

Secrets of a Supper-Swapping Mom

(and how you can be one too!)

by Trish Berg

Published in Today's Christian Woman - September/October 2006, Vol. 28, No. 5, Page 14

I was snuggled under an old quilt with my two preschoolers reading *Thomas the Tank Engine* when the familiar it's-four-thirty-and-nothing's-in-the-oven panic hit. My two other children were due home from school any minute, followed shortly by my husband. I made a quick mental inventory of my pantry, trying to come up with something to make for dinner besides sandwiches ... again. I was knee-deep in motherhood, elbow-deep in laundry, and struggling to fit our family supper into my daily to-do list.

That's when the phone rang. It was my friend Carla, asking me if I'd be interested in trying to coordinate a supper-swapping club with her and two other families in our area. *Would I?!*

That was almost three years ago. I'm still a supper-swapping mom who can't imagine life without my girlfriends by my side, swapping meals and nourishing our families together—bodies and souls.



Welcome to the Club

Dinner is delivered to my door Monday through Wednesday; my cooking day is Thursday. Wednesday evening after my kids go to bed, I prepare and assemble four identical meals, such as baked spaghetti and garlic bread, and stack them in my fridge. On Thursday after my kindergartner gets on the noon bus, I load my meals and my toddler in the minivan and deliver the other three meals to my supper-swapping girlfriends. For about one to two hours of meal preparation and clean-up time, and 30 minutes of delivery, I have a week's worth of homemade meals for my family!

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We currently have four families in our supper-swapping club (also called a cooking co-op), although seven families have joined and departed our group for various reasons over the past three years. With each change, we adapt our menus, welcome a new mom aboard, and move forward with our plans. We've always honored our friendships above the club, and have allowed each mom to leave when she needs to—guilt free. We typically ask for one month's notice so we can look for a replacement or reorganize our menus.

Some clubs operate with five families, covering the entire workweek. Some operate with three, and eat leftovers the other two nights. Some choose to meet Sunday evening in one location and exchange all of their meals for the week.

It's all up to you! That's what makes supper swapping so great. Each club develops its own personality, reflective of different schedules and lifestyles, meeting the distinct needs of the families involved.

Ready, Set, Swap

Here's how to start your cooking co-op:

Set a trial period. Ask everyone to commit for a specific amount of time to give supper swapping a fair shake. You'll need to adjust your grocery shopping lists and meal preparation schedule, so give it some time. We began ours with a three-month trial period and gave everyone the option of bowing out after that time.

Choose wisely. Pick friends with families around the same size as yours and with similar tastes and lifestyles. Form your club with families who live or work nearby so delivery isn't an added burden.

Define a meal. 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. Other clubs choose to include a complete meal. Decide what works best for you.

Be honest. When you establish your meal calendars, be upfront about food likes, dislikes, and allergies. We typically put mushrooms, uncooked onions, and spicy sauces in a separate container so each family can add what they like.

Plan ahead. Plan your meals at least three months at a time for stability and consistency. Write your meals on a calendar and make a copy for each club member so everyone knows what's being delivered for dinner each night. I create printed calendars through a Print Shop computer program, but it can be as simple as handwriting your meals on a desk calendar.

Schedule deliveries. List delivery days and times on the meal calendar. I deliver at noon after my kindergartener gets on the bus. Nann, another club mom, delivers Sunday evening at seven for Monday's meal. Your delivery times don't have to be identical. Just set a time that works best for each individual.

Buy similar containers. Purchase inexpensive 9x13-inch glass baking dishes with plastic snap-on lids at discount stores or garage sales. Snap-on lids make delivery easy and reduce spills. Use semidisposable plastic containers and Ziploc bags for sides and sauces. Expect all pans and containers to cycle through the club, and don't expect your exact pans back.

Have a backup plan. Because there will be times when you can't receive meals at the scheduled time, you might give each family in your club a house key, share your garage door or front-door security code, or leave a cooler on your porch so they can leave the meal inside. On nights when emergencies crop up, agree to switch days with another mom or have pizza delivered to the other families.

Use recipes that work. Start with family favorites. Try new recipes on your family before introducing them to the club. Also, choose meals that aren't labor intensive to

prepare. It may take some time to figure out which meals work best, but with time, you'll know which ones to leave out.

Cash in at the checkout. When you plan your meals three months in advance, you can buy ingredients in bulk and catch sales as they arise. Our local grocery store sometimes has skinless, boneless chicken breasts on sale: Buy one pack and get one for a penny. When I see that sale, I usually buy enough for two to three club meals or casseroles.

Minister to one another. Soon after our youngest daughter, Riley, was born, she was diagnosed with a serious respiratory virus. She was in the hospital for days, and I spent that time with her. My husband, Michael, went back and forth to the hospital, caring for us and our three older children at home. During that time, my supper-swapping girlfriends delivered meals, cards, and prayers every night for almost two weeks—and I didn't cook a thing for them. It was a blessing to know they were feeding my family when I wasn't able to.

Celebrate special occasions. We include life's celebrations on our meal calendars, such as family birthdays and anniversaries. We usually include notes of encouragement with our meals on those days, and sometimes even a cupcake for the birthday boy.

Minister to your community. When you're cooking in bulk, preparing an extra meal adds little additional work or expense. This gives you a wonderful opportunity to minister to other families in your community. On your cooking day, prepare an extra meal to share with a family welcoming home a new baby or caring for an ill parent. Or share a meal with a neighbor for the best reason of all: just because. What an awesome opportunity to share Christ's love!

Joining the swap can simplify your family suppers. Then, when that 4:30 P.M. panic hits and there's nothing in the oven, rest assured that your girlfriends are there for you with a warm smile and a delicious dinner in hand!

*Trish Berg, author of *The Great American Supper Swap* (due out April 2007), lives in Ohio. For more supper-swapping resources, visit www.trishberg.com.*

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