

START YOUR OWN MOTHER-DAUGHTER BOOK CLUB

(There are three major headings, in yellow. The second one is broken down into three subheadings, in blue. Beneath all colored headings and subheadings are the sections, in bold. Because there is so much text, I like the idea of only showing the headings, subheadings and sections, and each section is a click that reveals the one or two paragraph content for that section.)

Why Form a Mother-Daughter Book Club?

We Need Small Villages

Mother-daughter book clubs are not only a vehicle for sharing the enjoyment of reading, but they also act as small villages where women can collectively support girls and model healthy femininity for them. Mother-daughter book clubs provide these girl-friendly smaller villages, and in some ways are emotionally safer than school and sometimes even home. They can really be the small, intimate groups where girls experience a measured amount of communal upbringing that is sorely absent in today's world.

Clubs Can Meet a Wide Range of Goals

If you talk to people who have been in mother-daughter book clubs and if you read about them as well, you will quickly see that there are many reasons for forming them, and also many reasons for staying in them over time. Some examples of clubs with differing missions include:

- Providing more challenging books for strong readers
- Providing additional practice for weaker readers
- Building strong emotional bonds with daughters
- Social opportunities for mothers
- Social opportunities for girls
- Addressing important aspects of family life, such as imparting religious or other particular values, racial identity, or an appreciation for art or music
- Helping girls become more confident by providing a safe place for them to express their opinions and use their intelligence, apart from the environment of school where some girls dumb themselves down

Her Next Chapter will help you form and run a specific kind of mother-daughter book club that teaches mothers how to help daughters prepare for—and proactively address—the challenges facing girls and women today. The goal is to raise girls who are more confident as young women in a culture that makes many girls and women feel

insecure and powerless—about their looks and abilities and future roles. With the tools you gain from this book, you will be able to instill in your daughters a greater sense of agency about their own lives, and this will lead to girls who are more resilient and more driven to reach their fullest potential.

Clubs Help Moms and Girls Navigate the “Terrible Teens” and Other Clichés

We spend a lot of time in our culture talking about strategies for dealing with the “turbulent teenage years,” but the reality is that, these days, girls are ducking arrows on the frontlines of girl culture *way* before adolescence, and ten is the new fourteen in some respects. *Both* mothers and daughters can learn how to push back against some of these pressures. The most exciting and perhaps most transformative part of this process is that mothers and daughters *do* things within mother-daughter clubs that help them *be* things together as females, while maintaining their separate roles.

Clubs Help Mothers and Daughters See Each Other as Individuals

When Charlotte and I first started our club, I recall being pleasantly surprised by the way I got to know the other mothers and daughters so differently, and so much more intimately, within the context of our club over the years. I even saw a different side of my own child, and she’d probably say the same about me.

During the years of our club, the girls each got so much time to speak—about the books, about school, and about their lives—that all of the mothers came to see them as wonderfully evolving individuals, not merely as the little girls they were during the early play date years. Of course, part of this was that they were growing up! But much of it was that they were able to show us—and each other—who they really were as human beings within the comfortable haven of our club. Watching these girls find their voices as young women was extremely rewarding.

Clubs Are a Support Group for Moms

Although much of the focus of *Her Next Chapter* is on what mother-daughter book clubs can do for girls, I can’t stress enough how much these clubs can do for mothers as well. Raising kids today is hard, and raising girls comes with its own unique set of challenges for mothers. The learning from other trusted and respected mothers is perhaps one of the least discussed but most important benefits to a mother-daughter book club today.

Mothers need to seek less validation for their parenting decisions, to judge each other less, and to find more ways of forming genuine connections with other women who sincerely want to be their allies, not their “mompeters.” Mother-daughter book clubs are a way to sidestep some of these distractions and instead listen closely to other chosen mothers that you trust. Mother-daughter book clubs are not only a way for girls to find their inner voices, but for mothers to do the same.

Clubs Can Make Difficult Conversations Fun

There really is a way to talk to girls about uncomfortable topics in a reasonably painless way. At the very least, you can spread the pain around a bit in a mother-daughter book club!

Learning how to use books, movies, and other audiovisual media as tongs to pick up and examine difficult topics is central to *Her Next Chapter*. And there is strength in numbers. There were certain topics I found difficult to address with Charlotte, but they were not always the same ones the other mothers in the group struggled with. By approaching them collectively, different mothers can take the lead when they are in their comfort zone, and be followers when they are not.

So where does the fun part come in? It comes in through all of the usual ways—the pizza for dinner, the special alone time with mom, the weekend getaways, the unique sense of social belonging that comes from being a club, the special club activities and field trips, and the simple joy of reading and discussing books or movies. But it also comes from the shared and mutually understood task of talking about, you know, girl stuff!

Getting Started

Starting a mother-daughter book club actually begins long before your daughter is at an age where she is reading chapter books, browsing library shelves, or mulling over which friends to invite. It begins by raising a reader who will one day be excited by (or at least amenable to) the idea of forming such a club at all.

Her Next Chapter offers many tips on how to help your girls *love* reading. By the time you start your club—or even well after—they will learn to feel the magic, and books will remain an important connection between you for a lifetime. Once you and your book-loving daughter have decided to start a club, you'll need to think about next steps so that you can give your group the strongest foundation possible, ironing out as many details up front as you can before your much-anticipated first meeting. It is easier to discuss the issues—from the simplest logistical decisions to the most deeply philosophical ones—when all mothers have the same information as their foundation. Therefore, this book should be read by all of the mothers in a club.

Get Ready

Who Will Lead?

I wanted a partner. I felt that reaching out first to one other mom would allow me to test the waters, see if she agreed the club was a good idea, and remove any appearance of me being the sole creator and manager of any club we might start. This worked beautifully. We had coffee and discussed everything from philosophy to practical matters, agreeing on almost everything, including the optimal size for the club and who else to invite. As we moved forward, we did so together, until we achieved a cohesive

group of five mother-daughter pairs who were then charting our mutual course by consensus.

There are plenty of other ways to start—on one mother’s initiative, or more than two. But whatever you do, be mindful of the fact that however you start, you will be proposing an activity that others must buy into for years. Making the process as democratic and thorough as possible will serve all of you best in the long run.

What Is an Ideal Club Size?

It’s important to place this question in proper context. Enjoyable book clubs can be as small as three pairs, or much larger, but given the mission of a mother-daughter book club that will be exploring challenging issues affecting girls and women, a smaller, more intimate environment is best, so a club of three to five pairs is probably perfect. Six to ten members should be enough to stimulate discussion, but not so many as to intimidate quieter members or compromise privacy or emotional safety.

There is also the practical challenge of hosting big clubs. They tend to need to meet in large communal spaces like schools or libraries because most families do not have big enough living rooms for large groups to sit comfortably. Big rooms in community buildings do not usually feel cozy, and are often not even remotely private, which can have a chilling effect on discussion.

Whom to Invite?

This consideration is important for any mother-daughter book club, but especially for one with our particular mission. For starters, it is most crucial to choose mothers who are socially compatible and who share values. Relationships between young girls can change at any moment, so the relationships between the moms are the “glue” that holds the club together over time. If the mothers are on the same page about the purpose of the club and how to pursue it, the club will thrive. If the mothers are in agreement from the beginning about discussing difficult topics directly, there is less likelihood of conflict down the road.

After coming up with a list of potentially well-matched moms, then consider the daughters. In some clubs the mothers and daughters all know each other. In others, there can be any combination of mothers and/or daughters who are already acquainted, are good friends, or have never even met. Anything can work as long as you begin with very frank discussions about what the moms want to get out of the club for their daughters and themselves, and how they fundamentally view the world. Secondarily, it helps if the girls like each other or are neutral or have never met, but avoid creating a club that has girls who are known not to care for each other or are known to have direct conflicts. Girls can go to the same or different schools. They should be close in age for a club with this theme.

What Is the Right Age for the Girls in the Club?

Although I have heard of clubs starting when girls were still reading picture books, I think the optimal time to start one is when the girls are reading short chapter books, which is typically around age eight or third grade. You can certainly start them

later, and if you start them earlier, the girls will eventually be able to read the kinds of books that really lend themselves to discussion. For the purpose of this particularly themed mother-daughter book club, I recommend beginning at age eight or older because this is also the age at which girls are able to understand and contribute to conversations about the challenges they face as females.

What About the Reading Levels of the Girls?

When starting our own club, this is a question about which we probably did not make the right judgment call, and that was because we wanted the club to be inclusive of different kinds of readers, because that seemed good and right. Also, when the girls we invited were in third grade, there were differences in their reading abilities, but who knew if these would persist or change over time? We started out dealing with the disparity by compromising and choosing books “in the middle.” What that did was frustrate the one weaker reader *and* the four stronger readers. Eventually, the weaker reader dropped out. I have concluded that to the degree possible, it is best if the girls of the club read on roughly the same level, regardless of what that level is. All girls should be able to feel relaxed, happy and good about themselves when they are in a mother-daughter book club.

Get Set

How Often Should Clubs Meet? When, Where, and for How Long?

The frequency of your meetings is of course each club’s choice, but what worked for ours were monthly meetings during the school year, with summers off. That allowed the right amount of time to read each book and plan for meetings. More frequent meetings would have been too much work and would have conflicted with the many other commitments each family had to juggle; less frequent meetings would have detracted from the cohesion of the group.

Meeting in members’ homes or apartments rather than public places provides intimacy and emotional safety, however there are some public spaces where members can have privacy and not have to take turns hosting if that is more desirable. Whatever you choose to do, try to pick a schedule and routine that everyone feels they can commit to. Take my word for it: you will want to avoid rescheduling missed book club meetings. When several families are involved, getting disparate schedules to align can prove tricky. You can always try something out; if you find it is not working, try something else.

Have a Moms’ Organizational Meeting

One of the reasons our club started out so well is that the mothers made the time to thoroughly discuss all of the issues we could anticipate before including the girls and having our first official meeting as a mother-daughter book club. Of course there were ongoing conversations throughout the years about whatever came up as the girls got older, but we built a foundation that greatly benefitted us in the long term.

In addition to making sure we were as ideologically aligned as possible, one of the other helpful things we did was to collect our thoughts about what guidelines we

wanted for our club, *before* bringing the girls in on that discussion. And you do need to eventually bring the girls in on that discussion if you want buy-in. Some of the guidelines that our club adopted included:

- Striving to make the club not feel like school.
- Always reading the book.
- Not allowing siblings at meetings—reserving them as special mother-daughter time. Fathers, other relatives or sitters took care of any siblings one Friday evening per month.
- Requesting that mothers and daughters attend meetings together as much as possible. When one was sick or otherwise unable to make a meeting, it was fine for the other to come solo so that the meeting did not have to be rescheduled.
- Not allowing other adults (e.g. fathers, babysitters) to accompany girls to meetings.
- Discussing with the girls the importance of confidentiality, not bragging about the club at school and not appearing cliquey.
- Agreeing in advance on a process for deciding whether/how to replace any members who drop out.
- Committing to starting and ending meetings on time.
- Scheduling meeting dates and the rotation of hosting duties at the beginning of the school year for the whole year, so everyone could plan ahead.

Choosing Your Monthly Books and Movies

We've all heard the saying, *So many books, so little time*. Nothing could be more apropos for describing how hard it was to select books (and movies and media) to recommend in *Her Next Chapter*. My recommendations may well suffice, but mothers should feel free to explore all of the resources out there when selecting books or movies for their clubs. There are entire books written about how to select good girl-centric literature. There are also some excellent websites devoted to both books and movies that are recommended for girls. I list some of these helpful resources in an appendix at the end of the book.

How to Assess Age Appropriateness of Books and Movies

This is something I discuss at some length in *Her Next Chapter*, and it is difficult to summarize here. Mothers in a book club will not always agree, and there are ways to work through disagreement that I explain in the book. I do advocate for not shielding girls from all sex and violence, especially after elementary school. They need to be able to process certain realities of our world, and will face them eventually—with or without us present. I think it's best that girls experience some thoughtfully chosen mature content with their mothers first, because this way they will have support and guidance, and will be able to filter what they read or view through their mothers' values. If they are confused or worried, their mothers will be there to answer questions and provide reassurance.

How Should the Questions and Prompts Be Used?

Just as it helps new teachers to create and follow detailed lesson plans, it helps the mothers of a new mother-daughter book club to have plenty of sample questions and discussion pointers at their fingertips to use for as many or as few months as they choose. If your club feels this guidance is helpful, there are enough discussion questions offered in *Her Next Chapter* to allow a club to meet monthly for up to twenty-four months without having to plan any of your own discussions.

Don't worry if you only get to three or one or none of the questions supplied in the guides within the book. They are there to help you, but sometimes discussions take an unexpected turn, and it's best to go with it if it feels productive. Some of the most magical moments in our own book club happened when a question on the list led to a related conversation that took on a life of its own. If the conversation is interesting and the daughters are enjoying it and you can feel your bonds being strengthened, just go with it! You can always loop back to questions on the list later, or even individually between mother-daughter pairs on the car ride home or at some other time.

Can Moms and Daughters Create Their Own Discussion Questions?

Some mothers and daughters may never feel comfortable creating their own discussion questions. Some may come to feel comfortable after a few meetings. Some may feel comfortable from the start. There are no rules about it. However, if you hope to stay together for a long time and choose other books from the recommendation lists at the end of *Her Next Chapter* or from elsewhere, you will have to think about ways of planning a discussion. A good way to get started with using your own questions is to use some of mine, and add some of your own, and see how the mix-and-match goes!

It's also OK to go completely off-script. If mothers thoroughly read and understand the issues articulated in *Her Next Chapter*, they will be much better equipped to guide club discussions on their own terms or to even veer off into discussions about society in general or the real lives of the girls, related or unrelated to any of the recommended books. This is what teaching media literacy is all about—understanding each challenge faced by girls and women, and teaching girls to deconstruct the disempowering messages that are harmful to their self-esteem. The books and movies and media recommendations—and the discussion questions that go with some of the books and movies—are *tools*. Use them as you see fit. If you ground yourself in a solid understanding of the issues so that you are prepared to answer daughters' questions, the rest will follow.

How Should Mothers and Daughters Use the Media Suggestions?

I love the power of Internet media when it is used for good and not evil! Sometimes the message packed into a two- or three-minute video is unequaled by anything you'd spend two hours watching or ten hours reading. Obviously, we're all interested in powerful *positive* media for girls.

Included in *Her Next Chapter* are videos that further educate mothers and daughters. Mothers should preview all media recommendations first to determine which ones they feel are appropriate for their daughters, and at what ages. These videos can be viewed together as a whole club, at home by mother-daughter pairs as desired, or individually by mothers. They are sure to provoke very interesting conversations!

Go!

First Meeting Icebreakers

We started our first gathering with dinner, as would be our custom, and then played some icebreaking games. You can find many different ones to choose from online or in books, but here's what we did:

1. We had each mother interview her own daughter, and vice-versa. The interview questions were pretty straightforward, but there was still a lot of giggling—"Hey mom, I'm *interviewing* you!" The questions we used were: *What is your favorite book? Who is your favorite author? What is your favorite genre of book to read? What are you looking forward to about being in this reading group? What else would you like everyone to know about you?* To this day I have saved the girls' adorable handwritten answers to the interviews of their mothers, as well as the mothers' written answers given by their daughters. Once all of the interviewing was done, each member "introduced" her mother/daughter to the group by reading the answers to the questions. Very nonthreatening and simple!
2. Next we played a game called "Two Truths and a Lie," where each member wrote down two things that had really happened to her and one that hadn't, striving to recall two amazing truths and inventing one believable falsehood. This was another way to share information about ourselves using the vehicle of a fun and quirky game. I recently came upon my pages and Charlotte's. Charlotte's statements were: *1. I once swung over the bar of my swing set. 2. My favorite meal is mussels marinara. 3. When I went to London, I saw the Queen.* Number one was the lie. Mine were: *1. I used to work in a planetarium. At night I showed visitors the moon and stars through the big telescope in the observatory, and during the day I showed them sunspots. 2. I once jumped out of a plane with a parachute. 3. I met a former President of the United States when I was a little girl and he sat down with me to talk about my favorite books.* Any guesses? Number two was the lie, and number three is an awesome story!

Get Down to Business

After everyone was warmed up, we covered the following items of business, but you may tailor yours to the needs of your own club:

- The selection process for books.
- The meeting schedule.
- The importance of commitment (reading the books, coming prepared to discuss, trying not to miss meetings, etc.)

- Our commitment to making this club fun and not like school...not to insinuate school is not fun! (They got it.)
- Reminding the girls not to brag about the club at school, since that might hurt other girls' feelings.
- Soliciting their input on how we can have book discussions that everyone enjoys, where everyone gets a fair turn to speak, where no one talks too much, etc. They had great ideas!
- As we wrapped up, the moms announced what the first book would be that we'd all be reading during the next month, and the home where the first official book club discussion would take place.

Subsequent Meetings: Tips for Having Fun, Productive Discussions

I have a theory about teaching people how to lead book discussions, and it's the same as my theory about coaching people to speak in public: if you overwhelm someone with too many things she must remember and hold at the front of her brain while executing the task, she will be more anxious and less effective. So here are just a few of the most helpful pointers, which are explained in detail within the book:

- Remember that your role is to facilitate.
- Discourage literary debates between the moms..
- When possible and relevant, ask questions that help the girls pivot from discussing the characters in the book or movie to talking about their own experiences.
- Encourage turn taking among the girls.
- If a girl is not speaking, ask her if she would like a turn, but do not press her if she has chosen not to speak.
- Model comfort with silence.

Running Smoothly

Over time, as the girls in the club get older and family lives change, there are sometimes steps that mothers need to take to keep the club enjoyable and help it remain a priority. By anticipating and communicating about some common growing pains, clubs can stay strong and last for years.

When Family Lives Change

We are all familiar with the notion that tasks and responsibilities tend to get added to our plates, but never removed. Life just has a way of feeling busier every year. Just a few of the issues you might face include:

- Increasing homework demands
- Girls taking on more extracurricular activities
- Girls pursuing separate and busier social lives outside the club

- Mothers also needing to spend increasing time supporting the interests and activities of other children in the family
- Mothers going back to work or working more hours
- Mothers and/or girls wanting to re-prioritize their commitments

There are also bigger challenges than busy lives that can sometimes be faced by the members of a mother-daughter book club. There can be serious illness, death, job loss, or divorce. Even happy milestones like the birth of a new baby can shake things up. How each club collectively weathers these life events will differ, and I give tips for dealing with these challenges in *Her Next Chapter*. The way clubs can function as support groups for the moms can feel like a port in the storm when one is most needed. And when mothers help each other out, they model that for their daughters.

What to Do When Girls Have Social Conflicts

Because mother-daughter book clubs exist within, not outside, the real world of girlhood, there is always the possibility of conflicts or even girl-on-girl bullying. During the planning phase, discuss this between the mothers, making sure everyone is on board with the understanding that *any one* of the daughters could be a bully or be bullied. No girls are somehow immune to either of these roles, despite what excellent moms you are! Be explicit in setting expectations for kindness, and talk in advance about how you would handle any bullying if it occurs. *Expect* social conflict between the girls. If it doesn't happen, that's terrific. If it does, you'll be better prepared to see the truth and deal with it right away.

Moms Don't Always Agree Either: How to Get Unstuck

A mother-daughter book club can be a very intimate experience. The sharing of lives may extend well beyond group reading and into the private details and relationships between mothers and daughters, daughters as friends, mothers as friends, and even marital and other relationships within and between each family. There are no substantive human relationships that are completely devoid of conflict, and conflict can be healthy.

When book club mothers disagree, a few of the most common sources of conflict include:

- Frustration resulting from members not following the agreed-upon guidelines for participation in the club, such as when one pair misses too many meetings, or one member consistently does not do or finish the reading
- Difficulty agreeing on books and movies, often related to maturity of content
- Differences that arise between moms during discussions that veer onto subjects like religion or politics
- Events outside of the club that spill into the club, such as quarrels between girls at school, causing mothers to feel upset at each other's daughters or directly at each other

- Some type of life stressor affecting a mom or daughter and intruding excessively into club meeting time

Choosing members at the outset who share similar values cuts down on how often disagreement happens, but when it does, moms need to articulate their concerns and members need to really listen to opposing views and try to either come to consensus, or agree to disagree and to alternate outcomes, so that no mother feels or experiences that her wishes are never considered.

What Should You Do If Members Quit?

I know of very few clubs that have not faced this challenge. No matter how committed everyone is at the beginning, over the years lives and circumstances change, and even the most solid club is likely to lose one or more mother-daughter pairs along the way. The most common reasons members quit include:

- Moving
- Being too busy
- Reshuffling priorities
- Being unhappy in the club

In *Her Next Chapter* I outline how to think about various paths forward when members quit. Our club dealt with it, and we still had six great years together that changed those girls' lives for the better. I know that it also changed mine for the better. Invest time and energy in your club, do what you can to keep it together, and when the time comes for it to end, whenever that is, think about what you gained. You'll be surprised by how much!

How to Incorporate New Ideas and Activities That Will Reenergize Your Club

There are many things you can do to ensure your club is fun and exciting and remains that way over time. None of this guarantees that pairs won't quit, or that your club will never come to a premature end, but clubs tend to last longer when members find ways to spend more time together, to enjoy special experiences outside of the meetings, and to add creative elements to the meetings themselves. All of this needs to be balanced in terms of how much time mothers and daughters have to devote to the club when it may be only one of many other adult or child commitments. If clubs are *too* time intensive, some members may be driven away. It makes sense for clubs to consider the different ways in which they can enhance their time together and then to pick and choose a small number of options that appeal to everyone. I list several tried-and-true ideas in *Her Next Chapter*.

There are so many ways of keeping your club interesting and fun, and not letting it get stale. Seek feedback periodically from both moms and daughters about what is working and what is not, and what ideas they may have for spicing things up. Simply having this conversation will lead to any necessary changes that further improve your experience together.

