

Middle School Readers Want to Be Seen

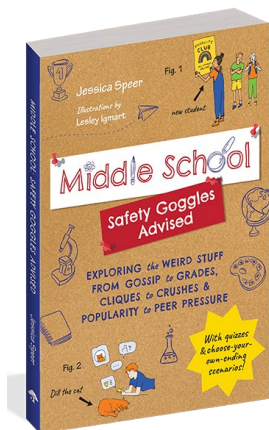
by C.M. Surrisi

Knowing the current reality of middle school students' lives is essential for creating engaging middle grade fiction. Accurately reflecting their language, humor, worries, and hopes promotes emotional connection and empathy. This is especially true for contemporary fiction but is similarly valuable for other sub-genres such as fantasy and science fiction—even historical fiction benefits from connecting with readers' lives today.

Furthermore, knowledge of current trends, apps, slang, and cultural references prevents writing from feeling outdated. It ensures characters align with middle schoolers' approach to friendships, family relationships, and the world.

Ultimately, writing authentic characters builds credibility and relevance. It strengthens plotlines and themes while giving young readers characters they can believe in and relate to, increasing a book's impact and success.

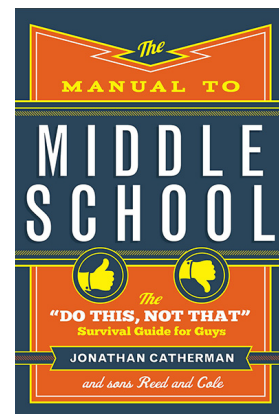
Thus, those who write books for middle school readers benefit from periodically updating themselves on what's happening with this age group. Although they're not a monolithic group, and some elements of their lives are unique, many of their experiences are similar across schools and regions.



The 2022 book *Middle School – Safety Goggles Advised*, by Jessica Speer, illustrated by Lesley Imgart, captures the middle school experience through thorough research and student interviews. All parents, teachers, and kids can find something in it to help them understand and cope with this challenging time. You will find hard facts, fun explanations, youthful commentary, quizzes, cautions, insights, discussion questions, activities, and more.

The 2017 book *The Manual to Middle School: The “Do this, Not that” Survival Guide*

for Guys, by Jonathan Catherman and sons Reed and Cole, gives direct advice on how to survive middle school from a boy's perspective. It seeks to speak to boys at their level. You'll find real-life hacks, humorous illustrations, and survival stories. Written in the second person and accompanied by graphic novel-type illustrations, it's frank and funny while at the same time being factually grounded.



What follows incorporates some of the observations in these books and additional considerations based upon my input and that of other writers, parents, and teachers.

FROM REAL PEOPLE TO CHARACTERS

Middle School Milieu

Schoolwork, Tests, and Grades. The difference between elementary school and middle school is huge. There are classroom changes, new people, more intense workloads, and increased testing, all of which lead to stress. In addition, there is the joy and pressure of after-school activities such as sports, music, plays, clubs, and so on. Parents, who are conscious of the coming pressures of high school, urge the development of good study skills, adding to the tension. All of this can be complicated by family problems such as divorce and/or a sick parent or sibling. And of course, there are hormones.

Physiology. Middle schoolers are at the age of puberty. This means they are awash in hormones, faced with changes to their bodies, menstrual periods, facial and body hair, and pimples. Puberty also brings moodiness, hypersensitivities, hurt feelings, tears, feelings of alienation, rejection, insecurity, jealousy, and righteousness. The effects, both physical and brain-related, can vary wildly among kids and throughout the middle school experience. Typically, there is a transition into some degree of maturity, albeit with some flashbacks into childish behavior.

Instant Judgments and Gossip. Middle schoolers are prone to making quick judgments about others. This can be a good judgment: “She looks nice.” But it is often negative and fuels, or is fueled by, gossip: “He’s a weirdo.” Students report that these hostile or harsh judgments can be the result of insecurity, comparing themselves to others, trying to be cool or fit in, jealousy, and insensitivity to differences. If you are the recipient of it, it hurts, it’s hard to tune out, and it takes courage to ignore it and seek out positive people. Middle schoolers are brave, but they can also be frightened.

Fraught Friendships. Problems in friendships may be the greatest challenge of middle school. They cause more tears, panic, and depression than anything else. Friendship problems typically derive from change: changing interests, changing personalities, changing moods. Students report that friendships are all over the place. One day you’re friends, and the next day you’re not. Sometimes you have no idea why. It can leave you alone at the dreaded lunch table. It’s awful, but many feel it’s okay if you dump or get dumped by a bad friend. It takes a lot of self-possession and courage to get out of a hurtful friendship. The use of “BFF” may be waning in today’s culture.

Cliques, Groups, and Peer Pressure. Cliques and groups exhibit some of the same characteristics as changing friendships. Kids can be in or out in the blink of an eye. To stay in a group, a middle schooler must conform to the group's rules. This can include what to wear, what jargon to use, who to acknowledge, who to dis, what table to sit at in the lunchroom, and so on. Adherence to the rules of the group is policed through peer pressure. If a group member doesn't abide by the rules, they can be shunned by the group. Still, there is nothing wrong with being in a group. Groups form naturally among friends with shared interests and can be a social space where you don't have to be judged. They can be open to new members but are rarely free of all peer pressure. Lots of intergroup gossip, hurt feelings, and attempted mediation among friends go on, but it typically resolves itself without a member being pushed out of the group.

Popularity or Lack Thereof. An outgrowth of cliques and groups, popularity still plagues middle schoolers. However, popularity isn't what it once was or how it is portrayed in movies. There are still groups that consider themselves at the top of the appearance, sports, and academic ladder, and they dress a certain way, act a certain way, talk a certain way, and ignore others. They often have money and the newest technology, and they project "high status." Some experts say the sway of popularity is greater in middle school than in elementary school or high school due to the strong emotional need to connect at that age. However, these days, the average student cares less about popular kids than in the past. There is more room for individuality and specialized groupings. Popularity can be more influential in a smaller school than in a larger school since in a larger school there is more room for personal image.

Crushes and Crashes. Crushing is not universal. Not every middle schooler has a crush, while others have one after another. Some are preoccupied with rushes and who's "going with" whom. Others couldn't care less. Today, there is a range of what it means to "go together" or "get together." It can be merely saying you're together, walking around the school together, texting, exchanging phone calls, holding hands, and maybe kissing. Sometimes they do it to be cool or to conform to the expectations of their group of friends. Mostly, middle schoolers like to do things in a group. Still, a study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* reports that one in eight middle schoolers have had an encounter with oral sex, intercourse, and/or sexting (texting nude photos). This is a discomforting number, but the survey is nonetheless credible and needs to be considered. Unrequited crushes can be embarrassing if exposed by an insincere friend. The crush and immaturity can cause chaos in the preteen mind. And crushes, realized or rejected, can hurt the heart.

Phones and Social Media. Phone usage among middle schoolers is an epic problem. Not all kids have a phone, but they are becoming increasingly more ubiquitous. There are good reasons to have one: safety, education, communication, keeping in contact, emergencies, and school research. But there are huge downsides and many unknown risks: executive function and attention deficit, cognitive delays, impulsive reactions, and decreased ability to self-regulate. It's a fact that families can be in a room together for hours, and a middle schooler will have their attention on the phone the entire time, missing the human interaction. When phones are restricted, kids will lie and sneak around to use them anyway. There is an undeniably addictive aspect to cell phones for kids and adults.

Social media, email, and other communications platforms are equally addictive and potentially harmful for middle school students. They steal healthy social and emotional growth time from life, leading to many of the same adverse outcomes as phones. Even more, they provide the opportunity for miscommunication, hurt feelings, and a record that never goes away. Beyond that, they can be the vehicle for contact from undesirable sources. Despite this, many kids use them (with and without adult approval), and it's hard to ignore their existence.

Conflict and Bullying. Conflict in middle school can smolder over time or erupt in a flash. Sometimes it is attributed to the group mentality and an us-versus-them sense of division. Sometimes it's one or two individuals with tendencies toward unkindness and cruelty. This can be psychologically damaging and physically dangerous. Sometimes, bullying behavior can be attributed to the fact that the bully is being treated that way at home, they have low self-esteem, or they don't know how to behave appropriately. Reasons aside, the real problem in the school setting is whether the behavior is identified and addressed. The average middle school student who is bullied will attempt to ignore the conflict and may feel shamed by it. Peer support is important, and this is one circumstance where friendships and groups can play a positive role.

"Parents Don't Understand!" As far as many middle schoolers are concerned, parents and other adults don't know much about their world and their stresses. They think adults always approach an issue from their "old person's" perspective. Sometimes, however, the same twelve-year-old critic regresses to younger childhood behavior and needs the comfort and understanding of Mommy, Daddy, or another significant adult. This swing in the need for an adult's opinion or comfort can occur in seconds. Don't blame the kids. This is attributed to hormones and the fact that at this age, kids are engaged in the awkward struggle for independence that will continue erratically for several years.

Diversity. Most middle schools are racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse – some widely, others not. A few may be all one race, religion, or gender. Mostly, the diversity in a middle school reflects the community. Younger kids can be more accepting and tolerant than adults, and middle school-age kids retain some of that natural ability. Parental influence is strong, however, and as eleven to thirteen-year-olds are beginning to develop their own unique identities, the dynamics of diversity play a role. They will mimic what is modeled for them, and feelings of discrimination will smolder. Their affiliations will be building blocks in their future.

Developing Identity. There are common themes in the life of a middle schooler. Students want to be accepted, have friends, be free of conflict, do well in their studies. Frankly, this is not unlike what adults want in their lives, but middle schoolers are struggling to achieve these goals in a sea of diverse kids with raging hormones and emotions. Not everyone experiences the abovementioned factors or matures on the same timeline. The slog through middle school to high school can hopefully bring self-respect, respect for others, trustworthy friendships, measured use of technology, accomplishment of things they enjoy, functional study skills, the ability to say no to things they don't like, the ability to embrace things they do like, recognition of stress, and the ability to seek help. It's a time of significant physical and emotional growth and maturity, so let's cut middle schoolers slack. They're eleven to thirteen years old. It's a lot.

Anxiety. Anxiety may come about as a reaction to any of the above. It can affect physical health, emotional well-being, and social skills development. It appears in various forms and intensities and can cause students to feel isolated and stigmatized. For more discussion of anxiety identification and treatment, see: "Understanding Anxiety in Children and Teens: Anxiety is the body's normal stress response. Learn how anxiety can be managed and treated when it becomes too much."

Good Things. Ha! Yes, there are some. The recitation above might suggest that the entire stretch of middle school is nonstop misery. For a few, it may be, but most kids report having fun with friends, liking their teachers, loving their family, and enjoying sports and other interests. Most kids possess the skills and awareness necessary to transit this growth period, albeit with some emotional bumps and bruises.

RESOURCES

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