



Clinical psychologist  
Delphin Swalm.  
Picture:  
Stewart Allen

## OFFLINE

**A** CURIOUS thing has happened on the way to the hi-tech, fast-paced, internet-enabled 21st century. We keep getting together. As in, face to face – despite all those online, SMS and networking options. While there is no doubt the online world is booming, the offline communities are not being left behind. At least not yet.

From book clubs to mothers' groups, exercise classes, knitting clans and cycling groups, the anecdotal evidence is global – people still also hunger for the human experience.

"These are groups that have social elements, and with things like book clubs and mothers' clubs, their largest aspects is that it's an emotionally supportive environment," says University of WA academic Tama Leaver.

"And in that respect technology cannot replace face-to-face human interaction.

"It's like the difference between being at a birth and seeing the video of the birth – it's a completely different experience."

And groups like mothers' groups may be more important than ever. As Leaver observes, society has fundamentally changed.

"There has been obviously a huge shift in the workforce," he says. "A lot more mothers are working 9-5 and there isn't necessarily as big a community for that knowledge to be passed down in the traditional way where mothers and daughters would form the bonds during the time when the men were at work."

The need for a connection is something Delphin

Nothing can replace that tactile satisfaction of having a book in your hands and the warmth of having someone to discuss it with

Katherine Ashby

Swalm understands only too well. Before she had a child, Delphin was shocked to discover her friends with babies could spend hours talking about nappies.

"I was disgusted," the clinical psychologist says. "I remember thinking, 'I went to university with these women'."

But, as she realised when her own arrived, having a baby changes everything.

"A few years later I was craving exactly that sort of information," she laughs.

The 40-year-old new mum, who had recently moved to Perth from Canada, joined a group for new parents. "It was really reassuring," she says. "I found people that I could ask the dumb questions of and they didn't think they were dumb questions."

In one of those paradoxes of modern times, the fastest way to find any of these face-to-face groups is to turn to technology. Search the internet and you'll find references to mothers' groups around the world catering to everything and everyone. There are groups for new mums, mothers of twins, mothers of children with disabilities, African-American mothers and Christian mothers. There's even a couple of groups in New York called Tots and Tonic, where mothers meet (with their babies) over a very civilised cocktail.

And that's just mothers' groups. Try searching for book clubs and you'll uncover a global phenomenon.

In Perth there is no way of gauging the exact number of reading groups – a predominantly female pastime – but you can get some idea of their popularity from the amount of bookshops catering for them.

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**A mums, dads and babies group, run by the WA Health Department. Picture: Richard Hatherly**



and questions for recommended texts, the staff offer advice on starting up your own group. Says Katherine Ashby of The Well in Shenton Park: "Most of our book-club customers hire the books which saves a lot of money. We'll hire them out for \$5.50 and we deal with about 60 or 70 clubs, a lot from the country."

According to Ashby, the popularity of such groups is a reaction to our hi-tech society.

"Nothing can replace that tactile satisfaction of having a book in your hands and the warmth of having someone to discuss it with," she says.

Some publishers also cite the "Oprah Effect" – a surge of interest in the US linked to when Oprah Winfrey began discussing books on her talkshow – books which would also then go to almost instant No.1 status. It spawned a boom in book clubs, its members eager to debate the titles she had mentioned.

Sinead Mangan, early evening presenter on ABC Radio in Perth, found the same thing here on a smaller scale when she introduced her regular book-club segment last March.

"We have people ringing in from all over the state – guys on mining sites, school groups and anyone who had something to say about the book," says Mangan.

Book clubs are much more than just the books discussed, too. They're as much about the social interaction – people getting together to drink a coffee or a glass of wine, share a laugh and have a gentle debate.

One Perth book club – The Withering Frights – has taken that all-important sense of sharing a laugh to the max. As well as starting each meeting with a bizarre toast to Emily Bronte, the English author of *Wuthering*

*Heights* (a book most of them have not read), they have developed many rituals which bring them even closer together.

The Frights formed when the women's oldest children, now aged 17, started primary school. Their initial motivation was to kick-start their reading again after having spent six years putting themselves second to the family.

"We didn't know each other all that well when we started so meeting on a monthly basis has brought us very close together and we all know that we have something very special," says one member. "It is very rare for any member to miss a meeting. Book Club takes precedence over just about anything."

But such groups are often much more than a social outlet. There are other benefits besides friendships and

gaining confidence. There's the sharing of fears and anxieties and providing mutual support. And for new mothers in particular that is most vital of all.

"All the literature says social support (for new mothers) is so important," says Delphin Swalm, who is the associate head of psychology at King Edward Memorial Hospital.

"A group allows you to be around others who really, truly understand what you are going through. It can normalise a lot of the negative feelings. It can help people to do practical problem solving."

As Highgate child health nurse Veronica Whitely observes, it is amazing to see how the groups evolve over the course of their meetings and how they really "gelled".

"They were real friends by the end," she says. ★

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