

Finding What's Right

Readers' Advisory for Middle Grades

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As children's librarians continue to support the development of literacy skills to children before and after they begin reading, there is also an ongoing need for librarians and support staff to be properly trained in providing readers' advisory (RA) service.

While storytime and other children's programs may take priority within most children's departments, RA continues to be an integral part of library service. Unfortunately, many RA tools and associated research are focused on adult readers, creating a distinct scarcity of RA material for children. This article will discuss the developmental considerations and interests for school-aged readers (aged 8–12) and give recommendations for providing RA services.

According to readers' advisory expert Joyce G. Saricks, "A successful readers' advisory service is one in which knowledgeable, non-judgmental staff help fiction and non-fiction readers with their leisure-reading needs."¹

Significant readers' advisory resources are available for adult readers, but RA services for school aged readers are sparser. This expands to Library and Information Studies graduate programs, where many readers' advisory courses exclusively focus on the adult library user.² While Saricks outlines that much of readers' advisory training is relevant for both children and adults, the developmental stages, reading interests, available tools, and awareness of popular materials are all potential barriers for providing RA services for middle grade children.

The middle years are commonly considered ages 8 to 12, and consist of many physical, emotional, and cultural milestones. This is

understood to be the time when children begin to form strong and complex friendships, grow more independent, and understand multiple perspectives.

Children of this age experience a variety of stressors in their lives, including peer pressure, growing academic challenges, and body changes.³ During this time, children's literacy skills are also growing, particularly in the areas of textual comprehension, inference skills, the ability to differentiate between factual and opinion-based arguments, and cause and effect.⁴

Within the library profession, early childhood and adolescence are the two primary areas for research on child development and library services. According to Diane Banks and Peggy Thomas, middle childhood has been misunderstood as a time of plateau between the progress of early childhood and before the onset of the teen years. Banks and Thomas continue to rebuke this misconception, outlining the developmental and environmental factors that influence child development and behavior, including entry into formal education, participation in after-school activities, the increasing importance of friendships, and growing independence from caregivers.⁵



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RA Resources to Consider

To provide excellent readers' advisory, an awareness of current popular materials for middle grade readers is essential. Library staff should be keen to learn about what children are reading, playing, and viewing. Beyond library-created book lists and book awards, there are a variety of incredible middle grade resources online. Here are a few suggested ones to try.

Podcasts

- *School Library Journal, The Yarn*: A podcast by an elementary school librarian and an elementary school teacher, this podcast looks at children's literature and includes interviews with authors, illustrators, and other children's literature experts. <https://theyarn.slj.com>.
- *Literaticast*: Literary agent Jennifer Laughran discusses all things children's publishing and literature and focuses on picture books, middle grade, and young adult novels. Each episode discusses new children's titles as well as other discussions about publishing with invited guests. <https://www.jenniferlaughran.com/literaticast>.
- *Book Clubs for Kids*: Host Kitty Felde is joined by three students to discuss a favorite new or classic middle grade novel, followed by an interview with the author, and a celebrity reading. An important tool to hear how children are experiencing and enjoying middle grade literature. <https://www.bookclubforkids.org/>.

Websites or Blogs

- *The Brown Bookshelf*: A blog designed to share and promote the best books written and illustrated by Black creators. <https://thebrownbookshelf.com/>.
- *KiBooka*: Blog highlighting books written and illustrated by Korean Americans and creators from the Korean diaspora. <https://kibooka.com/>.
- *South Asian Kidlit*: Children's book author Darshana Khiani's website highlights South Asian literature and illustrators through blog posts, book reviews, and book lists. <https://darshanakhiani.com/southasiankidlit/>.
- *Latinx in Kidlit*: A website that explores the world of Latinx children's and YA literature. <https://latinosinkidlit.com/>.

The following recommendations can support children's librarians and library information staff in this endeavor.

Conversation and Personal Connection

Conversation is the primary driver of readers' advisory service. A positive conversation builds a relationship between the child and library staff, allowing staff insight into the daily life and activities of the child. Questions such as, "What are you watching? What do you and your friends talk about? What are you playing together?"⁶ provide ample opportunity for children to begin a discussion. While resources such as *Novelist Kids* and *Teens* can provide titles and information to librarians, conversations with children about their interests and daily lives are the best way to connect them with books they will enjoy.

Multiple Options and Formats

Research suggests readers respond best to library materials they are allowed to choose⁷ and that suggesting multiple options increases the likelihood of readers' advisory success.⁸ Graphic novels, comic books, movies, e-books, and audiobooks all serve as effective entry points to reading, and multiple titles in multiple formats should be at the forefront of readers' advisors' minds. Excluding these options may dismiss the unique needs of school-aged children.

Physical, Emotional, and Cultural Milestones

The middle years are a time of distinct physical, emotional, and cultural change. RA professionals should keep in mind this age group's developmental milestones, including growing independence, importance of friendships, body changes, and growing literacy skills, such as increased textual comprehension and inference skills. A focus on the many changes middle years children experience will strengthen both RA conversations and recommendations.

Passive Programming

Creating passive programming specific to middle grade children is a low-stakes way to make readers feel welcome to the library and can serve as an icebreaker for children to interact with library staff. Though not a readers' advisory service, passive programming can increase middle grade engagement and set up your RA service for success.

Enthusiasm

The role of library staff in readers' advisory service is to support library patrons with enjoyable reading material. As such, in the conversation process with children or when young readers select material, their decisions should always be celebrated and met

with enthusiasm.⁹ Celebrating children's reading achievements is a great way to encourage child engagement with reading materials and with library staff.

Diverse Options

Middle grade children reflect the spectrum of diversity that exists throughout society. Children's librarians and departments work hard to ensure their collections, displays, and programs reflect this diversity, and it is imperative to have it at the forefront of readers' advisory work as well.

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