

Attracting Young Adult Readers with Knitting Groups

Shannon Okey

The runaway success of Debbie Stoller's 2003 book *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook* (over 215,000 copies in print—with a sequel released fall 2004 and a third in the works) spawned dozens of eponymous knitting groups all over the country. Stoller turned her private passion into a public sensation using not only her books but also the magazine she publishes (*Bust*) to promote knitting as a hip, crafty activity.

The problem? Most *Stitch 'n Bitch* groups are comprised of twenty- and thirty-somethings that meet in bars. What about younger knitters-to-be? Library-based knitting groups are an opportunity to reach out to tweens and teens, helping them develop traditional “library” skills such as reading, researching, and following directions . . . all while having a lot of fun!

Why knit? It isn't just a trendy hobby. The Seth Boyden Demonstration School in Maplewood, New Jersey, began a program called *Knitting Together a Community* that taught eighty-five children to knit. These students went on to teach their friends, families, and anyone else who would sit down with yarn and two pointy sticks! Community building, peer mentoring and knowledge sharing aren't the only benefits, though. When young adults master the hand-eye coordination, attentiveness, and fine motor skills required in knitting, as well as the math skills (stitch and row counting),

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abstract reasoning (visualizing pattern development and project planning), and other skills inherent in the craft, they develop confidence and self-esteem. Even young adults with attention deficit disorders benefit from the challenges that knitting has to offer. Knitters who knit in a group learn faster, because they learn from each other's mistakes and can offer each other the right kind of help at the right time. Your role is to facilitate that process, offer an initial direction for the group, and incorporate library-friendly teaching into the dynamic.

What if you don't know how to knit? A good first step is to contact the nearest yarn store or fiber arts group for assistance. Emily Way maintains a comprehensive online guide to local yarn stores and knitting guilds at www.woolworks.org, and Chicago *Stitch 'n Bitch* lists known knitting groups at their www.stitchnbitch.org site.

Once you have someone to help you teach the basics of the craft, some pre-planning is in order. For example, you may want to keep extra supplies on hand for unexpected drop-ins. Since enthusiastic knitters tend to accumulate spare yarn, or stash, they'll probably thank you for taking it off their hands if you ask! Although it's less expensive, try to stay away from cheap acrylic yarns when learning or teaching the basics, as it can stick and slip in the most inconvenient way. One hundred percent wool yarn is stretchier and more forgiving of beginner mistakes. Chinese takeout chopsticks or even dull pencils can be pressed into service as needles in a pinch.

Finding group members can be as simple as creating a display of knitting books and periodicals with a poster to announce meeting times. It also helps if you have a handful of willing participants to sit with you for the first few meetings



Stitch 'n Bitch in Akron, Ohio
(photo by group leader Rae Nester)

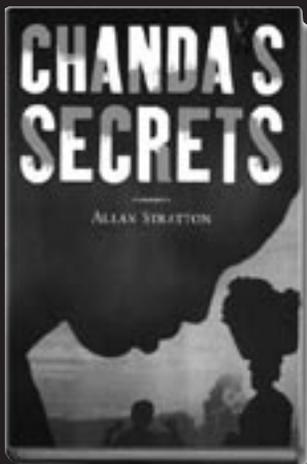
to attract interest, perhaps from a local group or your own staff. It's surprising how many nonknitters want to learn once they see someone making progress on a scarf or other simple creation. Leaving extra yarn and needles on the table is an excellent invitation for others to join in. You know best when your target audience is likely to be in the library, whether after school or in the evenings.

Once the group is established, and everyone has learned the basics of casting on, the knit stitch, and other essential techniques, try a “knit-along” project. Knitters of all experience levels enjoy these opportunities to work together on the same project at the same time, since they can solve pattern problems jointly

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and compare notes as they go along. It's also a chance for you to educate patrons in online research techniques and the appropriate use of copyrighted and free materials.

Even if your library doesn't have an extensive knitting collection, you can use the Internet to find free patterns. Start by picking a type of project (scarves are almost always popular with new knitters) and demonstrate how to perform a Google search, such as "free scarf pattern". This search alone will garner close to two hundred thousand hits. Entering "free knit scarf pattern" cuts the results in half. Continue refining the search until the group finds a pattern they want to try, or check out a free quality pattern site, such as Knitty (<http://knitty.com>). Knitty pairs articles on technique with a sizeable pattern archive, ranked by difficulty level, which makes selecting an appropriate project easier.

Take advantage of your library's existing adult knitting collection, but if you don't already have them, consider adding a basic text like *Teen Knitting Club*, *The Yarn Girls' Guide to Simple Knits*, or (a book no knitter should be without) Elizabeth Zimmerman's *Knitting without Tears*. Given their popularity with teen knitters, a few scarf-only books would also be a good choice.

Consider asking your local yarn store to sponsor contests for the group, particularly as its membership grows. Don't use knitting speed as a criterion, since knitters of all ages and skill levels knit at different speeds. Instead, try asking for short knitting books or magazine reviews that can be shared with the group, or create a scavenger hunt for Internet-based information, such as a particular stitch pattern. If you have a local charity that accepts handknit articles (there are many across the country—see www.woolworks.org/charity.html for a sampling), you could also ask each member to knit something for the organization, then vote on the most creative entry.

Charity knitting is also a good way to bridge the age gap if you have an existing adult knitting group nearby. Yarn stores often host a mitten tree during the holiday season for their knitters to

decorate with handmade mittens, scarves, and hats. Later, the objects are donated to a local homeless shelter. Why not pair up with more experienced knitters to produce the components of a set for your own tree? If your knitting group member's mentor teaches him or her a new stitch or technique, chances are everyone else will soon be clamoring to try it, too.

However, you don't need to rely on outside teaching help if your group has good researching skills. Just about every stitch combination in existence is documented somewhere on the Internet! And many sites offer short video clips demonstrating how to do them, such as <http://knittinghelp.com>.

Knitting, like reading, is a pleasurable, relaxing activity with many benefits. (Some more obvious than others!) If you start your own knitting group for young adult patrons, please share your experiences at <http://knitgrrl.com/library>, or send an e-mail to admin@knitgrrl.com so that everyone can benefit from them. ●

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WEB RESOURCES

- Woolworks online knitting group, store and charity reference: www.woolworks.org
- Chicago Stitch 'n Bitch list of known knitting groups: www.stitchnbitch.org
- Knitty magazine and patterns: <http://knitty.com>
- KnittingHelp.com online video stitch help: <http://knittinghelp.com>
- Knitgrrl book page and library resource: <http://knitgrrl.com/library>

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