

## **THE VIEW FROM THIRTEEN IN THE PRESSURE COOKER THAT IS MIDDLE SCHOOL, EMOTIONS RUN HIGH AS KIDS DEAL WITH FASHION, STUDIES AND THE OPPOSITE SEX.**

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The toughest decision for Kiana Sharp this morning -- or any morning, for that matter -- is whether to wear her hair up or down.

Today, she opts for wearing it down. Then, minutes before leaving the house, she changes her mind.

Her mom, Cynthia Sharp, is immediately drafted for hair duty when she arrives home from a morning class at Valencia Community College.

"Mom, you have to make sure it's smooth!" her daughter says, repeatedly slicking back the hair on top of her head.

"Then you have to poof it up," Kiana says, fluffing her ponytail and studying herself in the bathroom mirror.

Kiana lives in the Westwood neighborhood, near Pine Hills west of Orlando, with her mom, dad, 7-year-old brother, Joshua, and 9-year-old sister, Amber.

Both siblings cause her occasional trouble -- Amber when she crosses the imaginary line in the room the two sisters share, and Joshua each time he bounces through the doorway unannounced. A sign on the door warns that no boys are allowed.

"The girls are developing, and he just doesn't understand that," their father, Erving Sharp, explains.

Kiana's bedroom is one of her favorite places -- "I love my room," she says.

She's just not thrilled about having to share it.

"Look what Amber did with her blanket. It's all balled up. That is not cute," she tells her mom.

Her parents understand the challenges of middle-school kids today.

"Thirteen- and 14-year-olds have advanced to a whole new level," says her dad.

For Kiana and many others her age, appearance is critically important. She dresses more conservatively than one of her Lockhart Middle School classmates, who shows up to science lab with 11 ear piercings and tight low-rider jeans adorned with dangling chains.

But like many other seventh- and eighth-graders, Kiana faces a slew of other demands in the peer pressure cooker known as middle school.

There are relatively simple decisions to make, like whom to sit next to on the bus, and the monumental issues to face -- puberty, the availability of drugs and a new sense of independence, experts say.

"It's a tough step between childhood and teenage-hood," said Chris Stenger, a seventh-grade guidance counselor at Ocoee Middle School. "Their bodies are changing, and they're either up or they're down. It's almost like they don't fit into their skin right."

Students who resist drugs and sex face daily quandaries, such as what, or who, to look like.

"They definitely are more sensitive to their appearance," said Nancy Rizzo, a clinical psychologist in Winter Park.

For some, it's deciding whether to go for piercing No. 12 or which T-shirt slogan best fits the day: "I'm sorry, did I look like I was listening?" or "Don't annoy the unmedicated person," both spotted recently in the hallway at Lockhart Middle School in Orlando.

### RULERS OF THE COURTYARD

At Lockhart, eighth-graders rule, and it's no more evident than in the courtyard, where some of the 1,250 students hang out before the first buzzer sounds. They meet in an unofficially assigned corridor, sitting on concrete benches while waiting for friends.

"If you're a sixth-grader, they'll kick you out," Kiana says.

The eyes of middle-schoolers are in constant motion, scanning each other's clothes and hair.

When a seventh-grade boy walks by and checks out Kiana, she whispers to a friend, "He's giving me that 'I-want-you-but-can't-have-you' look."

Once class starts, students dive into math formulas and verb conjugation, but until then, bubble-gum cracking girls in the throes of puberty talk mostly about one thing: boys.

"It's a time of hormones kicking in," Rizzo said, adding that most girls hit puberty between the ages of 9 and 12 -- earlier than boys, who typically face puberty between 10 and 13. "It's that awkward stage, where you grow 5 inches, or say, 'Wow, I have breasts. Now what do I do?'"

About 20 percent of adolescents have had sexual intercourse before their 15th birthday, and one in seven sexually experienced girls has been pregnant, according to a report released earlier this year by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

And as portrayed in the movie *Thirteen*, a disturbing film depicting the worst of middle school, sex and drugs often go hand in hand.

The report by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, which analyzed seven studies conducted in the late 1990s, found that 29 percent of the sexually experienced adolescents said they had smoked regularly, and 43 percent had used marijuana, compared with 8 percent and 10 percent of the virgins.

In *Thirteen*, a "good girl" is drawn to a popular "bad girl" and soon finds herself stealing, smoking, drinking, tattooing, huffing and having sex.

"Friends are real important at that age," Rizzo said. "They have a huge influence over you. And if they go in [to middle school] already depressed and having low self-esteem, that's certainly going to make it a lot worse."

Rizzo recently worked with a 14-year-old alcoholic drug addict who refused to listen to her parents.

"Unfortunately, that does happen," she said.

But those cases are more the exception than the rule, she said.

Stenger said that, individually, most 13-year-olds are "wonderful," but that in groups "they tend to be unlikable."

While not all early-teens are having sex or doing drugs, "everybody has a crush," Kiana says, walking with a friend to the basketball courts, where boys in low-hanging jeans take to the courts.

"We make fun of the boys, and the boys try to flirt with us," Kiana says.

Kiana's crush has a great smile -- he's a "dime" for sure -- a "perfect 10" on the 1-to-10 cuteness scale.

"And he always smells like Tommy Hilfiger," she says.

But as is the case with many 13-year-olds, this crush presents a major predicament. The guy she likes has a best friend who likes her. Major complications. So for now, she's doing her best just to be friends with both.

When the first buzzer signals the first of six classes, or blocks, students have five minutes to get their books from their lockers. It's a whirlwind 300 seconds -- a sea of gabbing adolescents crammed into the "Royals Territory," the eighth-grade hallway.

#### HALLWAY MANEUVERS

Kiana grabs pastel notebooks before maneuvering the moving mass of other 13-year-olds to get to Dianja Williams' locker, lined with photos of friends and a magazine picture of the rapper Chingy.

Then, in a matter of seconds, she slips into her first block seat, joining two other students ready to tackle a reading assignment.

"Is that really Gucci?" Kiana asks, eyeing a classmate's visor dangling from his belt loop.

"Yeah," he responds, before teacher Tiffany Torkelson asks students to take out their reading logs.

The rest of the block is filled with peer grading and "bubble maps," flow charts used to analyze short-story plots.

"She's probably trying to rewrite it all and make me look bad," a classmate jokes about Kiana, who was writing suggestions on his bubble map.

Some teachers are stern, while others joke around, trying to speak teenage lingo.

"Whad uupppp?" science teacher Mike Smith asks students, who respond with giggles as they take seats around black-topped science tables.

During science lab it is nonstop chatter. As the room gets louder and louder and louder, Smith uses his own quieting technique, calling for a "time situation."

"Five, four, three -- I'm down to three, folks!" Finally, it is quiet.

"I have a lot of patience in the morning," Smith later says, "but that fades by the end of the day."

While 13-year-olds share common pressures and interests, they also struggle to blend clashing personalities.

Some in Kiana's science class take lab work seriously while others, well, don't.

"I wonder if you can drink this stuff?" one student says, his lab mate rolling her eyes.

Some students work hard, intent on doing the whole lab -- correctly -- before the class ends. Others grab their guts, cracking up when they spill some of the colored water.

One boy reminds a girl to pour over a tray in case the liquid spills.

Her typical teenage response: "Whatever."