
THE PECKING ORDER: WHICH SIBLINGS SUCCEED AND WHY

DALTON CONLEY

PANTHEON BOOKS, 2004

\$24.00, 320 pages

Reviewed by Ben Ketchum

When two siblings grow up in the same house and one becomes successful and the other suffers from economic turmoil and unemployment, who is to blame? Conley (2004) takes the mystery out of this phenomenon in *The Pecking Order*. Conley begins with a fascinating example of how two siblings, Roger and Bill Clinton, emerge from the same home and enter different socioeconomic lives. Raised by a single, working mother, Roger leads a life of hardship, poor choices, and economic instability, while quick-witted, charismatic, and politically-minded Bill climbs his way to success. This book attempts to get at the heart of these disparities and others like them by analyzing birth order, family size, social status, and more.

As for Roger and Bill, Conley believes “Bill’s success seemed to come at the expense of Roger’s—particularly when it led Roger to a false sense of invincibility” (p. 6). Each person is ultimately responsible for the choices made in life. However, there are times when decisions are based on outside influences for which a person has no control. Bill’s success and Roger’s lack thereof is a result of the many social forces surrounding the seemingly protective family. In *The Pecking Order*, Conley analyzes various American families over the past century. Through intensive research and in-depth interviews, Conley systematically sheds light on the socioeconomic inequalities that exist in today’s society.

Over the years, researchers have found ways to explain the causes of inequity among members of society. Conley takes this research one step further in order to explain not why inequality exists, but where it begins. Conley’s findings demonstrate that inequalities begin at home between members of the same family. The reasons that one person may succeed and another may not have a great deal to do with sibling rivalries. Society views the home environment as a place of warmth, comfort, and security. It is a place

to hide and be protected from outside hostilities. Conley takes an opposing view, saying, “The home is no haven in a harsh world—it both creates and reflects that world” (p. 112). The problems of capitalism, racism, sexism, and bigotry that hinder and hurt people in society are the same ills that trickle unnoticed into the home.

In order to accurately conduct this study, Conley collected information and data from three national surveys: the U.S. Census, to measure how students perform while still in the home; the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), to survey the economic and social status of families; and the General Social Survey (GSS), which measures attitudes about demographic and socioeconomic trends in America. Conley combined the findings with personal research and an extensive collection of in-depth interviews. These interviews provide the framework from which Conley delicately weaves the personal stories of real people with research and detailed surveys. The results are eye-opening and at times startling.

In chapter 4, “Death, Desertion, Divorce,” Conley describes how circumstances of uncertainty can suddenly affect good children in good families. Conley begins with a simple story of two siblings, Debra and Andre. Their parents had high expectations for both of them and provided them each with the opportunity to attend private school. When Debra was a senior she got accepted to Princeton University on full scholarship. During her first year, her parents divorced after it was known her father was having an affair. Because of the family’s closeness, this divorce had an immediate impact on the children’s social and academic lives. Both Debra and Andre saw their grades drop for a short period of time. In this case, Debra was lucky because she was already away from the home and in college. She was free from the trauma and turmoil in the home during the divorce. Therefore, she still had plenty of time to improve her grades and secure herself a bright future. Andre, on the other hand, was not as lucky. After living through the divorce firsthand, he was not able to get his grades up in time. After not being accepted to the universities of his choice, he was forced to attend the local university. Today, Andre has turned his life around, but he will forever be on a different career route because of this major event in his life. Small events in one’s life can have enormous consequences for the future. In this situation and like so many others,

if the eldest has managed to escape the household before...parental death, desertions, or divorce, then he or she is usually better off than those left behind. [On the contrary] being first born among those who remain is no advantage in the case of parental absence or demise. (p. 84)

This scenario, like many others in the book, raises many good questions about how individuals in the family are affected by events beyond their control.

Take for example chapter 6, “Legacies and Role Models, Fat and Skin.” In this chapter, Conley focuses on how different family experiences lead to different outcomes in life. Using the effects of differential gender treatment, Conley shows how family attitudes can affect the psychology of individuals, thus influencing the choices they make later in life. The story of Linda and her brother Adam demonstrate this reality. Linda was criticized by her father, while the brother was always praised. There were little differences between the two; however, when the time came to go to college, Linda had low self-esteem as a result of her father’s critiques and only applied to the local commuter college. Adam, her equally capable brother, had the confidence and support to apply and excel at an academically prestigious university. They attribute their different paths to personality alone. Adam says about their differences,

I think there was just always a big difference between my sister’s personality and mine. She always had a little bit of low self-esteem and she never really aimed at a high goal for what she could achieve....I don’t know why. (p. 115)

Gender bias can affect how children see themselves as they mature to adulthood. It is this crucial time when children are in the care of their parents, that will eventually shape their futures.

The strength of this book is Conley’s ability to see the whole picture while looking for patterns of behavior across social lines. Conley’s goal is for the reader to have “a new way of viewing the way pecking orders emerge” (p. 28). Anyone with siblings knows that there is a natural pecking order inherent to the family. This book is about those orders. But even more, it brilliantly reveals how “in combination with the decisions of parents, the family’s resources, class background, racial identity, and so on—household hierarchies forge our place in the larger pecking order called society” (p. 187). Conley points out that more than half of the income inequality in America today exists within families and that children are growing up only to find themselves separated from their own families by income and class.

Conley raises many important social and economic issues related to families and society, showing how family dynamics, whether positive or negative, can alter the course of one’s life. It is impossible to point to a single factor in someone’s life that determines the probability of the individual’s ability to succeed or fail. However, it is possible to begin identifying the social forces that can change or influence one’s decisions in life.

This book was written for parents, teachers, coaches, and anyone working with children. It not only draws the reader to pay closer attention to the social needs of children but identifies the attitudes and behaviors that create inequalities within the family. If adults realize the impact that their words, actions, and decisions make on the children they encounter, they can begin creating environments where all children are encouraged, valued, and loved.

Ben Ketchum is assistant principal at St. Ann's Academy in Washington, DC.

FAMILY MATTERS: HOW SCHOOLS CAN COPE WITH THE CRISIS IN CHILDREARING

ROBERT EVANS
JOSSEY-BASS, 2004.
\$25.00, 320 pages

Reviewed by Sandra Rojas

Recent decades have been saturated with books, articles, and research on how schools can improve their scores and enable students to achieve high academic standards while offering a safe and engaging environment. In trying to understand why some students succeed academically while others struggle to learn, many solutions have been proposed. Parents, teachers, and school leaders have tried to understand the underlying cause of academic achievement or failure. Schools that are nationally recognized for offering the best academic environment are scrutinized to find the magic formula and the blueprint necessary to educate children successfully according to today's society. Parents often place all responsibility to educate their children in teachers' hands and either blame or praise them if their children do well. At the same time, teachers either complain about the parents of struggling students or admire parents if the students can accomplish their academic goals.

In *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope With the Crisis in Childrearing*, Evans (2004) attempts to explain the factors that affect today's schools, families, and society and that make students "harder to teach and parents harder to deal with" (p. 156). Evans invites the reader to think "about what our children need and what our schools can do" (p. xix) to cope with