How to Engage Your Teens with Books

A Homeschooler’s Guide to Reading with Teens

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How to Engage Your Teens with Books – A Homeschooler’s Guide to Reading with Teens & the Talking Points List

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Permission granted to use The Talking Points list for your family. Please do not email it to others. Refer them back to this post for their own copy.
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Introduction

If you are homeschooling teenagers, then you know it’s important to check in and have discussions along the way. So much of what our teens are learning involves understanding their world and their place in it and being able to articulate their beliefs. Books are an excellent way to connect with our teens, but how do you do it effectively? How do you work with a teen who doesn’t like to read? How can you discuss a book if you don’t have the time to read it too? This eBook takes a look at how to use books and book discussions as a tool for homeschooling high school. My goal is to make book discussions with teens accessible to all parents regardless of reading background and family situation. Most importantly, I will share some practical ideas for facilitating discussions within the context of a busy homeschool.

How to Choose Books for Teens

You don’t have to have a specific method for choosing books, but it is helpful to keep things moving. Other sections of this book deal with resources for books and teens along with helpful strategies and other posts at Blog, She Wrote. Here are just a few general ideas:

- **University Book Lists**– Many colleges and universities have a list of books they expect incoming freshman to have read. In fact, some schools require a book list to come in with the homeschooling addition to the common application.
- **NPR Lists**- Which are often the top 100 of any genre. Our family has made reading goals based on these lists.
- **Ambleside Online**– A Charlotte Mason curriculum site with book lists for each grade
- **Annotated Bibliographies**– There are many books on books. Some are listed here and some are in the related posts at the end of this book. They will give you a summary of the book and why the author thinks it’s a good read for teens.
- **Internet Search**- If you know the keywords for the type of book list you want, try doing a Google search on the topic and watch the suggestions file in.
- **Choose Books Which Stretch Your Teen**– Either in perspective or topic. You want some growth to happen while you are talking about
books. The key is to know your students and what they might need to develop their thinking. This is more about ideas in books not just the text itself. Choose books which you think will speak into the life of your teen.

Choosing and guiding reading choices for middle and high schoolers is important as they grow into mature, adult readers who read for a life time.

**Strategies for Engaging Teens with Books**

One way to be certain you can use books with your teens is to begin building this skill in from an early age. Our teens talk about books because they’ve been discussing books with us since they were tiny. Beyond starting early, here are some ways to pull your teens into a book discussion:

- **Host a Classics Book Club**– A few years ago our oldest was part of a book club which required 7th graders and up to read a classic and gather each month to watch the movie version and have snacks and discussion. Brilliant idea!
- **Enjoy a Book Club with Book Loving Teens**– Our daughter belongs to a book club which meets monthly with a group of girls. We have food related to the read and they have discussions and sometimes a craft activity. The girls switch up book choices between easier and more difficult books. The great the thing about a book club is it helps teens to go beyond their comfort zone and reach out to things they may not normally choose to read.
- **Teach a Literary Co-op Class**– We belong to a simple Monday afternoon co-op and there is a core group of teens who adore literature classes. Our high school senior has taken a short stories
class, a class on the book Dracula, and a dystopian literature class where they read and discussed Fahrenheit 451 and The Hunger Games. It was fun to compare the more classic dystopian novel with a modern one. This year, our three teens are taking a Harry Potter class.

- **Have Your Teens Read to You**- As they read, many times they will lead the discussions and ask me questions. Their reactions and opinions to a book are immediate and self-directed.

- **Read Aloud to Your Teen**- Reading aloud gives your family a sense of community around a book and brings everyone together for discussions. Reading aloud often opens up more story worlds and teens will often continue to explore those books on their own. It’s a sure fire way to draw teens into a book they might otherwise ignore and it sends them searching for more books like it.

- **Take on Some Controversy**– Dracula may seem like a strange book choice for a Christian homeschooling group, but the discussions about the character in the original book compared to the romanticized modern vampire are invaluable. In the book, the vampire is not depicted as simply misunderstood. It is interesting to discuss this as you move through the book. A controversial topic is a compelling way to have important values discussions and they help your teens to develop debating and persuasive skills.

- **Discuss books with other teens**– Whether or not you formalize a group, discussing books with other teens is important. As Ethan, our 17 year old says, talking with your peers gives you a different perspective from someone who is the same age rather than always hearing an adult’s opinion or thoughts on a book.

- **Build into a Passion with Books**– Your teens will read for information and gain a lot of background knowledge if he is working on a project. What do your teens find interesting? What are they passionate about? Use that to incorporate reading and discussions!

- **Book Exchange**- Why not encourage your teen to find a book for you so that you can swap books and share opinions?

- **Family Book Club**- Reading and discussing a book as a family is a fun way to promote communication. Families can bond together over good books and have a common world to look back on while discussing almost any topic.

- **Outsource Discussions**- This could be with another mentor or it can be in venues outside your home. Our teens have participated in book
salons, author lectures, and library events. Sign up and go! You won’t regret more settings for discussions with peers and other adults.

- **Make the Time**- Build margin into your days so that you have time to read and to mull over books. The best of intentions cannot stand up against an overfull schedule, so be sure to set aside time for reading and discussing.

- **It Doesn’t Have to be Perfect**- Though you want the flexibility you need in your schedule, that does not mean you have to create or wait for the perfect moment for a discussion. Often I begin discussions while making dinner, late at night when our teens often come to find me for talking, and while we are driving in the car. Make the moments. Don’t wait for them!

On the topic of gathering in those who don’t love to read, focus on what would compel them to read. Worry less about the academics and more on the story. This is contrary to literature courses, but it promotes discussion over analysis. Sometimes we forget that classics and other books are stories first. Win your students over with stories which capture their imaginations. I am a voracious reader of non-fiction. I like to read for information. When I read fiction, I prefer classics to adult contemporary modern fiction. However, learning about stories and the people who write them is a lot of fun for me. The idea is to find out the way they will enjoy a story the most and capitalize on it.

### How to Discuss Books with Teens If You Haven’t Read the Book

What if you don’t like to read all that much or you just don’t have the time? How do you consistently engage your teens with discussion on a book you have not read?

- **Read notes on the book**– Find a webpage or story notes on the book and read those through. That will give you enough information not necessarily to give your own opinion but definitely to get a teen talking about theirs.
- **Read portions of the book**– Read the start and then skim other parts.
- **Read some of the books**– You don’t have to read all the books, but reading a whole book through now and then is fun to do and gives
you a more thorough opinion. So, make a goal of reading a few each year and choose the books you really want to make an impact.

- **Tag team with the other parent**– It’s good business for both of you to be discussing books with your kids. If you prefer to read a whole book, then share the task with your spouse. If you both read a book, then you’ll simply double the number of parents discussing books at your house!

The biggest point to note here is that I often have not read a book entirely and I can still provoke a good discussion with my teens. I know just enough to ask the questions that get to the meat of the book and challenge their thinking. Of course, you want to read some of the books in total, so choose them wisely. Perhaps they are the books that pack the most punch or it might be your favorite author. *Avoid inaction by doing what you can and making the most of it!*
Sample Talking Points for You and Your Teen

Some of you may be wondering where to start when it comes to talking about books with your teens. You don’t have to go super academic with these discussions. Just take it one conversation at a time! I’ve compiled a list of ways to get things started:

- **Ask the question, “How’s that book going?”** – My kids respond well to this question. It can lead to anything from, “I love it” with reasons why or, “I really do not like this book” followed by an explanation. It could also lead to where they are in the book or what they expect to happen next. Always be ready with another question in case you get a one word answer!

- **What’s happened so far?** – This is a great narration question at its core. You can’t get a one word answer with this one and it gives you a chance to hear where your teen is in the book and it will likely lead to some opinions to discuss.

- **Ask their opinion on the book they are reading** – A lot of people like to avoid this question, but I find it gives me more fuel for discussion. Even if a teen hates a book, I can learn more about why and force them to consider their opinion. It gives me a chance to hear what they are thinking and even a loathed title will get discussion time from this question. My teens think opinions are one of the most important aspects of reading and discussing a book. This is where you get to go deeper and talk about why they feel the way they do.

- **Challenge their opinions** – This is one of my favorite roles! Even if I’m in agreement with my teens, I offer other points of view and get a discussion going. It’s always profitable to have these discussions as your kids get older so you can help them develop a rock solid view which they can defend.

- **Talk about the theme** – You don’t have to be an academic scholar to approach the topic of what an author is trying to tell us with this book. I love to hear what my teens think the message is within the pages of a book they are reading.

- **Relate the book to a current event** – We look for ways to make reading relevant to our lives now. Sometimes there’s a perfect parallel in the news. Exploit the opportunity!
• **Ask them to compare a book to another one they’ve read**– Pull in comparisons and talk about them. How is a character acting like one from another book? How are their actions different in similar situations? Which is better? Who is more honorable? Bringing in their prior knowledge is an excellent way to strengthen their discussions.

• **Don’t Be Afraid to Wait**– Give your student the opportunity to form an answer. It allows more time for processing the question.

• **Ask a Follow up Question**– Often their answers will lead me to another question. Use those opportunities!

• **Make Sure Students Can Defend Their Answers**– They must articulate what they think and be able to tell why. This turns any one word answer into a discussion.

There is a separate section with a list of questions you can print out later on in this eBook. Remember that any effective discussion involves your teen defending his answer to anything you ask. I’m not nervous about the one word answers simply because they can’t stop there. Even if they hate a book, we have plenty to talk about. Resist the urge to give your own opinions early on especially if your teen isn’t too talkative to start. Let them know you value what they have to say and they will start talking more. Once that pattern is well established you can add in your own thoughts. I find it easiest to let them play out a thought before asking the next question. Often, if I haven’t read a lot of the book, I will have more questions based on their answers.

It’s enjoyable to watch your students grow in their ability to formulate their thoughts and share them. I love to see my teens mature and give succinct, articulate opinions on books. Look for those golden moments!

**Resources for Using Books with Teens**

There are many places I visit when looking for inspiration on discussing books with teens. Here are a few I have enjoyed:

• **Reading with Teens & Big, Juicy Conversations**– This is a Read Aloud Revival podcast with Julie Bogart of Brave Writer. She talks about how to read and enjoy books with teens. You can find a lot more encouragement inside the Read Aloud Revival Membership site.
• **Excellence in Literature**— A series of literature and writing studies based on classics. We use these as our primary English courses in high school and we’ve been using them for years. Not only do they provide a rich book list, but the manuals are self-directed studies for 8-12 graders and they offer a foundation for discussions with your teens.

• **One Year Adventure Novel**— A high school course on creative writing. This program has wonderful video lessons and as you join your student for the class time, it provokes amazing discussions based on the material. There is also an optional book list which gives you more reading choices that go with the program.

• **Other Worlds**— The science fiction and fantasy module that follows One Year Adventure Novel. We’ve used this program to create other worlds and there is great value in discussing the works of others as you create your own. It opens up in depth discussions as your teens share their world with you.

• **Honey for a Teen’s Heart**— This book focuses on choosing books for teens and how you can use books to communicate and stay connected with teens. My teenagers often read to me and we talk about the books we are reading. With my 17 year old, it’s a great part of our relationship as he’s transitioned to his late teens. Don’t lose those opportunities!

• **Brave Writer**— A writing program where you coach writers which I’ve been doing for years, but without this excellent resource until now. Ms. Bogart does a great job of incorporating books into the writing experience. If you are already a Brave Writer user, this is another tool for engaging teens with books.

• **Some of My Best Friends Are Books: Guiding Gifted Readers**— This book is also newer in my collection, but it provides a wealth of knowledge on gifted readers. You’ll find information on transitioning children from early readers to mature (lifelong) readers as well as an annotated bibliography for readers of all ages including teens. One of the hallmarks of this book is the idea that gifted readers have the potential to gain quite a lot from the best books and that the books themselves can become a peer to a gifted reader.

• **The Kids’ Book Club Book**— A book of reading ideas, recipes, activities, and smart tips for organizing great book clubs for kids in elementary through high school.
• **All through the Ages, History through Literature Guide** - Fiction and non-fiction books for each time period in history for all ages and all genres of books. We use this a lot for our history studies.

*Additional items found on my resource page.*

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**Other Blog, She Wrote Posts on Teens & Books**

Having two high schoolers right now means we've been engaging teens with books regularly for some time. Enjoy some other posts related to teens and books on my blog.

• **100 Books You Should Read by the Time You Turn 20** – This is a popular post with a list of 100 books our teens think everyone should
read by the time they are 20. So, it's a list by teens for teens. If you missed some titles on this list, there’s plenty of time to catch up!

- **The Ultimate Guide to Establishing a Reading Culture in Your Home**— Are you still in the early stages of raising readers? Do you have teens who need more reading built into their day? Read here for tips and strategies for all ages.
- **How to Grow a Reader**— Tips for babies through high schoolers on how to pour into your readers at any age or stage.
- **Summer Reading without the Carrot & the Stick**— Are you interested in having your kids read more without the popular summer time bribes? This post shares ways to engage your students with books without the prizes and trinkets.
- **High School Skills: Textual Analysis**— One of the best skills we can teach our high schoolers is how to write about the things they read. Learn the benefits of this skill and how to start teaching it.
- **Jules Verne: Literature, History, and Fashion**— Another approach to books with teens. Pour into their interests. In this case, our high school freshman has been studying fashion with history for a few years now.
- **Project: Steampunk Fashion Design & Drafting**— Because I can’t leave you without showing off the finished product from my daughter’s Jules Verne study! Behold, the finished steampunk dress. This is a fantastic example of engaging a teen with a book or author through a passion.

**Wrapping Up**

Taking the time to engage your teen with a book is some of the most significant time you will spend with them in high school. Building in character as they solidify their independence is never wasted time. **Being able to articulate their beliefs and discuss them safely is a skill which will last a lifetime.** Discussions at home provide a safe place to express thoughts, ideas, and opinions without risk. Be empowered to take on book discussions with your teens! Set aside the time for it. The best part is that it’s a lot of fun and it helps you to get to know your teens and to watch them grow into young men and women all while keeping them talking. It’s a win/win!
Books Our Teens Found Engaging

I interviewed our teens to see which books they thought were the most engaging for book discussions. These books are best suited for late middle school through high school. Realize we are still in this stage, so if you don’t see a book mentioned we may get to it yet. I don’t enjoy ranking items, so these are a random list of books over which we have had lots of discussion.

**Fahrenheit 451** - Portrays a future devoid of books with only visual and audio media allowed. Books are banned and if someone is caught with them, their house and the books are burned by firemen. In this future, firemen set fires. They don’t put them out. Ray Bradbury had a lot to say about the future and this book is still relevant today.

**The Hunger Games** - Pop culture loves this book based on an ancient Greek ritual. Teens love to talk about the characters and what’s happening.

**Harry Potter** - A big series with fun action and it provides a lot of fodder for discussions.

**The Screwtape Letters** - Written from the point of view of a demon, CS Lewis portrays a witty and poignant perspective on living the Christian life.

**I, Robot** - Readers are introduced to the three laws of robotics in this story. The development of one robot is followed through a series of stories.

**The Lord of the Rings** - Despite your stance on reading detailed works of fantasy, this book is full of Truth and is worth taking the time to read.

**Silas Marner** - This is a short classic and easy to read about a weaver. The characters in this novel give teens a lot to talk about and there are wonderful golden lines throughout the book.

**The Book Thief** - The narrator in this tale is Death himself as a young girl in Nazi Germany begins stealing books. She steals the first one before she can read and her foster father helps her to learn. My teens loved this book!

**Around the World in 80 Days** - We are big fans of Jules Verne, I admit. But, what’s not to love about adventure based on a wager?
**Dracula** - A controversial book in many ways. It provokes feelings in both directions. Lots of talking points in this book related to vampires and the sensationalism surrounding them today.

**Frankenstein** - Another classic, this story was a sci fi first and there are ample moments to discuss the characters and their choices.

*If you’d like to learn more about these books and other resources not mentioned here, visit my [resource page](blogshewrote.org).*
Talking Points for Any Book You Read with Your Teen

This is a list of questions to use when you begin a book talk with your teens. Remember that your teens must defend his answer. That’s what takes the discussion to the next level. You may want to set some ground rules for the talk before you begin.

How is that book going?

What’s happening right now?

Who’s your favorite character?

Who’s your least favorite character?

What made the book worth reading? Or why was not worth it?

What elements made it a difficult book?

Would you recommend this book to a friend?

Is the main character likeable?

What did the protagonist learn?

Was the broken redeemed in the book?

Which other book does this story remind you of?

Have you read about similar characters in other books?

Do you know characters who have made similar choices?

How is their story the same or different?

Which character would you like to be?

Rank this book on the quality of its language.

Which event in the book required the most courage?
How did the conflict or decision affect the outcome of the story?

What would have happened if ___________?

What would have been better or worse than ___________?

How did the relationships among characters affect their choices?

What was the main character’s motivation?

What would you have done?

How does the setting affect the plot?

How does the setting affect the characters?