

Name: _____

Class: _____

Middle School

Prologue & Act Two (This American Life Transcript)

By Ira Glass
2011

*Ira Glass is the host of WBEZ Chicago's public radio show This American Life, which uses interviews and real-life stories to examine different topics each week. On October 28, 2011, This American Life spoke with a mixture of middle school students about their experiences as adolescents. **Skill Focus:** In this lesson, you'll practice identifying an author's central idea and how they support it. Identifying an author's central idea means paying attention to the evidence and reasons they give for their idea. As you read, take note of details that present the thoughts and concerns of the interviewed students, and what those reveal about middle school and adolescence.*

Prologue

[1] **Ira Glass:** Hey everybody. Ira Glass here. So we got this email at our radio show near the end of the last school year from a 14-year-old.

Annie: Hello?

Ira Glass: Hey, is this Annie?

Annie: Yes.

[5] **Ira Glass:** I called her up at her house in California and asked her to read it.

Annie: It says, "Dear *This American Life*, I just escaped the whitewashed, brick-walled, iron-gated prison that is commonly known as middle school, and I'm finally out for good. But in all the time I've listened to your show, I've never heard an episode devoted¹ to what goes on inside the walls of a middle school. I hope you'll think about it. Anonymous."

Ira Glass: Yeah, you signed it anonymous, but then your email was signed with your name.



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1. **Devote** (*verb*) to focus on or give attention to

Annie: Yeah.

Ira Glass: Yeah.

[10] **Annie:** I did anonymous because in middle school, everybody is so judgmental, and I didn't want the kids to judge me or anything if they heard me on the radio.

Ira Glass: Mainly, she says that she wrote to us because she and her friends were talking right after they left eighth grade about how terrible middle school was. And she wondered was it just as bad for other people as it was for them?

Annie: You always wonder whether other people are going through the same thing as you. And it'd be cool to hear other people's stories about it and what they went through.

Ira Glass: And if you had to explain to somebody what are the worst things about middle school — can I ask you to just walk me through it. What is so bad about middle school?

Annie: Kids there are all in socially awkward stages, that the drama every day can be frustrating. And girls write things that are someone likes so and so. And then no matter who you are, or what you do, you'll get made fun of for it. Anything, anything in the world you can get made fun of for.

[15] **Ira Glass:** In Annie's case, she had friends who smoked, so she got criticized for smoking. But then she also was made fun of for not smoking, for being too much of a sissy to start smoking. She was made fun of for coming from a bilingual elementary school where everybody learned to speak Spanish and spoke it throughout the day.

Annie: And leaving elementary school, I guess I thought that when I got to middle school, everyone would think it was really cool that I spoke Spanish, but when I got there, they mostly just thought it was dumb. I don't know if they were jealous or what. They would make fun of me for it. Then they'd say we were all full of ourselves, that we spoke different languages and stuff.

Ira Glass: Did it make you feel bad?

Annie: Yeah, I didn't want to stick out in that way. If I got a new sweater or something, say for Christmas, that I really liked, and I would really want to wear it to school or something, but I'd be nervous because what if someone didn't like my sweater or someone made fun of me for wearing it. It can be hard to do even the smallest things, because you're so nervous that people tease you or judge you from it.

Ira Glass: That sweater example, is that a real example?

[20] **Annie:** Yeah, it actually is. I worried about it so much. I also had a pair of moccasins that I'd never worn, and they're kind of my signature now. Everybody really likes them. They're ankle-high, lace-up moccasins.

Ira Glass: And how long did you have the moccasins before you actually wore them?

Annie: A few months, probably two months. I guess I just thought if people didn't like them, they would all make fun of me for wearing them. And I didn't want to stand out that much.

Ira Glass: What could be done to make middle school better?

Annie: I don't think you can really do anything about it. [LAUGHS] Nothing.

[25] **Ira Glass:** We talked about this for a little while. She said basically, everybody comes into middle school as a little kid, and you're going to have to grow up, and figure out who's in what group, and who you are, and who's above who. And you're going to have to figure that out somewhere at that age, right? It might as well be middle school. And it was terrible, she says, but now she's in high school.

Annie: Whatever middle school was, it worked. Everyone is a lot friendlier, and everyone's lives are a lot better now.

Ira Glass: Well, today on our radio program, for Annie we look at whatever it is that happens in those mysterious years that we call middle school. We have stories today from all over the country, people lurching² their way through these years when you're figuring out so, so much. We go to middle school dances and classrooms, and down to the Mexican border. From WBEZ Chicago, it's *This American Life*, distributed by Public Radio International. I'm Ira Glass. Stay with us.

Act Two: Stutter Step

Ira Glass: Act Two, Stutter Steps. One good place to see the experiment that is life in middle school in action is a middle school dance. Last Friday, there were middle school dances all over the country, all at the same time, and we sent reporters to a half dozen of them to find out how kids were doing. They talked to them before the kids went inside to the field of battle. And, no surprise, we found a lot of stress, a lot of uncertainty.

Rob Wildeboer: Who's nervous about tonight?

[30] **Girl 1:** I am.

Rob Wildeboer: Why?

2. **Lurch** (*verb*) to move in an uncontrolled or unsteady way

Girl 1: Well, just you don't know what's it going to be like. And I'm just confused. I just don't know. Yeah.

Ira Glass: These four girls are sixth graders, and they're in a car on the way to a neon-themed dance at Edgewood Middle School in Highland Park, Illinois, with their mom and reporter Rob Wildeboer.

Rob Wildeboer: Who's going to dance with a boy tonight?

[35] **Girl 1:** Nobody.

Girl 2: I don't know.

Girl 3: I can tell you that.

Girl 4: No one in this car.

Ira Glass: Roughly 800 miles east in New Jersey, sixth grader Ethan Derosé was hoping there would be at least one slow dance, though did he feel ready for a slow dance?

[40] **Ethan:** Nope, not at all.

Brian Reed: Why not? What are you worried about?

Ethan: I just don't know how to do it. I'm not sure that I'll do it correctly or — yeah.

Ira Glass: He's standing in front of the school with one of our producers, Brian Reed, as kids stream into the school. Ethan is wearing a button-up shirt with green and black stripes that he is not happy with.

Ethan: That was my mom. She made me wear it. She said that if I don't wear the two shirts that I am wearing right now that I can't go to the dance.

[45] **Brian Reed:** What are you hoping happens at this dance?

Ethan: I'm hoping nothing bad happens, like no humiliation or not something that'll be a story for the next month or two.

Ira Glass: Of course, Ethan and the girls in that car in Illinois are sixth graders. In New York City, seventh graders Evelyn Benson and Alice Westerman are excited and feeling very grown up on their way to their school's Halloween dance.

Evelyn: I'm really happy because last year, they split the gym in half, so it's light on one side and pitch black on the other side. All the sixth graders are banned from the dark side, but that's where all the cool kids are. So now we're in seventh grade, we can dance on the dark side. So it's like, woo, we're cool.

Alice: Dance on the dark side.

[50] **Ira Glass:** Some of the middle school boys got up the nerve to ask girls to be their dates to the dances. But because this is a new experience for the girls too, being asked out on a date, they don't exactly know how to handle it. Here's a girl named Autumn talking with our producer, Lisa Pollak, in Delaware, the afternoon of the dance.

Lisa Pollak: Did you get asked to the dance?

Autumn: Yes, I did.

Lisa Pollak: And what did you say?

Autumn: I said I don't know, but I probably won't say yes.

[55] **Lisa Pollak:** Wait, you haven't told him yes or no yet?

Autumn: No.

Lisa Pollak: OK, so it's 1:20, and the dance is at 7:00.

Autumn: Yeah.

Lisa Pollak: When do you have to let him know?

[60] **Autumn:** I probably won't answer.

Lisa Pollak: Are you serious?

Autumn: Yeah. I just kind of want to hang out with the girls.

Lisa Pollak: So he's the only one who asked you.

Autumn: There was other people too.

[65] **Lisa Pollak:** How many?

Autumn: Probably five-ish.

Lisa Pollak: Five boys asked you to the dance?

Autumn: Yeah.

Lisa Pollak: You told all these guys, I don't know?

[70] **Autumn:** Yeah.

Lisa Pollak: What if they took that as a yes?

Autumn: Then they got the wrong answer.

Lisa Pollak: Do you say “I don’t know” because it feels too mean to say no?

Autumn: Yeah, I’m not mean.

[75] **Ira Glass:** Of course, some of the boys are no better. During the dance in Windham, Maine, our reporter Claire Holman pulled six grader, Christopher Potter, out of the action for a chat.

Claire Holman: Is there anyone you like at the dance?

Christopher: There is.

Claire Holman: Does she know?

Christopher: Yes, she does. We’re kind of dating at the time.

[80] **Claire Holman:** So how’s that going?

Christopher: Good, it just started 20 minutes into this, so yeah.

Claire Holman: You asked a girl to go out during the dance?

Christopher: No, a girl came to me and asked me out.

Claire Holman: OK, let’s go over it minute by minute. So where were you when this happened?

[85] **Christopher:** I was in the cafeteria, just got a drink of root beer, and she walks up to me and asks me to go out.

Claire Holman: What did she say exactly?

Christopher: She said, “Chris, will you go out with me?”

Claire Holman: And were you surprised?

Christopher: Not really. We’ve kind of been on and off again.

[90] **Claire Holman:** So it’s not the first time.

Christopher: Yeah, not the first time.

Claire Holman: But she always asks you? Or do you ever ask her?

Christopher: Well, it's kind of weird, because it's always, she wants me to ask her. So it was weird that she asked me.

Elliot: Usually, they don't last. It's a middle school relationship. Nothing really happens.

[95] **Eric Mennel:** What does that mean, a middle school relationship? What do you mean it doesn't last?

Jonathan: It's destined to fail pretty much.

Elliot: Yeah, because it's a middle school. This isn't where you're starting your life with. You don't hear things about middle school sweethearts.

Ira Glass: In Richmond, outside Moody Middle School's dance, reporter Eric Mennel spoke with Elliot German and his step-brother Jonathan Lawton. They're both eighth graders who ran through the official rules for the dance.

Jonathan: So some of them are kind of funny, because I mean it's like no hands below the waist, no petting, which I thought was kind of funny.

[100] **Eric Mennel:** Wait, no petting?

Jonathan: Yeah, no petting.

Eric Mennel: What does that mean?

Jonathan: No one knows.

Elliot: It was specifically on the flier that they hand out. They give you the dress code, and then they give you the rules, "no petting." And it's in quotations, and you never know what it means. Do people sit there at dances and just pet other people? Because that would be really weird.

[105] **Ira Glass:** There are rules like this at all the dances, and some more comprehensible³ than others. As for whether or not the kids obey the rules and what actually happens inside the dance on the actual dance floor, one of our producers, Lisa Pollak, went inside to the dance floor at the Fall Costume dance in Lewes, Delaware. And I'm going to hand it off to her.

Lisa Pollak: So the scene in the gym was pretty much the way you remember it. Older kids dancing in the middle, younger kids at the periphery,⁴ a few aimlessly wandering around,

3. **Comprehensible** (*adjective*) able to be understood

4. **Periphery** (*noun*) outer edge; perimeter

looking like they're not sure what to do. Lots of kids were dancing, jumping up and down. Occasionally, you'd see a fist pump. They danced in these tightly packed clusters, very little room between them. And outside of the clusters were chaperons, ready to step in if they saw any grinding or suggestive dancing.

Hovering outside one of the clusters was a teacher named John Gauze, and he looked perplexed.

John: This knot has got me on edge at this point.

Lisa Pollak: Why?

[110] **John:** Because they're trying to get away with stuff. You can tell by the way they're looking at you. They have a guilty look, because you're about to see me swoop.

Lisa Pollak: He actually did swoop. He plunged into the pack of kids, pulled the boy aside and talked to him. Then he told me why.

John: He needed to be taken aside and told to stop being up against those girls like that. I don't want to jump in too much, but I just want to give them the "whoa," the flat hand "whoa," just whoa. Just calm it down a little. I mean usually, if I see it, then they're going to stop because they see me.

Lisa Pollak: And then comes the moment of truth, the moment that forces every kid in the room to make a decision, the moment that separates the timid from the brave, the slow song. I watch it with teacher Brian Comra.

Brian: So we got our slow song, and just as I suspected, a majority of the students left the dance floor. All the couples are in the middle of the dance floor in a cluster. I suspect so they're not near an adult.

[115] **Lisa Pollak:** I love how the kids go up to the couples dancing and interrupt them.

Brian: Oh absolutely.

Lisa Pollak: Some of the couples didn't have much privacy. Their friends were standing a foot away, hanging out and talking to them. And every so often, a random kid would just cut across the dance floor.

Lisa Pollak: This girl right here just grabbed onto the back of her friend's neck while the friend was dancing with the boy.

Brian: Yeah, I don't know if she didn't want to be left out, or they came as friends. I think at this stage of the game, it's hard when boys and girls pair off, and then one friend is always left behind.

[120] **Lisa Pollak:** There are a few of these slow dances, but most of the songs are fast. And then suddenly, the song, “Hit the Road Jack” starts playing, and the lights snap on.

Lisa Pollak: Oh my god, they just all like — oh my god.

Brian: Yeah, it ends very abruptly.⁵ It’s 9:00. It’s 9 o’clock.

Lisa Pollak: That’s it?

Brian: That’s it. There’s no wind down. 9 o’clock. Lights come on. Parents are waiting. It’ll be empty in another minute.

[125] **Lisa Pollak:** And he was right. The experiment in mini-adulthood that is the middle school dance was over. The same kids who, minutes earlier, were holding each other and swaying awkwardly on the dance floor, got into cars and said hi to their parents.

Ira Glass: Lisa Pollak. Coming up, surviving middle school by pretending that you are from a completely different family. That is in a minute, from Chicago Public Radio and Public Radio International, when our program continues.

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5. **Abruptly** (*adverb*) suddenly

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. In line 6, Annie says she "just escaped the whitewashed, brick-walled, iron-gated prison that is commonly known as middle school." What term best describes Annie's tone toward middle school?
 - A. critical
 - B. hesitant
 - C. regretful
 - D. devastated

2. Refer to the conversation with Ethan in lines 39-46. What is a concern that Ethan shares with Annie, the first student Ira Glass interviewed?
 - A. They are both concerned about their parents' involvement in their lives.
 - B. They are both concerned that people do not understand middle school.
 - C. They are both worried about not having dates to the school dance.
 - D. They are both worried about standing out and being embarrassed.

3. What term best describes the tone of the phrase "field of battle" in line 28?
 - A. disapproving
 - B. encouraging
 - C. humorous
 - D. frustrated

4. What does Act Two suggest is a challenge of being an adolescent?
 - A. Adolescents want freedom from their parents, but they also want their parents' help and security.
 - B. Adolescents want to choose new friend groups, but they are afraid of losing old friends.
 - C. Adolescents want alone time, but they also seek out constant social interaction.
 - D. Adolescents want to be grown-up, but they also feel awkward and confused.

5. Summarize what parents and teachers can learn about their middle school students through this podcast.
