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The First Rule of Book Club Is ...

Standing on the corner of Lexington Avenue, buses whirring by, children storming the schoolhouse, a friend and I were doing the normal post-drop-off mom chitchat – this time comparing notes about what our kids were reading. Our third-graders’ homework included at least thirty minutes of “independent reading” a day, and it was hard to keep them flush with good, solid books. In that rather bleary moment, we planned a simple book-swap to shore up our own deficiencies. Little did we know the wonderful places this inspiration would take our sons and us.

I am a big believer in tea parties, and will use just about any event as an excuse to pull one out of a hat. Stubbed your toe? Let’s find the chamomile! Want to exchange books with your friends? Fetch me some scones!

Tea parties are not just for girls, my friends. Boys love them too.



So I invited a posse of them for a “fancy tea party” (is there any other kind?) and book exchange. It was particularly satisfying to take the boys on their maiden voyage into clotted cream. “What is this stuff?” one boy marveled. “It’s so creamy and delicious.” Of all the herbal teas I served that day, the boys were most drawn to “relaxation” blend – a subtle combination of lavender, lemon and chamomile.

Apparently, after a long day at school, these third-graders really needed to decompress.

No one broke any of the mismatched teacups my mom has collected for me at flea markets and dusty antique shops over the last twenty years. But if one had broken, it would have been worth it, just to have seen the boys acting fancy (pinkies out), while still sporting cupcake crumbs all over their faces.

The best was still to come; the tea party merely set the stage for the drama of the main event. We had asked each boy to bring five of his very favorite books to share. I found [library supplies on Amazon](#) (apologies, Hachette), and the boys took great care in affixing card pockets, creating library cards and stamping due dates into their books. They claimed spots around the apartment to display their wares in enticing patterns.

Then began “the sell.” Without any prompting from the grown-ups (who were mostly drinking their own highly-caffeinated, anti-relaxation tea at this point and chowing down on scone crumbs the boys left behind), the kids instinctively turned into a team of Goodreads

reviewers, each trying to outdo the other with spirited descriptions of their books, some of which bordered on book bullying. “Take this one, or you’ll be sorry.” “If you liked *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, you’re ready for *Nicholas*; it’s even funnier.” “My mom made me bring that book.” (Enough said.) *The Pushcart War* did not sell well (bad cover), despite vigorous marketing by its owner and the word war in the title. But *Snow Treasure* was popular because its peddler heavily plugged the war, danger and sledding angles – all winning themes with eight- and nine-year-old boys. (In fact, there should be more books about sledding and war.)

Our living room quickly looked like the Book Expo at the Jacob Javits Center – lots of frenzied connection-making, lots of amped-up book pitches. And equally loud. Let me repeat over the buzz: LOUD.



It got LOUDER still when my son’s cache of toy guns, light sabers and wood swords and shields was discovered hiding behind his bed. (Thanks a lot, grandparents and “fun” uncle, for those items.) Our book expo quickly devolved into a sweaty battlefield with chase scenes and treacherous plots that, I am quite sure, will endure as the most vivid memory of the day for all the boys. We moms are still trying to blot it out.

As I collected swords at the door and handed boys their piles of books, one child asked, “Can we come back and do this again next week?” Another said, “So when’s the next book club?” Then there was a chorus of “Yeah, when’s the next book club?”

Book club? Who said anything about a book club? I hadn’t planned on a next time. (It would take my downstairs neighbors and me weeks to recover from this one.) But the boys were right. A book club was born, all from its own spark.

Since that day, the boys have consumed copious quantities of sugar-laced tea, doctored their own versions of *The Polite Elephant* after reading *Battle Bunny*, gone on book-inspired father-son hikes, recited poetry on mountain tops, drawn cartoons, done *Lightning Thief* scavenger hunts in the Met, and sampled lozenges that tasted like sadness (just to see what the ones in Kate DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn Dixie* were all about). They have become a team. They have each other’s backs. But they also fight and make up. They debate important topics like should we all have to eat gluten-free cupcakes just because one of us is allergic? They laugh like crazy and undermine the parents’ attempts at seriousness at every turn. They dream and imagine and play. And all this is done within and alongside the magic of books.

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Check back on the [MeeGenius Blog](#) for more book club ideas in the future. In the meantime, here are a few things I've learned along the way about boys' book groups:

Assembling the Group

- Every group needs a parent leader to make sure meetings get scheduled. Book club is an easy ball to drop if responsibility for it floats from parent to parent.
- Six to seven kids is a good number. Larger than that, and prepare for some crazy times. The intimacy of the group is meaningful. But, if it's too small, one sick child derails the meeting.
- Pick kids whose parents read and will be dedicated to the enterprise. You will need them to contribute inspiring snacks and ideas, chaperone trips, host meetings, make sure their kids read and attend. But ixnay on the excessively serious parents who see book club as an academic opportunity, a potential college essay or an SAT vocab prep session.
- Pay attention to homework schedule. Don't schedule a meeting or a long book the same week as a school project, play or test.

Picking the Books

- Be creative and fun when it comes to what you read. Book club is the perfect time to play/experiment/get naughty. Mix great literature in with short books, comic books, single poems, song books, irreverent books, books about MineCraft. Our next "read" is Andrew Knapp's wonderful photography collection, [Find Momo](#). It's like *Where's Waldo?* – except the reader gets to search all sorts of interesting, witty and intriguing real-life settings for Knapp's irresistible border collie.
- Know that the book is amazing before making the kids read it. Nothing worse than a dud at book club.



What to Do in the Meetings

- Do not expect the kids to discuss books the way you would at your grown-up club. Stay away from words like "themes," "character development" and the book's "central conflict." Way too much like school. Don't kill reading for these little ones.

If you happen to get a few minutes of book chat out of them over tea (or pizza if that's more your thing), you're ahead of the game.

- Always have a fun activity planned. The next project our group will tackle is bringing stuffed animals to Central Park, hiding them in various tricky spots, photographing them on parents' cell-phones and creating our own ***Find Momo***.
- There will definitely be mention of private parts, bodily functions and scatological humor at every meeting. Go with the flow. No need to send anyone to the principal's office.
- Give the kids ownership: let them pick the next activity or book. Let them do the talking at the meeting. You might have a grab bag of discussion questions prepared on notecards, to get the ball rolling. But let the kids pull the questions out of the bag and read them aloud to one another.

Tea Party Tips

- Tea sandwiches can be cut into all sorts of shapes relevant to the book at hand. Use extra-thin bread and [metal cookie-cutters](#).
- Whether it's cubes or lumps or loose, tea parties are always better with lots of sugar options. [Rock candy swizzle sticks](#) are always a hit.

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