

BY KATHERINE KOLLER }

Moms and Girls Who Read Together



In my busy mothering years, with six daughters each three years apart, my two daily goals were to take my preschoolers for a walk and then read them a book. Only now I understand why: I wanted them to observe their world and also exercise their imagination for that short time before they could read on their own. For years, I gave each of my daughters a book at Christmas and in June at the end of school. My neighbour Helen, a former librarian and bibliophile, gave us classics at every opportunity.

Coleen, a friend who had lived in the U.S., introduced the idea of a mother-daughter book club when my fourth daughter, Sophie, started Grade 6. We invited five other mom and girl pairs in our neighbourhood so everyone could walk to the meetings, in each of our homes, and not make this another commitment to climb in the car like all our other lessons and activities.

We wanted it to be social and fun, so we asked people we knew and some we didn't know very well. We asked girls in adjacent grades (5 and 6), so we had a mix of ages. Sophie sent out the first book title and author's name along with the book cover image on email to everyone. We hosted the first meeting at our house to model the format:

- Moms and girls read the book selected by the host girl before the meeting.
- The host girl creates a list of five to ten questions for discussion. Usually, time allows for only five, but making up ten questions gives options, depending on what comes up in discussion.
- The meetings, at 7 pm on Friday nights about four to six weeks apart, start with social time until everyone arrives.
- Then each question travels one by one around the circle, so every single person gets a chance to speak.
- After about an hour of discussion, there are snacks, chosen and prepared by the host girl and mom from the book.
- The girls find another room to eat and talk and the moms get some social time of their own.
- Make sure the next date, host and book are decided before everyone leaves, so mom and girl pairs have time to find and read the book.

Two years after Sophie's club was running, Vita's began, with six mother-daughter pairs, and three years after that, Rebekah's club started with a group of eight moms and girls. Some years, I had two mother-daughter clubs on the go, plus an adult one of my own. My only regret is that I didn't start book clubs for my three oldest daughters, who would have loved the experience.

The Life

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"Books provided a forum for articulating ideas . . . and forming your own opinions," says Coleen. She believes that the mother-daughter relationship benefits from a buffer, especially in the pre-teen and teen years, and that's what's provided by the other girls and their moms at book club. At every meeting, over the crucial years of their development, the girls hear their moms discussing sometimes deep and delicate topics with other moms as adults, not as parents. Those other adults are also genuinely interested in what every girl has to say, not only because everyone gets the floor at book club, but each girl has her own voice, own perspective and unique response as a reader. Adults and girls have both entered the same world of the book. The world of the book, a sanctuary, equalizes moms and girls as readers.

The casual, intimate atmosphere of each other's homes, the range of books chosen and the variety of opinions in the group all contributed to lively discussions. Rachel, Coleen's youngest of three girls, no longer had sisters at home, so the club became a kind of sisterhood, the opportunity for a regular all-girls experience. Coleen and Rachel's group met until Grade 12, and continued to hold reunions at Christmas and summertime when the girls came home from college.

When asked for memories of book clubs past, Meg, from Vita's club, which ended seven years ago, writes: "I was actually disappointed that it wasn't an email about starting up another mother-daughter book club!" Meg continues: "I just loved being able to spend time with my mom (although maybe I did not appreciate it as much as I should have at the time!), and being asked to read books that I would not normally choose for myself . . . and then to have the opportunity to discuss . . . among friends." The girls addressed the other moms on a first-name basis and each gained a group of aunts, some very different from their own moms, but women who listened to them. For me, as a mom without sisters of my own, I particularly valued book club aunts for my girls.

Sophie says that the bonds she made with other moms helped her later in a job where her clientele comprised women of that age. She already knew how to connect with women because of our book club. Other moms' experiences and knowledge of different countries and cultures, which became an eventual theme in that book club, piqued Sophie's own personal interest.

Often, moms would speak in their professional capacities, as doctor, teacher, nurse, writer, counsellor, scientist, artist

or therapist. Girls especially appreciated anecdotes about the moms' own girlhood experiences because, although the times and places differed, the core emotions matched those of modern girls. As Carleen articulates, "Each of us was in some way a mirror for the other, moms with moms, girls with girls, moms and girls." All of these dynamics showed other sides of each mother to all the daughters.

Likewise, moms gained understanding by watching their daughters speak aloud in a group. From Grade 5 to 12, the girls grew up. Book club continued through the transitions to junior high and high school, through puberty and boyfriends and decisions about life after high school. Girls who went to different junior or high schools had book club as an anchor to stay connected with their oldest friends from elementary school. Rebekah remembers that the girls supported each other if they were having a hard time at class or with relationships. To include girls who couldn't make that meeting, they'd send texts and pix while horsing around after snack time. Having friends who had already made the leap to junior or senior high school or university gave the younger girls an advisor, and let the older girls advise, about teachers, activities and, of course, boys. Rebekah felt comfortable telling boys that she was unavailable on a Friday because she had book club that night. For her, "It was never nerdy, more like a secret party" and hangout time with girls. They would ask each other between meetings, "Have you read the book yet?" Julee would always reply, "Don't tell me the ending!"

For me, the greatest and richest value of the clubs was observing, respecting and celebrating the girls as they developed, and the reminiscence of the moms. It also became clear very soon that moms and daughters reacted differently and sometimes oppositely to the same material. Where moms would laugh or cry, girls might not, and vice versa. For example, moms would sob if a child character died, but girls would weep if an animal character perished. Moms might laugh at adolescent embarrassment, but the girls would take it very seriously. Exposure to a diversity of thought and feeling produced the greatest boon for

The most part of the club's early days were spent reading to my granddaughters who were in the same year as I was. I found that the girls were more interested in the club than I was. I found that the girls were more interested in the club than I was. I found that the girls were more interested in the club than I was.

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me and for what I aspired for my daughters. No one felt compelled to conform to any one opinion. The imaginary world of each book provided an arena where girls and moms spoke freely and honestly. In her email message, Vita recalls:

When you are in Grades 6 to 10, everybody is still learning the ins and outs of emotions/hormones/life. At this age, teachers expected us to participate in class but there was always that overwhelming fear of being judged or laughed at. Book club allowed me to have a place to learn how to openly and deeply discuss literature with a group of adults and teenagers, teaching me fundamental skills of expressing myself, sharing opinions and debating ideas. I am attending law school and the academic seminar experience is so similar to book club.

A mom, Beth, elaborates: "Some of the questions touched on things I never would have discussed with my daughter or my mom friends in the context of our regular everyday relationships. I was also always very surprised at the depth of the answers coming from the girls." Darlene concurs: "We covered so many themes through the many books we read—puberty, death, loneliness, love. We talked about it all and I was always surprised how articulate and open the girls were." Like Luciana, all the moms appreciated her own "daughter's voice and insight." For me, having the permission to listen as well as contribute my own thoughts when even my own daughter was compelled to hear me was both a freedom and a responsibility. For each of my clubs, I managed to air my personal belief that all girls should read Jane Austen before they start dating.

It helped that we tended to choose books about "strong female characters," Sophie says. Moms assisted in the early years to find books, but soon the girls did the selecting.

This was an important, empowering task. Vita says, "My favourite memory of book club was always picking the book. Making up questions and hiding them so they were secret until I asked them was so fun."

Book selection, however, could be difficult. If a girl only read dog books in Grade 5, chances are she would move on to other books in the next grade, partly because of the book club experience. But, as MJ notes, "As the girls became a little older, choosing books seemed to create a lot of tension." Some used their book club book for an upcoming assignment at school. Some became overwhelmed by extracurricular activities and found it difficult to set aside time to find a good book. Some harboured concern that others might not like the book. In this case, deciding on a group theme for the year could make book selections easier by narrowing the field (girls in other countries; high school; time travel). Another choice is to pick from Newbery Medal, Young Reader's Choice Awards or library lists. At least two annotated bibliographies of great books for girls now exist, as well as a whole website devoted to mother-daughter book club titles, listed below.

Some of my clubs became frustrated when the book for the next meeting was TBA, shortening the time to find and read it. On the other hand, Coleen warns against setting a book list at the beginning of the year. Although it may be convenient, it's possibly "too schoolish" and besides, "the girls' tastes often change in the course of a few months" during those exploratory years. The girls who read fantasy shared that, the ones who loved historical fiction introduced the others to it, as did some girls with graphic novels, documentaries, biographies and cross-cultural fiction. This was part of the breadth of book club. And if a girl couldn't read the book in advance, they could usually participate in the discussions anyway because we talked about ourselves, albeit in the situations of the characters. More often than not, it was the moms who didn't read the book, or didn't finish or, like me, speed-read in the afternoon before Friday night book club.

Beth recommends the audio version of the book for moms (and girls) who spend time in the car, but talking books also work for reluctant readers or readers with low vision, as does paired reading, mom and daughter reading aloud together. In busy school months during exams or tournaments, we once read a short story ("Boys and Girls" to celebrate Alice Munro's Nobel Prize) and watched the movie version together at the meeting (*Life of Pi* by Yann Martel).

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The social time bonded the girls, but also the moms. Darlene notes: "I treasured the time we all spent as a group discussing the books, but I also really enjoyed chatting and sharing with the moms when the girls crept off to one of the bedrooms to do some sharing of their own. Darlene's second book club, which lasted three years, "never, ever had the same level of commitment or enthusiasm," but she plans to start one for her third daughter because she wants to embark on that journey again.

The book club is, as Coleen says, "direct contact" but in a group setting, a unique mother-daughter journey that Beth describes as "very special." Belonging to a mom and girl book club for even a handful of years reveals an absent part of modern female experience, a gap that librarian Kathleen Odean in *Great Books for Girls* also notices in fiction: "Almost no books tell stories about mothers and daughters having adventures together, or stories about several girls going on quests or journeys together" (15).

As a reader, writer, teacher, mother and daughter myself, I know the power of story. In the words of one of my own professors, I ask my students to let the book "read you." Books challenge, develop empathy and the capacity to think beyond ourselves, to imagine that anything can happen. They grow us. Reading stories together and discussing them in a group that lasts for years stabilizes the relationship between mothers and daughters, and girls and moms on their respective journeys. When girls and moms read together in book clubs, they learn about the world and each other: girls who become women and women who were girls.

*...
And that's the magic of the experience and reading
through the generations. Sustainable. Me, to online is
readable, get it and let it read for you, much like
the I am a woman, can be read to you, then.*

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Tips for a successful book club

- Select the host houses and dates (but not books) for the whole year at the first meeting. “Then the commitment has already been made and life has less opportunity to encroach,” Carleen recommends. If a mom-girl host needs to change later, they can switch dates with another co-hosting pair.
- Have a group of eight or more mom and girl pairs. This way, if one moves away or drops out, there is still a core group that will continue. It is difficult to add mom-daughter pairs later because the group by then shares history, compares books from before and possesses book club glue: intimacy, growth and honesty about many topics.
- Support your daughter with book choices, but leave her to do the selection; Beth concludes, “just let the kids pick.” Girls found suggestions from friends, the internet and by browsing at the library.
- Try to find books readily available in the library; if scarce, share them between pairs during the reading time.
- Take a picture of your group at the first meeting of each year. Some groups keep a scrapbook, but finding someone to be its keeper is challenging. Coleen’s club lost theirs for several years! In Rebekah’s club, we photocopied the questions for each mom-girl pair and gave them out at meetings. I kept my copies in a folder, and compiled our complete book list for the girls after our club ended.
- Create questions that provoke discussion, not yes or no answers. Ask why.
- Use a talking stick or club mascot to send the discussion around the circle, especially in the early grades.
- Keep the snack table for after the discussion to avoid people getting up and down during the meeting. Meg and her mom, Sheila, both agree that food from the book is “a fun and important element.” Here is Rebekah’s food list for *All-of-a-Kind Family* by Sydney Taylor: broken crackers, pickles, boiled eggs, candied fruit, nuts, apples. When the girls choose the food, they also want to share in the food preparation. The other girls try to guess the snack as they read. Sometimes food allergies, preferences and restrictions can prevent food from the book, but less is sometimes more when it comes to snack choices. I remember making a single, huge apple stollen with Sophie for *Fig Pudding* by Ralph Fletcher.
- If interest in book club begins to wane, Sophie suggests “don’t force it beyond a certain age.” If a conventional meeting is not going to work, but the group wants to stay together, author readings, movies, plays or art shows may be the way to go.
- Plan your last meeting. Carleen organized Rebekah’s last one, “The Story of Our Book Club,” with questions about favourite

Sample Booklist

The Breadwinner by Deborah Ellis
A Single Shard by Linda Sue Parks
Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis
The Tale of Despereaux by Katie di Camillo
A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L’Engle
Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson
The Great Gilly Hopkins by Katherine Patterson
A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly
Underground to Canada by Barbara Smucker
The Maze by Monica Hughes
Running out of Time by Margaret Peterson Haddox
Life as we Knew It by Susan Pfeffer
A Thousand Days by Shannon Hale
Tangerine by Edward Brooks
Bat 6 by Virginia Euwer Wolff

books (see above), memories, our first meeting and plans for the future. We all brought one book we’d read as a group to get autographed by everyone else. This happened in the last month of Grade 12 for the youngest girls in that group (there were also girls there in first year university or gap year). As Darlene says, “the fact that our book club continued all those years is amazing.” Luciana remembers “how in awe we were” at our last meeting that “our daughters grew from young girls into the assertive young women they have become today.” Take a final group photo!

- Continue sharing books with your own daughter after the formal end of book club. Darlene learned that Julie “really enjoys stories, particularly historical ones” so now is “on the lookout” for titles that they might both enjoy. I am starting a travelling mother-daughter book club, where one copy of a book, with comments written in by each of us, travels around the world to my four daughters away and back again to me and my two girls at home. Our first book is the new play, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*.

Resources:

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- Odean, Kathleen. *Great Books for Girls*. New York: Ballantine, 1997.