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BY LUCY PROBERT

The Parent Paper

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One of Maura Bariles favorite things about her job as a high school English teacher was discussing literature with her students. When she left teaching after becoming a mom, she missed the lively book discussions. So she set out to find a book club that let her not only read and pour over books, but also meet new people. "I had a newborn baby and felt isolated," she explains. "Although I belonged to a moms' group and met some great women there, we tend to get together with our kids and I thought it would be nice to be in a group where the primary focus wasn't our kids but ourselves." But finding the right book club wasn't as easy as this Ramsey mom of two thought it would be.

Online outreach

"I looked at libraries and bookstores because they tend to have book clubs, but either the books didn't interest me or the timing of the meetings just didn't fit my schedule with two young children, says Bariles. She decided to start her own book group, gathering members from an online meeting site. She put an ad on the Web site and now the group of about 25 regulars, dubbed Moms Night Out Book Group, meets monthly at a local Barnes & Noble on Rte. 17.

"We have all kinds of readers: newlyweds, moms with young kids, empty nesters and grandmothers. We have parents with adopted children and some with kids who have special needs." Finding members online has attracted readers from Bergen County as well as Rockland County readers who hail from Suffern and New City. Doing it this way has brought together such a wonderful and diverse group of women, says Barile. At their monthly meetings they have a casual discussion of the book where everybody has a chance to comment. "Most of us are moms and we often find that being a mother influences our reading and it's always interesting hearing everyone's take on the books, all coming from people who are in different places in their lives."

Through friends

Some feel more comfortable starting a group with people they already know, friends from their neighborhood, their kids' school, even friends of friends. When Joanne Nesi, from Old Tappan, joined her book group over two years ago, she already knew all of the members from her children's school. Even in this group of moms who are friends, there is diversity. "I am the only writer in the group," says Nesi. "So oftentimes I will talk about language use or craft issues, but we also have two members who are attorneys, who tend to be much more analytical. We even have a

pharmacist in our group, who helps us deal with medical issues." And although their discussions can occasionally get lively and heated, they always remain respectful and friendly, says Nesi. "Even though we all knew each other before, we're all very different and each of us brings a unique spin on books we read."

Running a group

One of the biggest challenges in running a successful book club meeting is getting the group to talk more about the book and less about their kids' second grade curriculum or their middle schoolers' principal. Gwendolen Gross, author of *The Other Mother*, Ridgewood resident and guest speaker to several book groups discussing her book, says there is nothing wrong with taking some time out of the meeting to catch up on the latest gossip. But then it's time to get down to book business. One of the best ways to do that, she says, is to take turns leading the discussion. And don't have the host for the evening be the leader, she's too distracted serving food and making everyone comfortable. Have the leader prepare in advance with questions for the group. Look for them in the back of the book or at the author or publishers Web site and remember to keep the discussion moving.

"Speaking from experience I can say that often book groups become either immersed in the minutiae of a book or they can't keep focused," says Gross. "One of the most organized book groups I attended had an egg timer to keep the discussions moving from person to person." She also recommends having a set time of maybe 20 minutes at the beginning and at the end of the meeting to get caught up on each other's lives.

Mother/daughter groups

If you're an avid reader, what better way to pass your love for books down to your children than to start a book group with them? Stacey Loscalzo, a language and literacy consultant from Ridgewood, started a book group last year with her 4-year old daughter and her friends. Because most of the girls were too young to read, they chose read-aloud chapter books for moms to read to their daughters. "What it does at this age is show the girls that their moms value reading and value spending the time to read to them," says Loscalzo. There are also reading comprehension strategies that can be used during the read aloud, like saying, "Gosh I wonder what will happen next?" or "What would you do in this situation?" Loscalzo also chose books for her group that are part of a series, like *Clementine* by Sara Pennypacker, which encourages the young reader to continue reading the next book. Their young group also loved *Gooney Bird Greene* by Lois Lowry. "We instructed each group of mothers and daughters to come to the meeting with a question and a favorite passage from the book, which gave each child a chance to be the star."

Cindy Hudson, author of *Book by Book: The Complete Guide to Creating Mother-Daughter Book Clubs*, is in book groups with both of her daughters. She thinks that during the teen years a mother/daughter book club can be a wonderful and effective way to discuss issues that may be awkward or difficult to address. "When my

daughter was in eighth grade she and her friends wanted us to read the book, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. The main character in the book was raped at a party and the moms felt that the girls were too young to talk about date rape," says Cindy. "But they told us that they were already worried about keeping themselves safe as they started to be more socially active, so reading this book really broke the ice for us and after that we weren't afraid to tackle any subject." Girls are questioning a lot of things around them during their teen years, she says, and they gain so much value from hearing their moms talk about their own experiences and perspectives. Books are a great way to tackle these issues.

Lucy Probert is a Bergen County writer and mom.

Here are a few choices that are guaranteed to liven up any book group discussion. *Lift* by Kelly Corrigan: The bestselling author of *The Middle Place* has written this book as a letter to her two young daughters "to put down on paper how things started with us, the things that I know about you that you don't even know about yourselves." This short read is chock full of talking points for moms, like witnessing a heartbreaking spinal tap performed on her daughter ("I stepped closer to the table, into the heart of our vehemence. Its one thing to know your child is in pain, its another to attend to it."); the death of a cousin's son and helping her unmarried friend make the decision to have a child on her own.

Loving Frank by Nancy Horan: The true story of Frank Lloyd Wright's lurid affair with a married woman who left her home and young children to be with him. This scandal of the early 20th century came to a tragic end because of her choices. Says Maura Barile, "This book resulted in one of our most amazing discussions. It's one of those books where being a mother really influences your reading. There were those who agreed with her decision to leave her family and those who were appalled by it."

Bad Mother by Ayelet Waldman: Waldman, already controversial for an essay she wrote a few years back in *The New York Times* confessing that she loved her husband more than her (five) children, hits back hard with her newest book, a series of essays on motherhood. This book is about the perils and joys of trying to be a decent mother in a world intent on making you feel like a bad one. Lots to talk about with this pick.

Others: *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, *Sarah's Key* by Tatiana de Rosnay, *Remarkable Creatures* by Tracy Chevalier and *A Reliable Wife* by Robert Goolrick. Bookmovement.com and Readinggroupchoices.com: These sites offer recommendations and reviews of books for reading groups. Indiebound.org run by independent booksellers has a running list of top reading book selections.

Is your bedside table starting to pile up with books you've promised yourself you'd read but probably never will? Have you stuffed the ones you have read in your already crowded bookshelf or in a box in the basement? Here are a few ways to trade your used books for ones you haven't read yet.

* Host a Book Swap Party: Find a book-loving friend with as many extra reads as you and host a party where each guest brings a pre-determined number of books (up to five). When guests arrive have them put their books on a table (or tables) set up to hold them all (20 guests, five books each equals 100 books). Each guest brings five books and goes home with five. Nice way to get rid of books you've read and get five new ones.

* Join Paperbackswap.com, a Web site that lets you swap books with thousands of other members. You list all of the books you want to get rid of, other members search for books they want to read and if they request your book you mail it to them. This gives you one credit to do the same with another member's book. Membership is free, you only pay for the postage to send your books to others.