

Book Club Encourages Parent-Child Discourse



Better communication was a goal when founding the Manasquan Mother Daughter Book Club in 2006, says Maribeth Pelly, 42 (left), whose daughter Zoe, 12, is a member. (*STAFF PHOTO: BRADLEY J. PENNER*)

When seven Manasquan mothers and their sixth-grade daughters discuss a book they've all been reading, the conversation is about far more than the story. They share their feelings and thoughts about the issues in the book and about life.

"The concept of having girls and moms read a book, have a discussion and relate it to their lives appealed to me. I wanted to be able to handle some of life's challenges in raising a girl, to be aware of issues and have an open communication with her," says Pelly, who patterned the group on a longtime club in town.

Seven mother-daughter teams belong to the ongoing group.

"When we started, the first couple of meetings were kind of boring," Zoe says. "All my mom did was talk about the book. I talked to my mom about how I felt. I said we did enough of that in school. I wanted to have an activity dealing with the book we could do together and a snack dealing with the book. We also made questions — me and my mom — for the girls."

The second year, other parents ran the discussions. Pelly and Zoe chose the books. Now, the girls choose the book for the club, which meets one night a month during the school year at the Manasquan Public Library. Books must meet certain criteria, says Pelly, who with her husband, Bill, 45, a math teacher, also has daughters Mia, 10, and Avi Mae, 8.

"They must have coming-of-age issues, such as dealing with friendship or trust and a girl character around their age," says Pelly, a marketing coach for small businesses.

Books have included "The Secret Language of Girls" by Frances O'Roark Dowell, "The Truth: I'm A Girl, I'm Smart and I Know Everything" by Dr. Barbara Becker Holstein — who spoke to the club — and "Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret" by Judy Blume.

"Next year, the topics will be more serious: Dating, making wise choices," Pelly says.

"They have to be discussion questions," Pelly says. " "Could you be friends with that character?" "

" "If you were in that situation, how would you handle it? " Zoe says. "Someone may have a personal story that relates to it, and it builds from there. Sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's sad."

Members sit in a "circle of trust" while talking.

"What's said in the circle stays in the circle," Zoe says.

"My personal goal is to ignite conversations and topics that wouldn't necessarily come up at home," Pelly says.

"A lot of kids don't feel comfortable talking to their friends about things such as bullying or what to do when your friends change as you're growing up," says Kathy Liskoff, 46, who attends with her daughter Michelle, 11. "Maribeth is a great facilitator. If there's an important topic in a book, she'll ask questions so we can get the girls' opinions on how to deal with it. That's important.

"The club has definitely taught Michelle to feel more comfortable talking about adolescent issues with other children and with me."

"I'm not really at ease talking in front of people. But after doing it at the book club, I realized it's not a big deal," Michelle says.

"In a test, when they ask you a question, or in a general discussion about a book in class, I express myself better because of the club," Zoe adds.

The girls also are reading more on their own.

"Before I joined the club, I was reading only a couple of books. Now, I'm really into it," Michelle says.

Friendships have formed too, and there's one more bonus.

"Instead of just having a book club, we bond with our mothers more," Zoe says.