co-op cooking provides tremendous time and financial savings, and simplified trips to the grocery store. But high on the list of benefits is that even in the midst of sometimes hectic days, I no longer stress about what to make for dinner!

Cooking co-ops can take many forms, and that's one of the beauties of the co-op – each one develops its own personality, reflective of the different communities with distinct needs. Some cooking co-ops are neighborhood co-ops. Other families might co-op with co-workers, church members, civic organizations, or extended family members. Cooking for one another's families is a natural extension of neighborhoods, churches, community service groups and friendships. Any definition of community has the potential to develop a successful cooking co-op partnership.

So on those gray, dreary days when the rain is falling, and you have no idea what to make for supper, rest assured that your girlfriends are there for you with a warm smile, a quiet wink, and a delicious dinner in hand!

Suggestions for Starting Your Own Cooking Co-Op

1. Ask a few close friends to pursue the co-op with you. Choose friends with families around the same size as yours, with similar tastes and lifestyles, and who live nearby so delivery is not an added burden
2. Choose recipes to start with that are your family favorites and are kid friendly.

- But don't feel the need to limit your co-op to only kid friendly recipes. After all, you are cooking for the grown ups as well.
3. Purchase inexpensive, glass baking dishes with lids and Ziploc containers to share meals; do not expect to get the exact dishes back you sent out.
 4. Be honest about food likes and dislikes, and possible food allergies up front when you plan your meal calendar.
 5. Buy in bulk for your meals, when items are on sale, and try to budget recipes so you don't make two expensive ones in a row (i.e. pot roast is more expensive than pizza burgers)
 6. Meet every three months to plan your meals. Give each family the opportunity to leave the co-op each quarter, guilt free.
 7. Have one co-op member write out or type up your three month co-op meal calendar and distribute it to each co-op family to hang on their fridge.
 8. Delivery times can vary depending on what works for each family. If you deliver at dinnertime, have the meal cooked and ready to eat. If you deliver in the morning, have your meal prepared with baking instructions; that way it is fresh out of the oven at dinnertime. Have delivery times printed on the meal calendars.
 9. Stick to the meal calendar. However, if you must change your recipe or adapt your delivery time, let your co-op partners know in advance.
 10. Be flexible with one another when life throws you a curve ball, like a sick child, a broken down car, or unexpected circumstance. Have a meal back up plan for those nights agreed upon at the outset, like switching days or having pizza delivered if you are in a pinch.

11. Decide what constitutes a meal at the outset. We only prepare and deliver two dishes: a main dish and a side or dessert. Each family is responsible for adding sides, salad or bread to complete the meal on their own.
12. Relax and enjoy the ride. Don't expect your co-op to last forever, since co-ops do have life cycles. If co-op members leave, try and find new families to fill in the gaps and give it a try. Co-ops with three to five families usually work best.

For more information on co-op cooking, visit www.trishberg.com or e-mail trishberg@trishberg.com. Trish would be happy to answer any questions you may have, send you some great co-op recipes, or e-mail you more co-op tips on getting started!