

On Parenting Perspective

# There is no room for 'average' students these days. Here's why that worries me.

By Jacque Gorelick  
January 8 at 6:10 AM

I'm face-to-face in the dark with my 5-year-old, a kindergartner. We're tucked into his flannel dinosaur sheets, his soft fingers cup my cheeks as he presses his nose into mine.

"Mommy, school is hard; everything is hard for me." Lines of concern fill his small brow.

"I know it feels that way right now, but it will get easier." It's a promise I've no business making, but it's what the situation requires, so I lie.

I close my eyes and imagine we're in Finland. I visualize him in a class where he gathers sticks and swings from monkey bars in an environment designed for curious, energetic 5-year-olds like him. Formal reading instruction will not begin until he's 7, so there's still time for playing. I open my eyes to find his round cheeks outlined in the dim glow of his owl night light. We're indulging in extra cuddles after a discouraging day of attempts to find high-frequency words on a wall, write sentences and use transitional words before he has learned all of his letters.

We are both unsure of his place in the American classroom of 2018.

A few years ago I left the education profession with a fair amount of disillusionment, but not before teaching dozens of students like my son: young learners still mastering basic skills such as holding chunky pencils in stubby fingers and anchoring letters to lines on a page so they don't float away.

Typical average students.

Merriam-Webster defines average as about midway between two extremes. Not out of the ordinary: common.

In my small community in California burrowed in the largest tech hub in our nation, average is an extinct construct. Revolutionary, innovative and extraordinary are staples of the local vernacular. Where I live, and where I'm raising my children, one must be exceptional. It's in the air we breathe, evidenced by the shiny Teslas that line our streets and the devoted STEM classrooms replete with personal MacBooks and 3-D printers. Mixed in with the abundant resources and privilege is a message: Be exceptional or die trying.

And kids do die trying. In the last decade, high schools in our county experienced a spike in suicide rates, prompting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to launch an epidemiological [study](#). Fences were [installed](#) between the hallways of a nearby high school and the railroad tracks, because so many over-stressed



Applicants are evaluated by the number of AP classes they take during high school, putting pressure on kids to track into advanced classes as early as fifth or sixth grade.

Education has become a high-stakes Rube Goldberg machine, propelling our kids from one academic pressure to the next with no end in sight. What has existed until now as an implied tenet, is becoming a tangible reality: Be exceptional, or be a failure; there is no middle ground.

Nose to nose in the dark with my son, his deep eyes look to mine for reassurance I can't offer. In our demanding, airbrushed society, the bar moves ever upward. If extraordinary is our new normal, what is to become of the average child?

"Mommy, do we grow when we sleep?" To my relief, he's moved on to questions I'm better equipped to answer.

"Every night, little by little." I wrap my arms around him, becoming, if only for a moment, a protective shield in the disquiet.

"Am I growing?" He lengthens his slender frame and stretches his toes toward the foot of the bed.

"Yes, but take your time," I whisper into the darkness, my lone battle cry.

*Jacque Gorelick is a freelance writer in California. Find her on Twitter @jacgorelick.*

**[Like On Parenting on Facebook](#) for more essays, news and updates and [sign up here](#) for our weekly newsletter.**

### **More reading:**

[This year, let's parent like it's 1989](#)

[How much screen time? Silicon Valley parents are still trying to figure it out.](#)

[Why I don't plan to put pressure on my kids to get straight A's](#)

### **Podcasts**

## **To build border wall, Trump considers national emergency powers**

President Trump is threatening to call a national emergency to build a border wall. Post reporter David Nakamura explains whether that's possible, or even legal. Plus, tech reporter Geoffrey Fowler takes us on a ride with a self-driving car.

► **Listen** 21:43

20 hours ago