

Being 13

Three girls, one year. This is what it's like to be 13 today, in a world that can't stop talking about the dire state of your future.

By Jessica Bennett Sept. 20, 2023

As eighth grade began, Anna was worried that she wasn't very popular because her parents wouldn't let her on Snapchat. London had a tough couple of days; she had been sent to the principal's office for lashing out at a girl who had been mean to her by sending a text impersonating a boy that girl liked. And when Addi's school had a lockdown later in the year, she spent the evening decompressing with her sister, reenacting a TikTok sketch — her mind far from the flashing police lights that had reflected in the windows.



Addi, Michigan

I just feel like I need my phone, you know? Like it helps me get through the day.

← Anna, London and Addi — three girls from three states, who, at 13, were legally able to join social media, and whose cellphones were always close at hand.

I started following them a year ago, after they responded to an open call for teenagers who'd let a reporter into their lives and phones. With their parents' permission, they each wrote weekly diaries and recorded voice memos about their days (except when they were grounded). The girls' last names have been withheld to protect their privacy, but all of the images and text messages you see here are real.

Listen to This Article



I wanted to put a face to the alarming headlines about teens and social media — in particular, girls. And to understand one tension: What happens when girls' self-confidence, which has been shown

3 girls who Jessica Bennett focuses on throughout the article

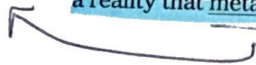
to drop right around this age, intersects with the thing that seems to be obviously contributing to their struggle?



Anna, Colorado
I feel like I'm a lot more insecure than I was at the start of the year.

The long-term effects of social media on the teenage brain have not yet been defined, much less proven — which isn't to say it's all bad. But adolescent girls have long struggled with depression and anxiety at disproportionate rates compared with their male peers, a reality that metastasized during the pandemic.

Metastasized -
to spread or grow
by



} interesting how females such as girls & women struggle a lot more by depression & anxiety than men (boys)

ADVERTISEMENT

What is known is that at age 13, a person is still more than a decade away from having a fully developed prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for decision-making and impulse control. In other words, adolescents are moving into this messy digital world at a time when they desire social attention most — and are not yet wired for restraint.

"It's all gas pedal and no brakes," said Mitch Prinstein, the chief science officer of the American Psychological Association, who testified before the Senate on the subject earlier this year.



London, Maryland
We have feelings too. We may not show them as much because we're in middle school.

For adults, it's become common to name the things that make women more likely to face burnout and stress. Many of us talk about this "mental load." But girls have a mental load, too — in facing the age-old pressure to be good enough, pretty enough, kind enough, popular enough, but now on multiple platforms, too.

women are put through higher standards to look pretty 24/7, be popular, nice and good enough for others.

At the age 13, adolescents are navigating social media at a time where an individual doesn't know abt restraint (decision making & impulse control)

What you'll read, hear and watch below is not an exhaustive account. But it is a snapshot of being 13 in the age of social media.

I. 'I just need it, you know?'

Addi had gone silent. She wasn't replying to texts from her friends, she wasn't posting on Instagram, she was ignoring DMs. Which could only mean one of two things: that Addi had disappeared from the face of the earth, or that someone had taken away her phone.

Click on the highlights throughout the story to hear audio the girls shared and see more images from their phones.

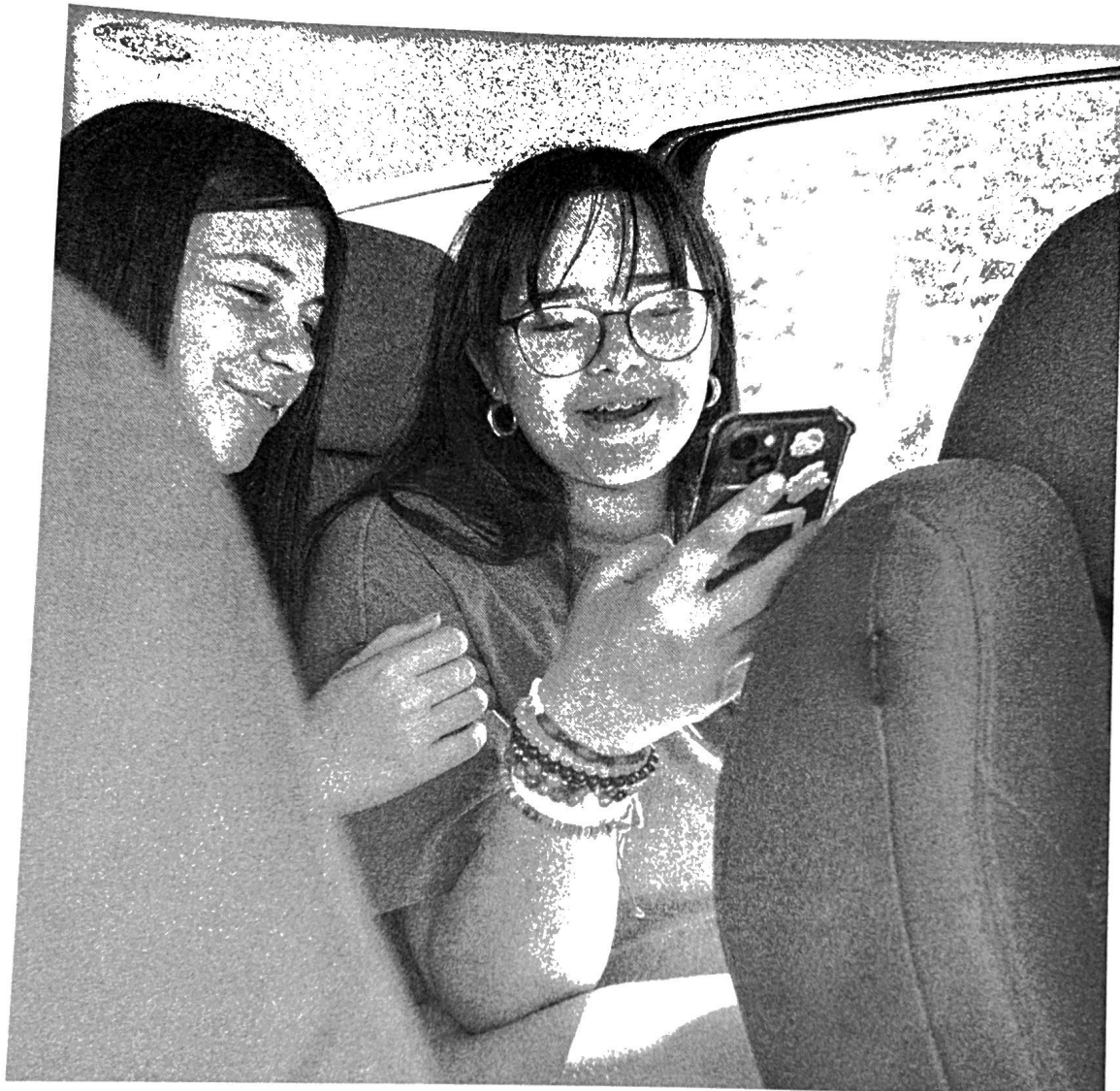
The culprit was her mother, Priscilla, and the grounding would last six weeks. Or, in teen time, forever.

It all started with a TikTok tutorial. Priscilla had watched one about how to recover deleted texts, and mostly out of amusement, she checked her phone and her husband, Brad's — both full of spam. Then she checked her eldest daughter's.

Addi said she has a "close connection" with her phone.

its funny how they introduced Addi's mother as the culprit.

→ a person who is responsible for a crime or other misdeed.



"I don't know if that's weird to say?"

There she discovered a conversation Addi was having with a boy she'd met on TikTok. He told her he was 17 and lived in North Carolina. Addi was 13 and living in a quiet suburban town that nestles the shore of Lake Michigan, in the house where her dad grew up.

They'd been talking for a number of months, about ordinary stuff: school, parents, whether she'd ever cut class (she hadn't). It was sweet. But then it became more than sweet.

Addi was mortified her mom read her messages, and even more mortified when her parents sat her down to talk about them. Look, Priscilla told her, they weren't there to shame her. She was a teenager when she had Addi, and knew that her daughters — four in total — would have relationships with boys, and probably with girls, too. But 13 was too young, she and Brad said. They blocked the boy and deleted his number before confiscating Addi's phone.

Deleting him was fine, honestly, Addi said — maybe even a little relieving. It was being without her phone that was the problem. Time was going by "SO SO slow."

interesting how losing a phone is more of a problem than ending a friendship.

Addi takes occasional breaks from being on social media to focus on her mental health.

Addi got her first phone at age 10, with strict parental controls. As she's gotten older, it's become both comfort and distraction: how she talks to friends and listens to music (a lot of Playboi Carti); where she watches makeup tutorials or nervously checks her grades. She needs it to send funny selfies, like the one with a tampon up her nostril when she had to stop a nosebleed.

"I just feel like I need it, you know? Like it helps me get through the day," she said.

With Addi now moping around the house, claiming that "everything sucks," her mom gave her an assignment: Write a gratitude list. On actual paper.

I can understand how a phone can be comforting and distracting.

Addi's list included lip gloss (her favorite makeup); her bedroom, which her mother had recently painted a blue-ish gray; time with her grandma, who lives in Guatemala; her beautiful hair — thick like her mom's; and "being a girl in general." Her phone was on the list, but not until No. 30.

Addi said making the list helped her get out of her head. That weekend, she went vintage shopping with her sister Sophie (No. 2 on the list), and by Monday, she was feeling more like her typically bubbly self.

This, of course, is what it is to be 13 — one minute the world is ending because your mom found your secret text messages, or a friend called you "fake" behind your back, and the next, you're watching "Wednesday" on Netflix and making ramen with your sister, and that same mom is letting you dye your hair purple, at a real salon.

"Half adult, half child," Addi's mom said, as Addi sat in the salon chair, sipping a Capri Sun: "Eating a Lunchable while at a fancy hair appointment."

II. 'Mom pleeeeeease?'

Last summer, on the eve of her 13th birthday, London gave her mother, Dekeda, a presentation — a case for why she should be allowed to join TikTok.

characterized by
examination of
ones own thoughts
and feeling; thoughtful
reflective.



London is an introspective kid who helps her mother care for her older sister, who has nonvocal autism. Their parents are not together, but London is close with both — though it's her mom, whom she lives with most of the week in a suburb of Washington, D.C., who makes the rules.

London's proposal was a success, and on her birthday, she officially joined TikTok. They both signed a contract agreeing to the rules.

London taught her mom a TikTok dance.

They'd been arguing in the days leading up to this, and finally the tension had broken.

"I was literally like, 'Is she a lawyer?'" her mom said.

London knew how social media might affect her mental health (ugh, was this all anyone could talk about?), but she proposed rules :

1. Dekeda would have access to the account.
2. London would not use her real name.
3. No sending or accepting nudes (obviously).
4. London would let her mom review anything she planned to post.

restrictions
being put on
London.

London just wanted to learn the dances everyone at school was doing — and she knew her mom, who spent years performing jazz and hip-hop, was a sucker for a choreographed dance sequence.

London's proposal was a success, and on her birthday, she officially joined TikTok. They both signed a contract agreeing to the rules.

London taught her mom a TikTok dance.



They'd been arguing in the days leading up to this, and finally the tension had broken.

Now, London streams TikTok to the living room TV, where she spends hours practicing dance routines. Sometimes her sister and mom join in. It's all pretty P.G., Dekeda said.

And yet Dekeda worries. She knows that no amount of rule-making can entirely control what London sees when she's scrolling. Yes, a lot of what she consumes doesn't need to be monitored.

But sometimes it does. Like when London landed on a grainy video purporting to show a woman flushing her baby down a toilet, which we watched on her bedroom floor together, before quickly swiping away. Or, the Facetuned, curated lives of people who are seemingly prettier, more popular, wealthier, better at clothes and friends.

} Parent worry
what adolescents
come across on the
media when they
aren't supervised

"It's not as easy as it used to be," London said later, when I asked her what the grown-ups don't get about being a teenager today.

"Cause you can't escape social media unless you delete the apps."

London was decompressing after school, with phone in hand, before starting her homework.

"This is the third time today I've seen this girl," she said, as she flicked her finger upward. I asked if she'd ever tried deleting the apps, and she gave me her best *OK Boomer* look.

"No," she said, laughing. "I would just block the person."

So how often has she done that?

"I said I *would*," London replied. "I haven't ever had to."

III. 'Really embarrassing'

Anna wasn't even sure she knew what "fat shaming" was, or exactly when she had committed it, but apparently she had. Well, she was told she had, by a friend who had seen another friend's Snapchat, accusing Anna of doing the shaming. But the details were all a bit hazy, because Anna didn't even have Snapchat.

Anna attends a top-ranked public school in Colorado.



She has "remarkable expectations for herself," her mom said.

What Anna did know was that the girl who'd posted the Snap was not speaking to her.

And, text messages between four girls — Anna, the two friends and another one, all calling one another names — had found their way to the school counselor, in whose office Anna was now sitting.

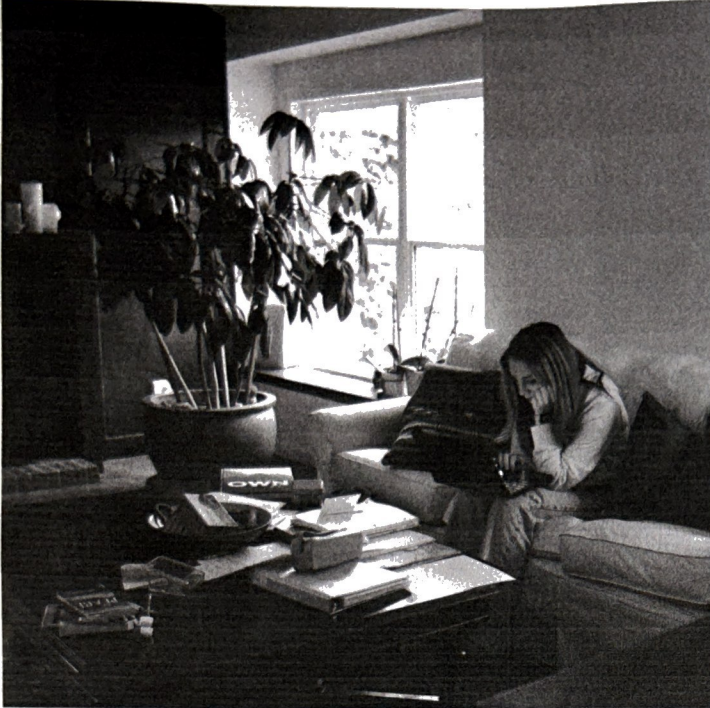
Social media
Creates drama

Anna attends the top-ranked school in Colorado, a public charter 45 minutes from her home in a suburb of Denver. She mostly balances the workload — two to four hours of homework a night, plus more on weekends — with running on the cross country team and chores and piano lessons without too much friction. Mostly.

Anna has an iPhone, which she uses to message friends, watch Lifetime movies and listen to "Wow in the World," a science podcast she likes to fall asleep to. She isn't allowed on social media, in part because of how the phone affects her, her mother told me. "The phone is such a love-hate," said her

mom, Erin. “Without it she can’t communicate with friends and feel connected, but it really impacts her mood.” And yet, you don’t have to be on Snapchat to be affected by what happens there.

Anna is in advanced math.



She often has multiple hours of homework a night.

Like when Anna’s friend posted a photo of another friend at an arcade with an astronaut helmet on — “really embarrassing” — and then wouldn’t take it down, which caused an argument between the three friends. Or when another friend sent unflattering photos of Anna to the “popular people” on Snapchat, which made her feel like “people were looking at me kind of weird.”

“It’s drama central,” a counselor at Anna’s school said, about the phone conflicts that make their way into her office.

She has seen fights escalate in group messages (“It’s scary what they say to each other on text”); feelings get hurt when photos reveal who wasn’t included in a social event. Recently, she said, a girl came into



13

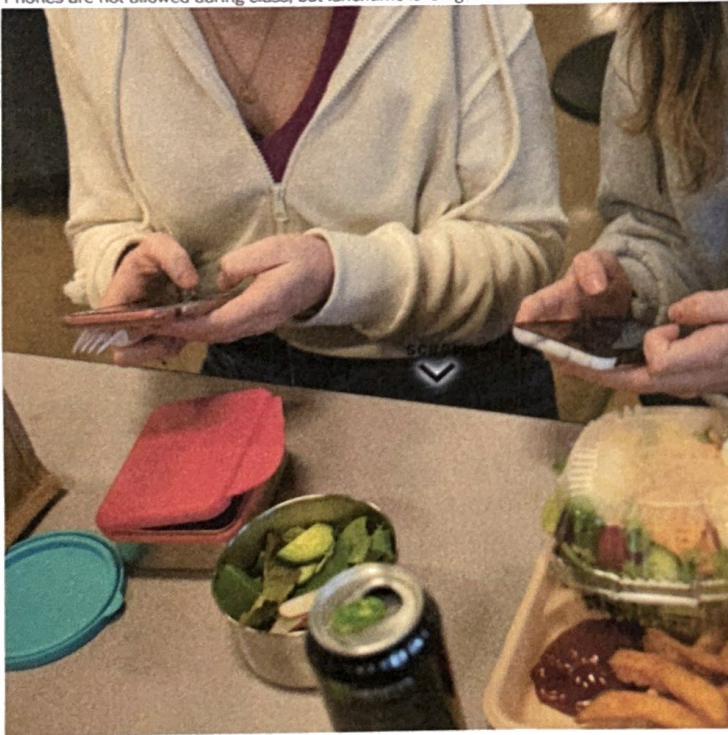
her office “shaking” with anxiety, after saying in a group chat that she was “feeling bipolar” — which caused her friends to pounce on her, calling her “insensitive” to people with mental illness. Boys come into her office with this type of stuff too, the counselor said, but not as much as the girls at this age.

And then there's the stuff that doesn't make it into her office. Teens have plenty of ways to hide their digital tracks, with apps to hide other apps, setting messages to expire or simply watching TikToks on YouTube from a computer browser, to get around not having the app. At each school I visited, administrators joked that they'd benefit from teen consultants to help them keep up with new technology.

mental health is taken as a joke which affect girls more than boys.

It can create sneaky adolescents

Phones are not allowed during class, but lunchtime is fair game.



At the root of these conflicts are issues teenage girls have always faced: insecurity, figuring out their place in the social hierarchy, puberty, hormones, trying on different identities. But the stakes feel higher now, because there's an audience, or the risk of one, at all times: “Receipts” for everything; hurtful messages to stare at again and again (unless you delete them,

14

which Anna said she sometimes does). That, and there is a unique awkwardness to this cohort of teenagers, the counselor noted — in that they spent years of middle school behind screens.

Anna apologized to her friend, and the Snapchat incident, like so many teen conflicts before it, was soon forgotten .

But Snapchat was still there — and she still felt out of the loop.

"I feel like not having social media makes me just as insecure as having it would," Anna said. "Because people are always talking about things that happened on social media. I can't relate to any of it."

not being on social media creates a feeling of missing out. FOMO.

IV. 'Can you ^{SCROLL} stop?'

London was waiting for her mom to pick her up from school. It was late in the school year, and the air was thick with wildfire smoke. As Dekeda pulled up, London waved to her sister, who was hanging out the back seat window loudly humming.

Leilani has sensory processing disorder, and from the moment she wakes until she falls asleep, she is stimming — sounds are coming from her mouth that aren't words.

Dekeda and London goofing off during the drive home from school.

15



London is used to this, and is fiercely protective of her sister. But on this day, as London sat shotgun and Dekeda drove toward home, London was suddenly self-conscious. A group of kids she knew was walking in the same direction.

"Girl, why are you worried about that?" Dekeda asked her. She joked: "Do you want me to stop and say hi?!"

London put her face in her hands, groaning. "Can you stop? It's already embarrassing enough!"

Self-consciousness has always been an unavoidable part of being a teenager. Being a teenager whose sister has a disability means London is accustomed to unwanted attention, from kids and adults. But recently, a group of girls had filmed her sister while they were out to dinner with their dad. She sent her mom an angry message.

The transition to middle school was difficult for London.

Right before the pandemic, her family had moved into a bigger house in a new school district — and while London was happy to finally have her own room, being the new kid during lockdown was excruciating. She and her mom were fighting about grades, clothes, makeup; and then she had a fallout with a friend.

16

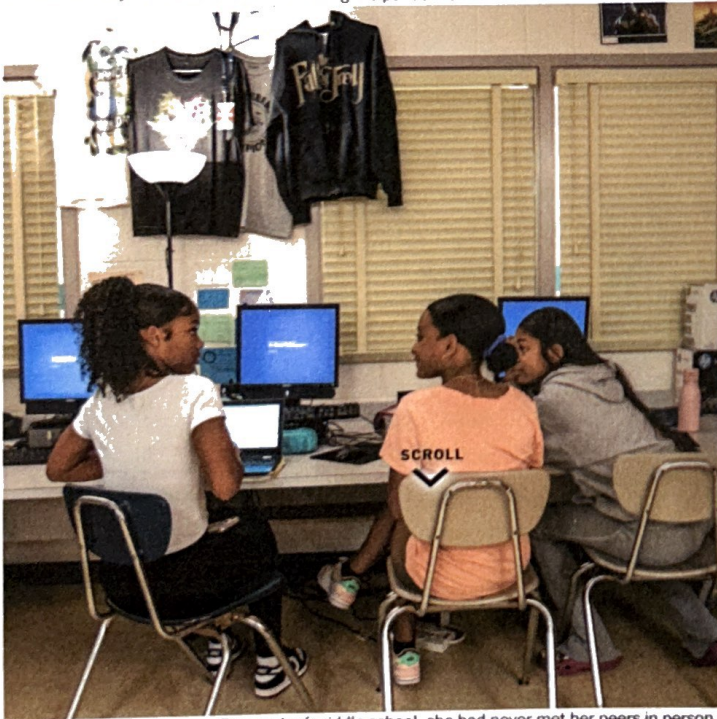
She and this friend had become close — best friends close, seemingly inseparable. Until they weren't.

As London explained it, in gym class this girl would act like her friend. Then next period she'd ignore her. Then they'd text all night. Then suddenly she'd leave London's texts unanswered. It was a constant flip-flop, and London was in tears frequently. Dekeda eventually found her a therapist.

the inconsistency of having social media friends and actual friends took a toll on London -

It took time, and work, but therapy has helped London manage her feelings, and she has found a new group of friends.

London's family moved to a new town during the pandemic.



For much of middle school, she had never met her peers in person.

One of them, a lanky basketball player with dimples, asked her to the school dance. He surprised her with flowers, scented Bath & Body Works sprays he bought with his allowance ("Champagne Toast") and a sign that quoted SZA.

They are just friends, London said — she's not allowed to have a boyfriend. But, Dekeda noted, they sure do seem to be in contact a

17

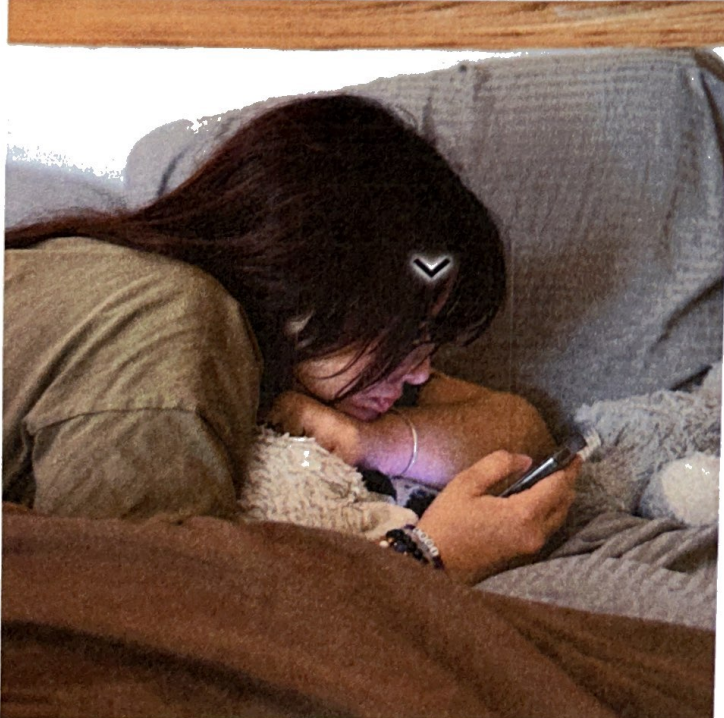
lot.

V. 'I can't even'



Addi kept having crying fits. The first few times it happened she was at home, but then she cried in a restaurant after a long day. Her dad thought she was pouting for no reason and snapped at her, she said, which made it even worse.

Addi relaxing at home.



She recently got a hanging plant for her bedroom, which she posted about on Instagram.



From left: Dad, Addi, Cocoa the cat, and Addi's littlest sister, Quinn.

Her dad is a lot, in a funny way, constantly sending Addi and Sophie inspirational videos about becoming their "best selves." Her littlest sister, Quinn, is a lot, though in a cute way, with an incessant stream of questions.

It was a lot, recently, when Addi's mom was offered a job that would have taken her away for almost a month, cooking ^{SCROLL} for traveling musicians. The gig would have been good for her résumé, but Priscilla declined, in part because of how Addi reacted. "She just gave me the hand, and said, 'I can't even talk to you right now.'"

Sometimes the kids at school are a lot, with their manufactured drama and trying to act older than they are, like when the popular girls were vaping into their sleeves during fifth period.

But math, the one subject Addi couldn't quite get control of, was a lot, for real. She's reminded of this seemingly incessantly, as her grades pop up, rudely, through push notifications to her phone.

→ constantly

19

The tears were mostly about a math test she was worried about, in a class that she was already struggling in, and the fear that if her parents found out, they'd take away her phone again. But they were also about ... well, everything?

Addi gets overwhelmed easily, a feeling she has trouble articulating. When she's especially overloaded, she will forget basic things, too — like what she ate for breakfast. That freaks her out.

Addi is close with her mom, who describes her as kind, funny, energetic — and a little bit dramatic. Most of the time, she is animated and upbeat, talking a mile a minute, cracking jokes and inhaling spicy food (her mom's pico de gallo is her favorite). But when Addi has these episodes, Priscilla worries her daughter might have inherited her own struggles with A.D.H.D. She recently enrolled her in counseling, at Addi's request.

Addi's favorite way of describing things is "a lot." Her family is a lot, with the constant cooking and laundry and mess and cats and lack of privacy.

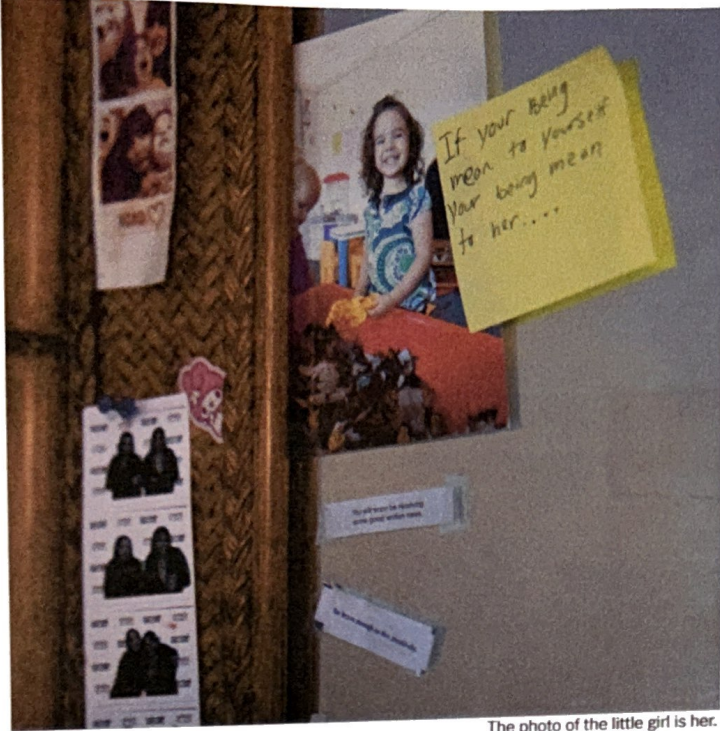
SCROLL



Addi at home with family.

20

Addi's wall of affirmation.



The photo of the little girl is her.

Sometimes, Addi said, she just has to tell herself really positive things. Like, when she feels like her sister or her friends are draining her, to “be a fountain, not a drain,” a phrase she thinks she heard on TikTok. Or she remembers that confidence comes from doing things that are uncomfortable, like math, which she learned from a self-help video on YouTube.

They write notes abt pos things to keep them in a good state of mind.

Soon after Addi watched that video, she texted me. She was feeling amped up, and had concocted a plan to boost her grade, plans that would — eventually — earn her all As and a single B.

“Your girl has some good news,” she said.

VI. ‘R we friends or no?’

Anna and her best friend were breaking up.

<

21

All year, it seemed, it had been one fight after another. Sometimes, they shared everything — lip gloss and Halloween costumes and the back seat on the way to family outings. Other times, Anna felt like her friend was upset when Anna talked to other friends. Or she'd act "mysterious," like she was "hiding something," or Anna had done something to offend her.

Anna between classes



She has an average of two to four hours of homework a night.

Still, she could be "really nice," and she was "really funny." And then there were times when Anna felt hurt by her jokes, poking fun of Anna's clothes, her lunches or her fake tan. Recently, there was an incident in the cafeteria about the smell of Anna's cheese.

"You make me feel shamed of everything about me," Anna texted the friend, not long after.

The friend explained that she was just kidding, adding, "It's cheese."

"It's not just that," Anna continued.

22