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ON THE FAMILY

MIDDLE SCHOOL: The Inside Story

WHAT KIDS TELL US, BUT DON'T TELL YOU

CYNTHIA TOBIAS

Best-selling author of *The Way They Learn*

SUE ACUÑA

“Every parent needs this incredible book! So much of your child’s character hangs on the hinge of what happens during the middle school years. And this wise book reveals all the insider information you need to make these years count. Do yourself and your child a favor—read *Middle School: The Inside Story* today.”

—DRS. LES AND LESLIE PARROTT

Authors, *The Hour that Matters Most*

“Middle school involves some really tough, confusing years for today’s kids . . . that demand our hearts and attention. Tobias and Acuña give us the inside story, which provides parents with practical advice and expert insight on what their kids need—even when their middle schooler isn’t able to tell them.”

—DR. TIM CLINTON

President, American Association of Christian Counselors

Executive Director, Center for Counseling and Family Studies,

Liberty University

“I wish I’d had this book when my sons were going through adolescence and I was a middle and high school music and English teacher. Far too often I was frustrated at home and in the classroom. I’m the grandmother of a middle schooler now. After reading *Middle School: The Inside Story*, my heart is more tuned to my grandchild’s needs during this wacky and wonderful transition. Thanks to Cynthia and Sue, and this great book, I will soar through this season on a high note!”

—BABBIE MASON

Award-winning recording artist, songwriter, TV talk show host

Author of *This I Know For Sure*

“I personally call the condition Tobias and Acuña write about ‘middle school trauma.’ This ailment can actually begin in elementary school and progress (unfortunately) through adulthood in the more at-risk students. For these very sensitive children, it can be one of the most devastating experiences of their entire lives. . . .

“Treating the resulting emotional complications that develop can

be very difficult, especially if the child has to return to the toxic environment day after day. I think taking a preventative approach is the best strategy. *Middle School: The Inside Story* is an outstanding resource for parents to use to fortify themselves and their children in preparation for what may be coming down the pike. I will recommend that my patients' parents begin reading this book when their children enter kindergarten.

“Thank you so much, Cynthia and Sue, for writing this book. It will have far-reaching positive effects in every family where the parents take your comments and recommendations seriously.”

—SHARON A. COLLINS, M.D., F.A.A.P
Pediatrician, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

“You don't know how bad it is or how good it can be for your middle schooler—until you grab this book to decode that mysterious world. Do it for the insights, how-to's, and absolute do's and don'ts to motivate and encourage your child. Any page on any day brings the *aha* you need through deep and rich counsel from Tobias and Acuña, who've been there, done that, and pave the way for success! Wisdom of the twenty-first-century sages—yours, now, here!”

—PHYLLIS WALLACE
20-year host of *Woman to Woman* radio show
Award-winning middle school guidance counselor

“Here's a thought: For every parent with a child entering middle school, a must read is *Middle School: The Inside Story*—a positive preparation for the transformation that is coming your way. Here's another thought: For every middle school teacher, you will find exceptional insights and strategies bringing peace to your soul and sleep-filled nights. Cynthia and Sue have hit the middle school 'Bubble' out of the park. You will be equipped for your middle school experience 'where nobody has gone before.' Simply excellent!”

—FORREST TURPEN
West Coast Regional Director, Christian Educators Association
Former middle school teacher

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Middle School: The Inside Story

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Contents

What's Going On? 1

PART ONE: CHANGES

- 1 Where No Body Has Gone Before 11
- 2 The Good, the Bad, and the Gangly 21
- 3 How They See (and Don't See) the World 27

PART TWO: PARENTING

- 4 What Your Child Needs Now 39
- 5 Behind Closed Doors 45
- 6 Technical Difficulties 51
- 7 The Missing Links: Relationships and Communication 59
- 8 Too Late to Discipline? 75
- 9 Verbalizing Values 87

PART THREE: FRIENDS AND OTHER PROBLEMS


- 10 Finding Where They Fit 99
- 11 Young Love, Old Challenges 107
- 12 Responding to Red Flags 113

PART FOUR: SCHOOL

- 13 Not So Brave in the New World 125
- 14 The Hassles of Homework 139

15	Getting Teachers on Your Team	147
16	Learning Styles and Learning Disorders	153
17	Finishing Strong	167
18	After School and Out of School	173
	A Final Word	189
	Notes	191

What's Going On?



"I know it wasn't always fun when we were in, like, second grade, but now when I look back it seems like we always had good times. School was easy, and we got to do fun projects, like grow flowers and finger paint."

—A middle schooler



Five-year-old Jason is up before 8:00 A.M., even though it's Saturday. He cheerfully wriggles into his parents' bed to snuggle for just a minute, then races out to the living room to start his favorite animated movie while he waits for Mom to fix breakfast. All morning he happily interacts with his mom, sings along with his movie, and plays energetically with his toys.

Sometime between 11:00 A.M. and noon, Jason's older brother, Zach, appears sleepily in the kitchen doorway with his head bent over his cell phone and a frown on his face. When Mom asks if he wants something to eat, Zach shrugs and grunts without looking up. When Jason runs up and hugs his brother's leg, Zach shakes him off and says, "Quit bugging me, you little brat."

Mom objects: "Zach, don't talk to your brother that way! He's just showing you he loves you. You used to love it when he hugged you."

Still staring at the cell phone screen, Zach mutters, “Whatever,” and walks back into his bedroom.

Zach’s mom has just experienced one of the most obvious differences between her young elementary-aged child and his just-became-a-middle-schooler brother. And this is only the beginning.

Many parents are caught off guard by the change in their children when they begin the transition out of childhood and into adolescence. As a parent, you may have thought you had more time—but suddenly your 10-year-old is beginning to be less like a child and more like someone you don’t even recognize. Welcome to middle school.

If you’re thinking 10 years old is way too soon for early adolescence, you’re not alone. It used to be that many of the issues this book talks about didn’t show up in most children until at least the sixth grade. Now we’re finding that signs of puberty and the beginning of adolescence can start as early as the *third* grade. So “middle school” has become a strange and wonderful world of transition captured between the bookends of elementary school and high school—and it often doesn’t bear any resemblance to either.

We asked a group of experienced teachers to help us highlight some of the most distinct differences between elementary and middle school so parents can recognize when the transition is happening. If you have a child between the ages of 10 and 14, you’re probably seeing many of these transformations right before your eyes:

Elementary School Student	Middle School Student
Cheerful, playful, easygoing	Moody, often unexpressive
Gets up early in the morning, even on weekends	Almost always wants to sleep in
Life is directed by adults	Expected to multitask and plan ahead

Elementary School Student	Middle School Student
----------------------------------	------------------------------

Discipline and correction are direct and immediate by parents and teachers

Expected to be more self-correcting

Focused on whatever grade he or she is in

Expected to think beyond to high school, college, and career

Learns primarily through worksheets and objective tests

Required to complete long-term projects and engage in thoughtful class discussions

Acquires concrete, straightforward knowledge

Expected to think critically and deeply

Free to dream that anything's possible

Begins to judge aptitude and limits self based on perceived shortcomings

Accepts and follows parents' religious faith

Begins to ask for evidence to back up beliefs

Not really burdened by pressure of good grades

May resort to deception to maintain high grades

Takes trusted adults at their word

Challenges authority

Adopts parents' worldview and value structure

Interested in exploring other worldviews; value system is in flux

There are many books and articles by professionals who have presented compelling research on—and a myriad of ways to deal with—this mysterious stage of development known as early adolescence. But most of us still don't really know what's "normal." We can't quite figure out how these no-longer-a-child-but-not-really-a-teenager creatures think, or why they do the things they do. One minute they act like young adults; the next they resort to childish behaviors. So how can

parents provide a safe and loving environment, a stable and positive relationship, and a strong launching pad into the real world? There doesn't seem to be a standard guidebook or reliable source of knowledge for how to deal with these young but complex human beings.

We decided to go straight to the source. After all, most of these kids are trying to figure *themselves* out, too. Maybe talking to us would help everyone improve at coping with change and not driving each other crazy. So we started asking middle schoolers questions, and they started talking to us. Boy, did they talk! Responses poured in from parents and teachers when we asked them to get feedback from their students. It wasn't unusual for Sue (a full-time eighth grade teacher when we started this book) to ask her class one question like, "How do you wish your parents would act?" and type four pages of notes as they replied.



I can remember my boys, at age 13 and in the seventh grade, complaining almost daily. Most complaints were along the lines of "I don't have any real friends," "I just feel dumb," "I hate everything."

I would quickly reassure them: "Almost all kids your age feel that way."

"No, they don't."

"Yes, they do."

"No, they don't."

"Yes. They do!"

When they were graduating from high school, I reminded the boys of our conversations. They both nodded.

"You were right, Mom," Rob said.

Mike added, "Seventh grade was the worst year of my life."

—Cynthia Tobias



It turns out middle schoolers *do* want to be understood. But they don't have any better idea than their parents do about what's going on with their bodies, their emotions, or pretty much anything else in this stage of their lives. These are critical years; teens who don't have good relationships with their parents during middle school are going to have a very tough time in high school, when it's almost too late to establish the trust and rapport necessary to stay connected.

This book will give you dozens of valuable insights and practical strategies for handling life with a middle schooler. But the most important thing it offers is solid, tried-and-true ways—many directly from students themselves—to help you build and keep a strong and positive relationship with your child through what is often one of the most difficult stages of life.

When they were very young, your kids looked to you for guidance in their eagerness to learn how to walk, talk, and deal with the world. They used to love snuggling, confiding in you, and having you with them as much as possible. Now they're often embarrassed to be seen with you, resistant to your hugs and affection, and constantly looking for ways they can spend time with friends or just be alone. They may even make you believe that your parenting skills are hopelessly inadequate.

In some ways, it's a test of endurance—but not the kind you might expect. Instead of just barely hanging on and riding out these middle school years, this stretch of your lives together can be a time that enriches and deepens your relationship in ways you never thought possible. We guarantee it's worth the effort. The important thing to remember is that this stage is temporary; believe it or not, smoother roads are ahead if you can hang on. As the old saying goes, "When you're going through the tunnel, don't jump off the train!"

Before you start down the track into Chapter 1, though, pause for a moment to take the following true-or-false quiz. You might be

surprised to learn how much—or how little—you really know about your middle schooler:

Test Your Middle School IQ

Common beliefs about middle schoolers:

- T__ F__ 1. Most of them just want their parents to leave them alone.
- T__ F__ 2. By the time kids are 12 years old, they're pretty much grown up.
- T__ F__ 3. It's important to make good grades a high priority during middle school.
- T__ F__ 4. Parents should make time for a sit-down talk about "the facts of life."
- T__ F__ 5. Friends should never be more important to kids than parents and family.
- T__ F__ 6. Parents should do everything they can to be considered "cool."
- T__ F__ 7. Middle schoolers don't need much supervision with homework and school activities.
- T__ F__ 8. Middle schoolers are self-centered and believe the whole world revolves around them.
- T__ F__ 9. Kids this age no longer want to be part of any family activities.
- T__ F__ 10. When middle schoolers struggle in school, it's usually because of a learning disability.

Every answer is "false."

As you read this book, we'll explain why; get ready for the inside story.



Here's a Thought:


As you're reading this book, try sharing parts of it with your own middle schooler. Ask, "Are these authors right? Is this how you feel sometimes?" You may be surprised at how much your child will share with you when you make it clear you really want to listen!

part one



CHANGES

Where No Body Has Gone Before



*"I wish my mom knew that I'm struggling
with a lot of things right now."*

—A middle schooler

*"I wish my parents could understand the things that go
on when they aren't around. Also that I may not always
want to share what struggles I am going through . . ."*

—A middle schooler



"I think I might be raising a narcissist."

The statement came from a dad sitting in a room full of parents of middle school students. Heads were nodding in agreement all over the room as he continued. "She's so self-absorbed! It seems like she's always in the bathroom. I don't know what she's doing in there, but she spends *hours* in front of the mirror!"

Of course she does. Think about how much her looks have changed in the last six months. As adults, we usually don't find many drastic physical differences from one year to the next. We may get grayer hair or lose or gain a few pounds, but not much else. For an adolescent,

though, six months is like a lifetime—almost like translating dog years into human years!

Between the ages of 10 and 14, middle schoolers may gain as much as six inches in height (and a few inches in other places). They might sprout new hair in spots they won't show their parents, grow broader shoulders, and lose the roundness in their faces. About this time many students acquire braces or contacts, both of which bring new challenges of their own. The smallest pimple can cause a major meltdown. The mirror is the object of a new love-hate relationship—and it's hard to tear themselves away.

During this time when your teen exhibits these rapidly changing physical characteristics, it might help to remember this: You're not the only one who doesn't recognize this new person in your home. Your middle schooler is struggling to get to know the kid in the mirror, too.

Middle School Guys



What makes somebody cool?

*"Being able to embarrass yourself
without being embarrassed."*

—A middle schooler



This is a good time for parents to stay alert for changes in body shape and size. It's not unusual for a gap to suddenly appear between the top of a seventh grade boy's shoes and the bottom of his pants. Longer arms need longer sleeves, and broadening chests need bigger

shirt sizes. If your son can't be persuaded to go shopping, you can spare him a lot of embarrassment by discreetly buying clothes for him and returning whatever doesn't fit or meet with his approval.

Boys are constantly wondering if they're normal. They keep sneaking looks at each other in the locker room, comparing themselves to the other guys. Boys who suddenly shoot up several inches early in seventh or eighth grade often have an advantage; deservedly or not, they're looked up to in more ways than one. They're also more likely to be the object of the girls' interest.

For those who hit their growth spurts later, this can be an excruciating time. Classmates may keep calling attention to their short stature, and they may act out in anger as a result.

Middle School Girls



*What makes somebody cool?
"Having the right clothes, especially if
people compliment you on them."*

—A middle schooler



"Jenny, I need to talk to you for a minute."

Mrs. Walker was a young and popular middle school teacher, and Jenny quickly came up to her desk. Smiling, Mrs. Walker said, "Let's go out into the hallway for some privacy." When they were alone, Mrs. Walker gently pointed out that Jenny's new shirt (which was what every cool girl was wearing this fall) didn't quite measure up to the dress code.

Jenny was surprised. “Why? Most of my friends are wearing shirts like this, and they don’t get in trouble.”

Mrs. Walker nodded and lowered her voice. “Jenny, have you noticed that your shirt tends to . . . show a little more of your maturing body than the other girls’ shirts do?”

Jenny blushed, but was unconvinced. “So?”

Her teacher sighed. She didn’t really want to have this discussion here in the hallway, but Jenny didn’t seem to have any idea how the cleavage shown by her shirt was affecting the boys in her seventh grade classroom. As she briefly explained why Jenny’s shirt was a problem for young teenage boys, Jenny got a horrified expression on her face. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“*What?*” the girl shrieked. “*Eww!* Can I go get my sweatshirt?”


A girl’s body shape will change even more dramatically than the physique of the boy who sits next to her in class. This is a good time to have a discussion about modesty—and to gently explain that two friends can’t always wear the same styles. What looks good on one girl’s figure might not be very flattering on her friend.

Another important point parents need to make to their middle school daughters: The boys are *noticing* these changes. Often innocently, girls wear necklines that expose cleavage or tight, short clothing that reflects current fashion trends. What they may not realize is how it affects developing teenage boys. Middle school teachers repeatedly share stories about quietly pointing out to a student how her clothing is influencing a boy’s thoughts and raging hormones; almost always the young lady is horrified to find out how she’s being perceived. Frequently the idea hasn’t even occurred to her. As a parent, you can help tremendously by making your daughter aware of and sensitive to what’s going on.

Girls also need adult women who’ll discuss the issues that accompany her menstrual cycle, and the need for proper hygiene during this time. If there’s no trusted adult who will do that, many girls seek out

advice from their girlfriends—and what they hear isn't always accurate or helpful.

The Talk



"I never really had The Talk because I learned it in school. So one day my dad told me on the way to school that if I ever want to talk about that kind of stuff, I could ask. But I probably never will because it's too awkward."

—A middle schooler

"I was in the car with my mom when she turned down the radio and said, 'Alan?' And I said 'What?' and she started singing, 'Let me tell you 'bout the birds and the bees . . .' And I was like, 'Mom! No! I really don't want to talk about this in the car. I'm not comfortable with this right now.' And she was like, 'Okay. Well, just let me know if anything in your life is going on that you have any questions about.'"

—A middle schooler



What about having “The Talk” with your middle schooler?

This is something many parents dread. Even if they work up the courage to bring up the topic, their middle schoolers may be so uncomfortable that it just doesn't go well. Parents who are calm and matter-of-fact about the subject of sexuality, or who have honestly answered questions long before middle school, will have an easier time. But a parent who springs it on a middle schooler out of the blue can expect some reluctance and awkwardness from both parties.

A better solution is to address topics as they come up, or to use what's being shown on TV or sung about in the music they listen to as a jumping-off point. Most students will receive information in health or science classes, but it often isn't given through a filter of morals and values. It's important that parents use even short chats as opportunities to reflect their beliefs and to point out how they differ from those of the world around them.


Even if your efforts are awkward or don't seem well received, make your point—keeping it short and tackling the difficult issues. For example, many parents of sixth grade girls are asked if they want their daughters vaccinated against HPV (a sexually transmitted infection which can cause cervical cancer). Regardless of how a parent feels about the vaccination, this can be a time to talk about the risks of sexual promiscuity and God's plan for sexual purity.

Many middle schoolers prefer to get information from someone just a little older than they are. They say they're too embarrassed to ask their parents, so they go to an older sibling or even an aunt or uncle with their questions. They don't appreciate parents who overreact: "If I'm texting and my mom sees me, my mom will think it's a boy, so she will tell me that I don't need to be texting boys. It's like if I'm texting a boy, it obviously means that I'm pregnant or something."

If you're blessed to have someone you trust in your child's life who can be the go-to person for questions about these issues, that's great. If not, be sure you stay in tune with what's going on with your teen. Look for opportunities to bring up sensitive topics in as casual and natural a way as possible.

For guidelines and practical advice from physicians and other professionals about how and what you need to know and communicate to your children about sex, puberty, and related issues, you'll find that *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex* is very informative and helpful.

A Healthy Relationship Makes “The Talk” Easier



“My mom and I are really alike, so I’ll say stuff without even thinking. One time I asked her something about sex, and she told me I was a pastor’s daughter and shouldn’t even be thinking about that stuff. She asked me how I knew about it, and I said ‘I’m 13; I know about stuff.’”

—A middle schooler

“My aunt will sometimes talk to me, and since she’s in her twenties and closer to my age, it’s not as awkward. She’ll just say, ‘You know what this is, right? And you know not to do this and this?’ And I’ll say yes and we’ll go back to what we’re doing. I like talking to her because she just keeps it between us.”

—A middle schooler


“My mom told me where babies come from and she was calm about it, so we still have talks and it’s just conversation. So it’s not embarrassing or anything to either of us.”

—A middle schooler



You are often the best potential teacher for your son or daughter when it comes to dealing with these awkward yet life-changing issues. Prepare for this as well as you can; talk to professionals or other parents or mentors, and read relevant and trusted resources. Keep the lines of communication open with your middle schooler. Admit it when you just aren’t sure what to say and offer to help your son or daughter look up answers to questions.

Hygiene Matters



"I always wondered what B.O. [body odor] smelled like, and then my teacher told me it's kind of like onions. Now I smell it on boys all the time, and sometimes on girls. Why doesn't everyone just wear deodorant like they're supposed to?"

—A middle schooler



"Smell ya! Shouldn't have to tell ya!"

This obnoxious cry from childhood more than applies when puberty strikes. Even the most expensive or stylish shoes can hide stinky socks. And that's not all that can cause some pretty foul odors on a middle schooler.

As kids develop more adult-like bodies, they also develop more adult-like smells. Unfortunately, they don't yet have adult-like hygiene habits. In some ways they get dirtier than they did when they were little, but parents no longer have the option of undressing them and plopping them into the bathtub.

Eventually peer pressure may be enough motivation for middle schoolers to take care of their own hygiene. In the meantime, it's up to parents to insist on a daily shower, clean hair, clean teeth (emphasize fresh breath), clean armpits, and clean socks—and clean-everything-else that goes under their clothes. Don't assume this will happen every day automatically; you'll probably have to ask.

The topic may be uncomfortable at first, but many others will thank you—especially if you find ways to help your child smell socially acceptable within the confines of a small classroom, car, or family room at home.

What Teachers Told Us About Physical Changes of the Middle School Years

- Hygiene is important. As early as third grade, some kids begin to smell. At the beginning of fourth grade, some students should start wearing deodorant.
- Puberty seems to be happening earlier. Girls are developing. It catches parents and teachers unaware.
- One boy's body odor was so strong that the teacher had to open doors or kids would feel sick. His grandma owned a restaurant and cooked everything with onions and garlic; it seemed to be coming out of his pores. The teacher would intercept him in the morning and hand him deodorant. Then she'd meet him at lunch and tell him, "Reapply."
- P.E. uniforms should be washed regularly. So should other school clothes or uniforms.
- What teachers used to see in grades six, seven, and eight is now showing up in grades three, four, and five. Girls are developing earlier, and are either embarrassed by it or "loud and proud" about it.

To prevent too much awkwardness or embarrassment, you might consider creating a code word to discreetly let your middle schooler know it's time for an armpit freshening. Sue had a student whose mother had died when he was nine years old, so he was being raised by his elderly grandmother. He often wore nylon jerseys but seldom wore deodorant. After a heart-to-heart talk, they agreed that their code word would be "secret." If Mrs. Acuña told him she "had a secret," he would immediately head to the restroom to wash and reapply deodorant (which she supplied and he stored in his gym locker). If he told *her* he had a secret, she would know he needed to be excused for a few minutes to freshen up.

For a parent, the code word might be “pits”—as in, “Hey, Bud, wasn’t last night’s football game *the pits?*” accompanied by a smile and a raising of eyebrows. The middle schooler may be slow to catch on at first, but eventually it will sink in: “Oh! *Oh!* I’ll be right back.” The result: a graceful exit from the room to apply deodorant or change a shirt.



Here’s a Thought:

This is a case when you can do something positive with a middle schooler’s fear of doing the wrong thing. Kids don’t want to find out that their classmates were talking behind their backs about how bad they smelled. If nothing else works, try telling a story about a student you remember from seventh grade who always smelled so bad that nobody wanted to sit by him. Or use the one we’ve already mentioned about the boy whose grandma ran a garlic-and-onions restaurant. Chances are good that the fear of being “that” student will be all the motivation it takes to get your middle schooler to shower more often.