

# THE Mean-ing of Life

By Gal Baras

*Not only is it unlikely your kids are “average,” it’s downright impossible*

When I was a kid, mothers raised their children according to a famous book by Dr. Benjamin Spock called *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. The book described in detail the various stages of growth, and what mothers should expect of their children during each stage. Despite a recommendation to treat each child as an individual, most mothers used the book to measure how well their kids were developing. When there was a difference between what a child could do and what they were “supposed” to do (“See? It says here

in the book...”), mothers would feel distressed and often put pressure on the youngsters to perform.

My mother always said, “Gal has never read Spock’s book. He’s just naturally wonderful,” and refused to discuss me and my performance any further. It helped that I ate very well, grew up nicely and that I was a friendly and polite child. Or maybe it was the other way around...

### The Average Child?

Let’s face it, parenting is scary business. When we have our first baby, we have no clue what to do half the time, and we become desperate for signs of progress and indications that we are doing a good job. So we read books, search the Net and ask around. What we get from that are average answers...or, rather, answers about what the average is.

And this is a problem, folks. It is a problem because human beings are very complex biological creatures, and not robots.

There is such wide variety in nature that trying to figure out what it means for a little girl to be off the charts in terms of weight is risky business. Yes, she was really big as a baby, but now Eden is healthy, quite short and has a very nice figure. All that baby fat is long gone.

If little Albert’s mother believed in averages, the world would have missed out on Einstein’s genius, and his enormous contribution to science and technology. Even when countless teachers told her they knew for certain the child would amount to no good, she insisted he was just different.

Let me illustrate.

Say there are 12 boxes to be given away. Eleven of them contain a single \$1 bill, and the other contains an iPad 2, worth \$829. The average value of these boxes is \$84. However, if you pick one of the 11 boxes, all you have is \$1, whereas if you get the last box, you have the iPad.

The point is that extreme values affect the average strongly, and that an average (or “arithmetic mean”) is neither a common value nor a real one. In the example above, nobody gets \$84.

Say there are nine women in a doctor’s waiting room. One of them is nine months pregnant and the others are



$$= \frac{a_1 + a_2 + \dots + a_n}{n}$$

not. On average, they are 1 month pregnant, but what does that even mean? Similarly, my friend and I may have an average of 2.5 children between us, but neither of us has half a child. The point is that averages are sometimes just mathematical figures and have no practical meaning whatsoever.

When I worked at National Semiconductor's headquarters in Santa Clara, California, there was a sign on the wall of one of the corridors that said, "Doing no more than the average is what brings the average down."

If you think about it, each measurement affects the average, so if one of them drops, the average drops, too. Of course, improvements also bring the average up, but in a company, there are employees who cannot perform better, and others who can. The problem starts when the better performers just meet the minimum standard, because the other ones cannot change even if they wanted to.

Yet this is precisely what keeps happening in our world. Many commercial entities have a strong interest in targeting an average person, so average behavior is

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encouraged everywhere. We are surrounded by messages that persuade us to follow trends, be like everyone else, be included, accepted and so on.

This makes things really boring, though. Wherever we go, we see the same things, hear the same things and buy products that do the same things and come in the same packages.

### No Such Thing as Average

However, in order to drive more profits, those same things keep changing. So we hurry up and buy new things to make life interesting—but then again, so does everybody else. The result is a crazed, hyped, yet boring life.

Schools make this even worse by testing and measuring everything, and administering state comparative tests—supposedly to make sure "no child is left behind," but actually to increase conformity. The school system in many places is based on teaching 30 very different students with a single teacher, using one teaching style—and expects to fit everyone inside some bell-shaped academic performance curve.

I am here to tell you there is not a single person in the world who is average. It most certainly is not you and it definitely is not your kids. No matter what research shows, it may or may not apply in your case. No matter what experts write in best-selling books, they did not know you or your kids when they wrote it.

So here is what I suggest:

Take a deep breath. Exhale all the way to your abdomen and then inhale deeply.

Take another deep breath. This one will be deeper than the one before, and will help you relax. Are you relaxed?

Make a list of areas in your life in which you try to conform. It may help to start with things about yourself that make you uncomfortable: your shape, your weight, your level of education, your hobbies, your religion, your choice of car or whatever. That discomfort comes from having an unrealistic expectation of yourself.

Take another deep breath. It can be unpleasant to recall this stuff, so calm yourself before you go on.

Add to your list areas in which you try to make your children conform. It may help to start with things they generally refuse to do when you ask, or otherwise evade somehow: homework, housework, extra-curricular activities, kissing their aunt on the cheek, and so on. That friction comes from them just trying to do what is

natural for them and you expecting something else.

Take another deep breath. Not a bad habit, is it?

Go over your lists and ask yourself, "Who am I doing this for? Who am I trying to please here? Who says things need to be this way?"

Now, ask yourself, "What will happen if I just do things naturally instead?" Allow your mind to create an image of that possibility. Remember, it is only in your mind, and if you do not like anything, you can choose something different.

Write an alternative to each item on your list that you are willing to change.

Go over your list from time to time, and see if you can change anything else.

Feeling good about yourself will help you feel good about your kids. And when you feel good about your whole family, you will be happy...no matter what the average is. 🍷



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$$AM = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n$$