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Reading each other

In book clubs, moms, girls are on same page

By **KAREN HERZOG**

kherzog@journalsentinel.com

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At a stage in life when mothers and daughters tend to drift apart, they can still meet on the same page once a month.

The mother-daughter book club, born in the 1990s, has come of age in the 2000s as an opportunity for moms and preteen and teenage girls to bond over books.

Club benefits go beyond the books.

"My daughter has these other mothers she knows in a context other than going to their house for pizza," said Connie Gavin of Whitefish Bay, who has been in a book club with her 17-year-old daughter, Catherine, for seven years.

"These are smart women and she respects and feels supported by them. We connect with each other's kids, and I really care about each one of them."

The moms have watched the daughters grow into young women who are starting their senior year of high school and planning futures of their own.

Once a month, in the pressure-free environment of a friend's living room with great munchies to fuel them, the girls discuss a book and share what's on their minds.

The moms listen, add their own observations and perspectives and gain insight into their daughters' world.

These book clubs can encourage discussions about sensitive topics - "things that might be embarrassing to bring up with your mom," said Cindy Hudson, who started the Web site www.motherdaughterbookclub.com earlier this year as a resource for hundreds of clubs across the country, and is in clubs with both of her daughters.

"If things happen to characters in a book, it provides an entrée," said Hudson of Portland, Ore.

"Conversations then morph into what my daughter or her friends are experiencing. So we start at the safe place of a character in a book, and sometimes, on the ride home from book club, we'll get into details of things my daughter wants to discuss more privately."

Hudson said her older daughter's group came of age when, in eighth grade, they read "Speak," by Laurie Halse Anderson - a book about a girl who is raped the summer before she starts high school.

"In our discussion, we found not that the girls were afraid of being raped, but they talked about how they would react differently from the character. They couldn't believe the character didn't tell her mom," Hudson said.

Some moms had balked at reading books with such mature themes, afraid their daughters either weren't ready or would be embarrassed by the discussion, Hudson said.

To the contrary, their 13-year-old daughters already were discussing mature topics with their friends and both needed and wanted to hear what their mothers thought.

Gavin recalled being concerned about a common theme in several of the earlier books her group tackled - girls growing up without a mother due to death or other extreme circumstances.

The daughters had a different take on absent mothers in novels.

"I think they had to have an excuse for the character not to have supervision or an authority figure so they could rise to a challenge and grow," said 17-year-old Maisie Buntin.

These girls have mothers with a strong presence in their lives. And the fun of book club, said Alison Huckenhahler, 17, is that the mothers have "very different" personalities, as do the daughters.

Several of the moms and the daughters already were friends before book club, but not all of them socialize beyond book club.

They all share a love for reading, said 17-year-old Karen Orlowski.

Even though they have busy lives as high school seniors, the daughters said they value their once-a-month gatherings with the moms.

"It sounds lame, but it's really cool," said Huckenhahler. "What you get out of it is so much more than what you put into it."

Orlowski said she is more comfortable with her friends' mothers because she has gotten to know them better through book club.

Mother-daughter book clubs are win-win opportunities, said Leslie Burger, of the American Library Association.

"We all know, based on education research, that kids who read perform better academically," Burger said. "If mothers and daughters are reading a book together, it's a great opportunity to set an example for how important reading is, and how enjoyable it is to share the story, the feelings, and what they learned with someone else."

Some of the best book themes?

Coming-of-age novels; novels with the perspective of women liberated from traditional roles, or girls

succeeding in male-dominated jobs; novels showing women in historical periods or different cultures; and novels with strong women protagonists, Burger said.

As mother-daughter book clubs carry them through the growing years, friendships naturally deepen, said Hudson.

Her oldest daughter's group - now high school juniors - have started planning a weekend get-away every year.

Over the summer, the mother-daughter book club rented a beach house near their homes in Oregon, prepared meals together, and of course, shared a good book.

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Start Your Own Group

Want to form your own mother-daughter book club? Here are some tips to get you started:

Six to eight mother-daughter pairs is a good number to keep discussions strong if not everyone can attend every month.

Set a regular day of the week, and week within the month, so everyone can plan around it. The Portland group reschedules if they can't get four of the six pairs to attend a gathering.

The daughters don't have to be close friends. The Portland group started with girls who knew and liked each other, but weren't necessarily school friends. They all read at similar reading levels, though.

"The depth of the book discussions make the friendships deeper as they get older," said Cindy Hudson, of the Portland group. While the Portland group started in fourth grade and the Whitefish Bay group started in fifth grade, some groups form as early as second grade.

Girls should have input about which books are read, and may take the lead in researching the author to share background with the group. Books shouldn't just be good; they should have good fodder for discussion. Some groups vote on the next book to read, while others ask the hosts to pick the book from a list the group compiles at the beginning of the year.

Groups meet in homes, library meeting rooms or other locations. Food can be simple or more elaborate, depending on the group's preference. Some books lend themselves to themed food. If a group meets for two hours, roughly one hour is devoted to discussing the book and the other hour is for socializing.

Appoint a leader for each book to keep the discussion going. But don't worry if there are pauses in the conversation. That's thinking time.

Read More

Following are helpful resources for starting book clubs and choosing discussable books:

Local librarian or book seller

www.motherdaughterbookclub.com

www.ala.org

www.booksense.com

"100 Books for Girls to Grow On" and "The Mother-Daughter Book Club" by Shireen Dodson

"Great Books for Girls" by Kathleen Odean