

SummerFun&Learning

Starting a Parent-Child Book Club

By Melissa B. Stoller



Children build and erupt their own volcanoes after discussing 'Vacation Under the Volcano' by Mary Pope Osborne, the latest endeavor in their parent-child book club.

Three years ago, a friend and I started a parent-child book club. We participate in an adult book club, and wanted to create a similar, meaningful experience with our children. Through the years, our children continue to be thoughtful readers who delight in bonding over books. This summer may be the perfect time for you and your child to get started!

The Initial Logistics: Before starting your group, think about important details such as group size, age ranges, and coed versus single-sex groups. Next, pick the location and discuss scheduling issues. To avoid future complications, consider your group's expectations about attendance, requirements for finishing the books, and keeping the discussions focused.

Our group comprises: myself and my daughters Zoe (7) and Jessie (4), and my friend Marcy and her sons Max (7) and Steven (4). Once a month, during the school year, we alternate after-school meetings at our homes or at theme-related locations.

While a small group is ideal for us, a larger size might be more suitable for older children. We enjoy hearing different perspectives in our co-ed group, although single-sex groups allow readers to delve into books and issues most suited for that gender.

Choosing the Books: During our first year, we read poetry, picture books, and early chapter books. Now, we are reading *The Magic Tree House* series by Mary Pope Osborne (illustrated by Sal Murdocca), in which two children pursue adventures in exciting locations. These books spark discussions about topics including science, geography, and social studies. Research guides, written by Osborne and husband Will Osborne, supplement the topics. Additionally, we refer to atlases and other non-fiction resources.

Several books provide book selection guidance: *The Mother-Daughter Book Club* and *100 Books for Girls to Grow On* (Shireen Dodson); *Games with Books* (Peggy Kaye); *The Essential Guide to Children's Books and their Creators* (Anita Silvey, Editor); *The Barnes & Noble Guide to Children's Books* (Holly Rivlin and Michael Cavanaugh); *Great Books for Girls*, and *Great Books for Boys* (Kathleen Odean); and *Meet the Authors and Illustrators* (Deborah Kovacs and James Preller).

Also visit:

- www.randomhouse.com/magictreehouse
- www.ala.org/parents (links to Newbery, Caldecott, and Coretta Scott King books)
- www.nypl.org
- www.cbcbooks.org
- www.kidsreads.com
- www.enchantedlearning.com
- www.amazon.com
- www.bn.com
- www.nswagtc.org.au/info/books

Leading the Discussions: Marcy and I alternate book selection, leading the discussions, creating enrichment materials, and hosting the meetings. We ensure that everyone has a voice, and differing viewpoints are respected. This non-judgmental, non-confrontational setting fosters connections among friends, siblings, and adults.

We create writing booklets with questions to answer and discuss. Our specific questions revolve around plot, characters, and writing style, and we encourage philosophical debates. We often suggest acting out favorite scenes. General questions include: What is the most interesting situation? What information do you glean from the title and cover art? Does the story remind you about any personal experiences or another story? Did you like the solution the author proposed? What mental images did you form and what predictions did you make?

As part of our booklets, we include crossword puzzles or word searches, space for sketching, and theme-related stickers.

Enrichment Ideas: For each book, we create a related art project. When we read about gardening in *Frog and Toad Together* by Arnold Lobel, we painted flowerpots and planted seeds. With *My New York* by Kathy Jakobsen, we created maps highlighting our favorite New York spots. For *The Magic Tree House* books, we have painted horses; built dolphin models; laminated bookmarks; created outer space pictures, lion masks, rainforest magnets and origami animals; and erupted volcanoes.

We also take field trips to complement our discussions. The Museum of Natural History is a perfect setting for books about dinosaurs, woolly mammoths and other animals, volcanoes, and space exploration. The Central Park Zoo relates to Polar Bears and the rain forest, and we sketched in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Egyptian galleries.

The art projects and field trips allow our children to internalize the stories and become part of the literature. They interweave their own experiences and memories with the characters and plots, and thus make the stories their own.

Book Club Rituals: Each child maintains a folder containing book club materials. We start each meeting with a welcome song (a "toast" is appropriate for older children), and end with a goodbye song and sticker. Before our discussions, the children share a story they wrote or anything interesting. These rituals make the meetings special.

Our goal is to continue this parent-child book club until our children depart for college! Bonding through the magic of books enriches us all. ♦