

Speaking up about what our kids read

An unusual book club is helping parents and children to connect — literally. **Jennifer Cook** reports.

AN AWARD-winning Melbourne author is encouraging parents to form book clubs to boost their children's literacy.

Krista Bell, an author of 17 books for young readers, says she came up with the idea of BookSpeak — aimed at upper primary and lower secondary students — after travelling extensively around Australia working with librarians, teachers and parents.

"I noticed a common thread running through the schools. Librarians would love to raise literacy levels but there is simply not the funding to do so, especially in country schools," Ms Bell said.

"When my three boys, now aged from 15 to 27 years, were growing up, I was reviewing books for ABC Radio. So I was in a very privileged position to know what books were around and what to offer them to suit their very different tastes.

"But what about other parents? That's when I came up with the idea of BookSpeak, a book club for parents where they could meet once or twice a term and discuss what their kids are reading."

Ms Bell says the important thing about BookSpeak is that it is not prescriptive, where the parents read a book and then go home and tell their children they have to read it. "It is all about meeting with the librarian and each other and discussing books their children are reading, could read, or have just been published."

Ms Bell says BookSpeak costs nothing but enthusiasm and time. It allows parents and their pre-teen and adolescent children to connect through literature. "When your child

starts to read, as a parent you are in control of that process," she says. "Suddenly something happens when the child reaches upper primary. Often parents don't know what their kids are reading and by the time they reach high school they don't know if their kids are reading.

"It can also be a very revealing process that shows children have a totally different perspective on books to adults."

Ms Bell says it is all about sharing different viewpoints and creating a literary environment in the home.

Children's literature consultant and owner of Show and Tell speaker's agency, Bronwen Bennett, agrees. "When I was working as a librarian, a year 7 girl wanted to read a book called *Dear Nobody* by Berlie Doherty. It was about a girl who was pregnant and hadn't told her parents," Ms Bennett says. "The next thing I knew, the girl told me her mother wanted to see me and I was all ready to defend the book.

"But she said her daughter had an 18-year-old brother and they were concerned about his friends hanging around her. She said the book enabled them to have a conversation she didn't even know how to start and they talked about how they would handle the situation if it happened to her daughter."

Ms Bennett says her 13-year-old stepdaughter read *Anna's Story*, by Bronwyn Donaghy, a book about the teenage girl who died after taking ecstasy. "What she said nearly knocked my socks off. For her, the drug issue was peripheral," Ms Bennett says. "She knew who was dealing drugs among her peers and who was taking them. What struck her was the



issue of friendship. She was shocked that Anna's friends left her alone for so long. She wanted to know where their courage was and told me that friendship wasn't just something you shared during the good times."

Ms Bennett described it as "a great lesson to me that young people will often come away with a completely different message than another generation". She adds that literature is not personal, so it allows people to discuss difficult issues without emotions boiling over.

"Books provide an important opportunity to see a young person's point of view. Some of the best literature written for children and young adults is done in Australia and BookSpeak can raise awareness of this," Ms Bennett says.

Head librarian at Mentone Girls Grammar, Susan Maslin, says about 20 parents turned up to the first BookSpeak held at the school. "Parents get asked to come to so many things that

I thought it was important that the BookSpeak meetings were informal, a chance to come along and have some nibbles and talk about what their children are reading — they need to be able to come and enjoy themselves," she says.

"I heard one of the mums saying that she read a book and then one of her children read it and I thought it was wonderful that there was this sharing between them. I hope that the BookSpeak sessions become more and more directed by the parents and I think it will help enrich the book borrowing environment for our students."

For information on BookSpeak, visit Krista Bell's website at kristabell.com.

Jennifer Cook is a freelance journalist and author of young adult fiction. She has been a guest speaker at Melbourne schools. Her latest book, *Persephone: Secrets of a Teenage Goddess*, is out now through Lothian.

Above, members of BookSpeak discuss books at Mentone Girls Grammar. Right, author Krista Bell. PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

