

# THE HIDDEN LIVES OF MIDDLE SCHOOLERS



PHOTO: © CARL SCHNEIDER/GETTY IMAGES.

What's really going on in the minds of middle schoolers? *Instructor* talks to Linda Perlstein, who spent a year finding out. **By Jenn Shreve**

**B**ullying, drug use, sex—curious about whether or not these news-making trends describe your middle school students? And if so, how do they affect your classroom?

We asked Linda Perlstein, a reporter who spent a year attending classes at Wilde Lake Middle School in Maryland. Perlstein witnessed a side of middle school that teachers rarely get to see. “The kids asked me to read their diaries, invited me to their parties,” she says.

As she does in *Not Much Just Chillin': The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers* (Ballantine, 2004), Perlstein offered some fresh insights on teaching, respect, and life inside middle school.

## »»Why do we find this age group to be so mysterious?

You have this formerly open, sweet thing turn into this gangly, grunty creature. It's hard to adapt to the relationship the way we need to. Adults are poorly equipped to remember what it was like.

## »»How did you get the students to trust and talk to you?

Kids are quick to open up, if you're not their teacher or parent. They're shameless, actually—they wanted their real names in my book. They just didn't feel like they had much to hide. >>

# tough topic

## »»You saw teaching from a kids'-eye view. What strategies worked the best?

When teachers governed the class without threats or extensive discipline. You can do this by engaging the kids and letting them have input and choice in their learning, and providing a context for what you're teaching. Unleash kids so they can practice solving problems creatively.

## »»What was it like going to a middle-school party?

It was fun, strange, and amusing. I liked these kids, so in some sense it was entertaining for me, and in many ways it felt like regular hanging out.

## »»The media talks a lot about preteens and sex. How close is the coverage to the truth?

It's pretty sensationalized. There are, however, disturbing things worth noting.



## What Middle Schoolers Need

- **CHOICE:** Practice making decisions in a supportive environment.
- **ACTIVE LEARNING:** A switch in gears at least every 15 to 20 minutes.
- **RELEVANCE:** Connections to the real world that bring lesson concepts alive.
- **COLLABORATION:** Group work to aid in critical socio-emotional development.
- **DIFFERENTIATION:** The flexibility to match individual needs and interests.

FROM REACHING AND TEACHING MIDDLE SCHOOL LEARNERS, BY PENNY A. BISHOP AND SUSANNA W. PFLAUM (CORWIN, 2005)

Sexuality among kids is a different thing today than it was twenty, ten, or even five years ago. It can't just be, "Well, my students aren't having sex." Probably not, but your students very likely hear a lot of talk about sex at lunch.

## »»What are the consequences of this new frankness?

After watching kids freak dance, I don't worry they're going to go into the alley behind school and have sex, but I do worry about what their relationships are going to be like down the road, how they are going to treat each other—with love or as disposable objects for pleasure.

## »»How can teachers encourage more respectful relationships?

Don't romanticize opposite-sex friendships. Don't ask, "Oh, is she your girrrrrl-friend?" It may seem harmless, but it contradicts the notion that boys and girls can and should develop platonic

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friendships with each other. Also, stop on a dime when you hear sex talk in the classroom or anything remotely resembling sexual teasing.

»»*Regardless of what goes on behind closed doors, one thing that's obvious is how emotional these kids are.*

It's what you have to love and hate most about middle schoolers—they wear their emotions on their sleeves. You have to learn how to navigate the tears.

»»*How can teachers separate themselves from the drama but remain approachable?*

We've created this false dichotomy—schools can be rigorous academically *or* nurturing for the child. You can't do either right without doing both. It's easier to be tough academically when you're keyed into who your students are.

»»*Were there times when you wanted to stop being a reporter and get directly involved?*

I knew there were situations I could make better, but I just took notes. Now I'm friends with many of the kids and I can help them in ways I couldn't when I was working on the book.

»»*What are the challenges in recruiting teachers to work with this age group?*

First, it's easy to look down on teaching middle school. You might have had a bad experience during your own middle-school years and don't want to revisit it. But more important—and this is systemic—the educational field is set up for elementary and high school. Middle school is treated like an afterthought.

»»*What do you hope teacher-readers come away with?*

Remember you're not alone. Also, it's not a good time to throw up your hands—you can make a lot of difference. Understand who these kids are, and stay intimately involved, because they do need that. □

WHAT'S YOUR TAKE ON THE MIDDLE-SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?  
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