

Obama daughters will face public curiosity

Beth Whitehouse | Parental Guidance

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When Malia and [Sasha Obama](#) move into the [White House](#) in January, they'll also move into the proverbial fish bowl.

The public will likely have an insatiable curiosity about their lives, and with the Internet, cable TV, blogs and other 24/7 technology, the girls will face more potential exposure than any first child has ever had to handle.

[-Click here to see photos of Malia and Sasha Obama](#)

The girls - ages 10 and 7 - will be the youngest children to move into the White House in 32 years, since Amy Carter moved in at age 9 in 1977, and they will be the first African-American children. Any time someone is the first, that person faces even more scrutiny, experts said.



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"They kind of become these public figures," said Joan Kuchner, director of Child and Family Studies at [Stony Brook University](#). "No matter how much the family wants to keep their lives private, the children will be brought into the spotlight naturally."

There'll be lots of things about 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue the girls will love, predicted Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian at the National First Ladies Library in Ohio and author of "America's First Families: An Inside View of 200 Years in the White House." "It'll be a delight. . . . There's a pool, there's tennis courts, there's a big lawn," he said.

But Barack and [Michelle Obama](#) will have to manage the "internal development" of their daughters carefully, Anthony said. "This is a hothouse situation. Being doted on and having so much focus on you and people staring at you - that's the thing they're going to face. There's a potentially darker side to this."

The children are going to have everything done for them, which may prevent them from making the kind of mistakes children need to make to learn and grow, Anthony said. The Obamas will need tight security, he said. And perhaps Michelle Obama's mom should move in with the family, to be "on site" when the president-elect's wife has to fulfill the duties of first lady, which are more extensive now than when Jackie Kennedy and Rosalyn Carter served, Anthony said.

The Obamas should consider going frequently to Camp David for weekends to escape the White House environment, Anthony said. Jackie Kennedy had a weekend home in Virginia where she would take the children, Anthony said.

Precedent has been set for respecting the first children's privacy - the Clintons, for instance, put a protective bubble around Chelsea, who was 12 when her father took office. Private schools in Washington, D.C. - if the Obamas go that route - are experienced in making sure the children of high-profile politicians aren't exploited, said Aggie Underwood, who was headmistress of the National Cathedral School for Girls when the daughters of then-Vice President [Al Gore](#) were enrolled.

Ellen Galinsky, president of the Family and Work Institute, a Manhattan-based nonprofit, attended the National Cathedral School during the Luci and Lynda Johnson era. "They had Secret Service people everywhere," Galinsky said. "If they went to the bathroom, there was some guy standing outside." Galinsky and her classmates were instructed not to "trade on" the Johnsons' fame.

For a child who is very social, being in the first family limelight can be an extraordinarily positive experience, Kuchner said. But a shy child can find it stressful to act polished with important or intimidating adults.

The Obama girls will experience their tween years - the "Whatever, Dad" years - while their father is leading the country. Any misstep - or accomplishment - can be beamed worldwide, replayed on YouTube, accessed forever with a few mouse clicks. Photos of John-John under [President Kennedy's](#) desk and saluting at his father's funeral have become iconic images of American history.

"I think that this family has caught the imagination of the nation," Kuchner said. "They have a wonderful potential to be role models. The down side is that this is good and bad for children."

Kuchner said she hopes the public will remember these are kids, not little adults, and won't inflict too much judgment and pain.