

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

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## Most of Our Children Are Average

*Candice Watters*

I'll never forget the way it hit me – news about our children, delivered from the pulpit of a crowded chapel service. The preacher, Randy Stinson, said, “Can I say something to you about your children? I don't even know half of them, but they're average. They're average.” I suspect I wasn't the only one in his hearing who took slight offense, making a mental list of all the reasons he must be wrong.

Many American parents believe their children are gifted. The surge in after-school activities, private tutors and a willingness to tolerate impossible amounts of homework points to parents who are convinced that their kids can be “... tutored and coached, pushed and tested, hot-housed and advance-placed until success is assured.” That's according to *Time* magazine's recent article, *In Praise of the Ordinary Child*.

It's not just the parents. Kids, too, think they're pretty special. *Time* cited one survey that found 70 percent of the students asked – well over half – consider themselves above average – the halfway point – in, get this, academic ability. That's statistically impossible. Clearly they're below average in at least one school subject.

Why do parents long to have above average children? And why are children willing to go along with their Herculean efforts to achieve such status? According to *Time*, and a similar story from *aeon.com*, *You Can Do it Baby!*, it has everything to do with our drive for success. We

want kids who can beat the odds to attend the best schools, which will lead to the most rewarding jobs. We don't want them just to be financially set (though that's part of parents' motivation), we want them to be fulfilled. And by extension, the kids are good with the prospect of being rich and happy.

Leslie Garrett describes the trend in *You Can Do it Baby!*:

“When your child is four or five, barring intellectual disabilities or severe behavioural diagnoses, anything does seem possible. A child shows an interest in art and we imagine his work eventually hanging in galleries. A talented runner, we think, might make the Olympics. Kids who love science are given microscopes and we begin to wonder if we should start saving up for college fees at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Backing our hopes and theirs are the culture's cheerleaders, led by viral convocation speeches and a steady stream of ‘overnight’ successes unveiled on reality shows and *YouTube*, all urging us to dream big and never give up.”

Both she and *Time*'s Jeffrey Kluger argue that kids who hear nothing but praise are in trouble. Garrett's concerns lie primarily in dashed career expectations among young adults who grow up hearing they can be anything they want to be, only to discover it isn't true. Kluger shows that kids can't help but disappoint parents and themselves in the face of sky-high expectations.

According to Garret, “A 2012 *LinkedIn* survey showed that roughly one in three adults are working at their ‘dream job,’ which means that two in three are not.” She cites Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me*, who says, “When you tell somebody: You can be anything, that ‘anything’ they're thinking of is rarely a plumber or an accountant.”

“The dangers are legion,” says Garrett.

“Unrealistic plans lead to a waste of time and money. When a C- student spins her wheels planning on medical school, other, more lucrative and realistic careers – say in business or education – fall by the wayside. And the ambition gap has led to increased dissatisfaction across working life. Deloitte's 2010 *Shift Index* revealed that 80 percent of workers were dissatisfied in

their jobs. By 2013, the figure had jumped to 89 percent.”

Certainly, growing up to find your options limited by reality can be a downer. But that's not the worst of it. Christian parents should be alarmed by these articles but not in an “I-can't-believe-how-ridiculous-those-parents-are” way. We should be alarmed for the times we've done the same thing, for the times we've hoped we had a prodigy on our hands or daydreamed about the soccer scholarship, the recording contract, or the signing bonus.

We are all tempted to want our kids to soar above the masses, to encourage them to dream big and reach for the stars. But we must think biblically about this temptation, lest we make Icaruses of them all. (Of course in our helicopter-parenting age, we tell ourselves we'll simply catch our kids if, like the mythological Icarus, they fly too close to the sun and melt the wax from their wings.)

Stinson is right when he informs parents, “You don't have a phenomenon on your hands... average is the biggest category. Most people are in it.” I know it's undeniably, statistically true. Still, it can be hard to accept. “Everybody thinks they're above average. But it can't possibly be that way because it defies the category of average.” Just because our kids are average, he says, “doesn't mean they're mediocre, or that they need to live a life of mediocrity. It just means we don't need to bloat their ego or increase their narcissism.”

How then should we parent? How do we encourage our children to be good stewards, to work hard and to do their best in a way that's not ego-centric? Paul tells us in Colossians 3:17, 23-24, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him... Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

We must shift their focus from themselves to God and shift their motivation from self-glory to God's glory. If your children have an interest or talent that sets them apart from their peers, thank God for it. And teach your children to do the same. Then encourage them to develop that skill to serve others. Everything they have is from the Lord. Nothing is theirs by their own doing. They

(and you) have no reason to boast (1 Corinthians 4:7). In fact, the expectation is higher, not for greater success, but for more faithful stewardship. To whom much is given, much will be required (Luke 12:48).

You know your children are special, they each have gifts and talents from God that make them unique. But we're not Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon*, “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” They aren't better than others. This is the cultural lie that we must reject. Philippians 2:3 says, “Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves” (NLT). This is the way of Christ.

When our firstborn was about three, he announced that someday he was going to be a “trash truck driver.” Overhearing him talk bright-eyed about this future, my close friend countered, “Or you could be a doctor, that could be fun, too!” I appreciated her humorous attempts to aim his sights higher. But he needed to look higher still.

When your children dream about the future, point them to the One who made them. When they ask you what they should be when they grow up, resist the urge to make career suggestions that you find appealing. Instead, say something like, “I don't know what you should be, but we can ask God. He made you and he knows best what you should be.” It is only in seeking God and serving him, for his glory and the good of others, that they will find fulfillment that truly satisfies, whether a doctor or a trash-truck driver.



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