

# Debunking Normal (Except in Illinois)



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I wish I had a dollar bill for every time someone asked me whether someone else's behavior was normal. In fact, I have such a big problem about the word "normal" that I'm considering adding it to my dictionary of bad language right alongside "age appropriate." Normalcy is a concept at odds with open-mindedness, self-acceptance, and a nonjudgmental attitude toward ourselves and each other.

The idea behind normalcy, which we all seem to absorb early in life, is that some people exemplify the way we are all supposed to be. Some special folks apparently emerged from the Great Assembly Line in the Sky with a complete lifetime kit entirely free from defects. These paragons of virtue set the standard for the rest of us on the planet.

There are several problems with this idea. First, it invites all of us to find ourselves somehow wanting. Not knowing exactly which individuals are the perfect ones, we can come up short in our own eyes by comparing ourselves with just about anyone we choose. What's more, when we look for normalcy in ourselves (and others), we inevitably wind up trying to show that somebody else is abnormal—as if there were some universally accepted yardstick.

A norm is difficult to pin down in many areas—not in matters of height and weight, perhaps, but certainly as regards temperament, talents, behavior, and other abstractions. No one quite knows what normalcy is. Nevertheless, many self-proclaimed experts claim to be able to spot it on sight in neighbors, children, coworkers, test scores, and other places. Of course no one wants to be regarded as abnormal.

The concept of normalcy, because it is vague, elusive, and emotionally charged, readily lends itself to exploitation. People who want money, power, and reassurance that nothing and no one will threaten their prosperity find a myriad ways to let everyone else know that they are normal. We oblige these folks when we struggle to apply their "normal" to a messy reality in which differences

abound. The process can be a lot like trying to put on a pair of shoes that are too small.

Do I hear you objecting? You maintain that some things are generally accepted as rules of thumb. Isn't it normal for children to sleep apart from their parents? Shouldn't everyone be able to tie shoelaces by the age of seven years? Normal teenagers gravitate toward the opposite sex only! And isn't twenty-one (or twenty-three or twenty-five or twenty-seven) the normal age for marriage? Surely everyone knows that it's wrong to pierce your nose and to have children out of wedlock. And what about the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*? Surely it's the ultimate authority on who's normal and who's not?

The answer to all such questions depends on who you are, when and where you live, and the values with which you were raised. I have long since stopped suggesting that any one way of interpreting a situation is right and another wrong. There are as many ways of seeing anything as there are observers—a point nicely made by the classic Japanese film *Rashomon*.

Only an omniscient, ever-present Being can pronounce judgment infallibly. The views and assumptions made by us common mortals, in contrast, are culturally constructed, contingent on viewpoint, and privileged by money and might alone. The question to ask, therefore, when someone says something is not normal is "According to whom?"

Rather than find fault with ourselves, our children, and each other, how much better it would be to celebrate our differences as evidence of the richness of human nature. When we do so we discover fresh possibilities for our lives. In addition, we can choose to acknowledge, in conduct good and bad and even in cases of criminal wrongdoing, that the actions of any one person, at any age, reflect human potential—things of which all of us are potentially capable under some set of circumstances. Surely such an attitude would stand us in good stead as we aim for consensus within the global community on how to safeguard the world we all share.

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