

new word order



of his own misfortune Andy Stanton hangs with the kids

Not just grown-ups who run book groups – children as young as eight are getting in there to discuss their favourite authors. **Anne Phillips** spends time with a junior literary critics

Book groups for adults are a well-established norm but you may not be aware that children are also in on the act. Children's book groups have been running for many years. Anne of 'Teletubbies' fame, set up The Federation of Children's Book Groups in 1968 to encourage her own children to read. Currently there are approximately 25 affiliated FCBG groups, and many others run through the large Chatterbooks scheme in schools or independently by parents and children. The good news, as says Wilson Fletcher, project director for the 2008 National Year of Reading, is that 'unlike adult book groups, children don't need a bottle of wine to talk about books.' 'I'm reading for book group more than at school,' says Phoebe, aged ten. The London group meets every six weeks; each child is

accompanied by a parent. Whoever hosts the group chooses the book and plans a discussion and activity around it. 'You get to read books that you might not normally pick up,' adds Henry, nine. Gita Croft, a parent, agrees: 'Naomi really enjoys the group and it has given her the opportunity to read books that she wouldn't have chosen for herself.' Alcohol aside, the difference between a children's book group and its adult equivalent is that the key to a successful session can lie in the related activities, which are used as a means to enhance

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the book. 'They also contribute to making the group gel,' parent Cynthia Rouso points out.

When the group read 'Moon Man' by David Donohue, a treasure hunt with clues written backwards and stuck on

pictures of the moon landing, was a great success. Cooking, art, quizzes and making spy notebooks are further examples of activities that work well. All six children feel strongly that this is what they particularly enjoy about their book group but add that having an author come to speak also makes it special. Some authors will charge to visit a group; others may not. But new groups, if affiliated to the FCBG, are eligible to apply for a grant, up to £250, that could cover this.

One of the children wrote to his favourite author Andy Stanton, who writes the popular Mr Gum books, just prior to Stanton winning the 2007 Red House Children's Book Award and invited him along to a group. Joining in with their activities, he was generous with his time, staying long enough for the children to find out why he was kicked out of Oxford University (it was too little work in his first year that did it).

As with adult book clubs, the choice of book is crucial. 'Aviv loves it when it's his turn to host and feels very passionate about the books he chooses,' says parent Dina Shiloh. But finding the right book to read can pose a challenge. 'It can be hard to find something that people will like,' says Noah, nine. 'It needs to appeal to both boys and girls as well as lending

itself to a fun activity,' adds Croft. Occasionally getting hold of a particular book can be a bit of a scramble. Single difficult-to-obtain copies of both 'The Empty Envelope' by Ron Roy and Enid Blyton's 'Look Out Secret Seven' had to be circulated to three children within 24 hours for a last-minute, pre-book-group read.

Although Richard and Judy have influenced adult reading group's choices, their impact seems minimal on the younger age range, even with the airing of the first Richard and Judy Children's Book Club last autumn. 'I don't think R&J has influenced the group much; we've only read one book from the list,' comments Rouso. Sometimes it is the books that the children have enjoyed the least that have provoked the most criticism and the lengthiest discussions.

Certainly the parent/child balance gives the group a different focus from their adult counterparts but the children also cite the socialising element as a source of enjoyment. And the addition of the activities 'makes it even more fun,' says Abbi, nine. Next time an adult book group reads 'The Shadow of the Wind' perhaps they should consider racing round the house, clue in one hand, chardonnay in the other.

A new leaf

Tips for setting up your own children's book group:

The children don't need to be keen readers but should be **open-minded** about new authors or genres.

Choose books carefully and **try a variety of texts**. Good titles to start with are 'Skellig' by David Almond and, for younger readers, 'Fergus Crane' by Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell.

Keep the group small. Six to eight children, aged eight upwards, is ideal. Meet regularly, **every four to six weeks** for an hour and a half. The hosts should supply the food.

Once your group's gelled, think about **inviting an author along**.

Websites that will be of use include **The Federation of Children's Book Groups** (fcbg.org.uk) and **Chatterbooks** (www.readingagency.org.uk)

timeout.com/london/kids