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## Support Group or Co-op. What's the Difference?

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As you lean on the Lord to direct your path through the homeschooling years you may find He will lead you to be a part of a support group or perhaps even a co-op. You may ask yourself, "Well what is the difference?" Let me first explain that the term "co-op" is a group of homeschooling families that join together for similar purpose to "cooperate" and pool their resources to meet the needs of their homeschooling community.

I once took a field trip with my children to a pumpkin patch. We had a very educational afternoon. One thing I have taken with me for years is that I learned that all pumpkins are squash, but not all squash are pumpkins. A similar comparison can be made between co-ops versus support groups. Many co-ops offer a support group component, but support groups generally are not co-ops. Okay, now that I have officially confused you, let me break apart these two distinct titles.

What does a support group have to offer?

Is a co-op right for your family?

What are you finding you need?

Let me try to navigate the support group and co-op maze for you.

First, support groups are designed to offer encouragement, enrichment, prayer time, and support to homeschooling parents in many areas. Support groups are generally rich with resources for the homeschooling parent. Some groups meet for the sole purpose of praying to the Lord for direction and guidance during the homeschooling years. Some support groups meet at a local coffee shop to discuss successes and trials with other fellow homeschoolers. There is a wealth of seasoned homeschool veterans that can offer valuable insight gained from their years of service in homeschooling. As the name infers, the support group is geared toward supporting the parent by offering up ideas and opportunities that might enhance the homeschooling experience.

By contrast, the co-op generally has something to offer the whole family, not just the parent. Co-ops provide programming geared toward the children and their academic pursuits. There is truth to the old adage that there is "strength in numbers."

Most co-ops have a component that provides a wonderful source of information and encouragement to the homeschooling parent, many times referred to as "mom's time". This offers a supportive setting in the midst of cooperative activities going on. Co-ops generally offer parent-led or adult-directed classes like science, physical education, and art. Classes like these are typically better suited for larger groups than just a single family or two. In addition, some co-ops provide used book sales, field trips, and even organize a yearbook for their members.

As you plan for homeschooling, be in prayerful consideration of what these groups could possibly offer to you and your family. MACHE wants to help you plug in where you feel led to join. Please make a point to stop by the Support Groups booth at the MACHE Conference in Rochester; become familiar with your local liaison who is an advocate for you as you seek to connect with the support groups and co-ops in your area.

If you have been part of the support group and co-op community you know the benefits they have to offer. Perhaps the Lord is leading you to start a group of your own. Or perhaps the Lord is calling you to step up in leadership of an existing group. MACHE wants to help you where we can for the benefit of homeschooling and for God's glory.

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