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Democracy Dies in Darkness

What families with ‘successful’ children can teach us about parenting

In “The Family Dynamic,” Susan Dominus delves into the stories of six families to learn how parents can — and cannot — shape what their children achieve.

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Review by Judith Warner

When Susan Dominus was in the fourth grade, she spent two weeks living with close family friends whose dinnertime rituals she found both intimidating and intriguing. At the end of each meal, the father would grill his children about current events or ask them to solve math problems. Dominus, included once in this rite, burst into tears.

At her childhood home, Dominus writes in her new book, “The Family Dynamic,” she and her siblings enjoyed a more relaxed environment. They watched sitcoms, “wolfed down our meals, goofed around, or debated once more the question of why my sister always got the corner seat.” Her parents, like many in the 1970s, kept a “healthy distance” from her (“intensely high”) academic ambitions, as she made her way to Yale and then into a career as a star writer for the New York Times.

Despite this success, Dominus could not help but wonder: “What if I’d been working problems out around the dinner table night after night? What if I’d become accustomed to voicing my opinion on the events of the day, defending my stance — where would that have taken me?”

When she and her husband became parents of twin boys, her focus shifted to them. “I worried about how the choices we were making might shape our sons’ futures, their ability to enjoy the full range of their potential,” she writes. “Were we exposing them to enough, encouraging them enough, enriching them enough? Were we instilling in them a strong enough work ethic?” In a competitive and uncertain world, wasn’t it her responsibility to school them in the skills, attitudes and personal attributes most associated with success, to hold them to the highest possible standard? “Were those kinds of expectations a blessing and a gift,” she writes, “or a burden?”

“The Family Dynamic” is her attempt to find answers to these questions. To write it, Dominus spent extensive periods of time with six very different sets of siblings who have two things in common: They all have been exceptionally successful academically and professionally, and all were raised by parents who, like Dominus’s long-ago family friends, were “intentional enough about success that they planned for it,” unapologetically and unrelentingly setting high expectations and demanding peak performance from their children.

Books that purport to share how ambitious parents can raise high-achieving kids are a dime a dozen. (“How to Raise Successful People,” an exemplar of the genre, was published in 2019 by one of Dominus’s interview subjects, Esther Wojcicki.) In an attempt, perhaps, to make her book stand out, Dominus positions it as a study of sibling dynamics, looking for ways that exceptionally successful brothers and sisters shape one another’s lives.

As she gets to know her subjects — judges, civil rights leaders, lawyers, doctors, tech innovators and entrepreneurs, an Olympic triathlete, an acclaimed novelist, a world-class musician, a Tony Award-winning theater director — Dominus finds some common themes.

Healthy competition helps grease the wheels of ambition; upwardly mobile older siblings help pave the way for those who follow. But those insights are not particularly earth-shattering. Much more interesting (for the reader and, one suspects, for Dominus) are her observations of the parents who produced those six sets of high-performing kids. “The Family Dynamic” comes to life when Dominus takes us through their backstories, their hopes and dreams, their unstinting faith in their ability to steer their kids toward the fulfillment of their own desires, and the varying degree of emotional damage they inflict in the course of doing so.

Two main types of parents emerge. There are “overcomers,” people who have faced considerable barriers and hardship — poverty, the Jim Crow South, a need to flee China’s one-child policy — and nonetheless thrived, modeling a level of success that sets the bar high and provides “living proof that other people’s limits need not apply to their family,” as Dominus writes. And then there are the “thwarted” parents, “whose dreams, perhaps especially in notably challenging fields, have not been realized, and who gladly try to clear from their own children’s path whatever obstacles may have been in their own way at an earlier time.”

Both types of parents aim high and provide their children with every form of enrichment they can afford. But there is a key difference between them: The overcomers positively inspire by doing, whereas the motivation provided by the thwarteds, more often than not, is a poison, the emotional equivalent of a shock collar, compelling kids to succeed largely out of fear and to avoid pain.

Each group of parents gets results, but for the kids of the thwarted, there's a high price to pay. The Groffs, an upper-middle-class White family, are competitive and hard-driving. They run on the fumes of “ambient, restless regret” emanating from the mother, Jeannine, who shelved her dreams of becoming a doctor to work in a lab so that her husband, Jerry, could attend medical school. The three Groff children become a doctor/successful entrepreneur, a best-selling writer and an Olympic-level triathlete turned PhD student. But when the music stops, the Groff girls, at least, fall prey to severe depression, anxiety and OCD.

The four Chen children — one doctor and three highly successful tech entrepreneurs or engineers — soar far beyond the world of their parents, Ying and Xian, immigrants from China who work seven days a week running a restaurant. But their success is fueled in large part by a need to appease Ying, who channels her regret about her lack of music education into violent episodes of “unnerving, unchecked rage” when her children fail to practice their instruments. The siblings leave home traumatized. The youngest, Devon, “never sure when his mother would fly into a rage,” Dominus reports, “had a stomachache for much of his childhood.”

The cause and effect behind all this — between parental effort and kid success, and kid pathology — is “murky,” Dominus notes. No amount of reporting or research in this book, wide-ranging, well-curated and effectively conveyed — can take limits: Do successful parents teach their kids the skills and traits they need to inherit them? *Probably both*. Under normal circumstances, do you more prone to be anxious through your actions or your genes? *Unclear*. That’s the problem of science, Dominus writes: “Science is best at observing ‘what happens when’; it is far less good at ‘what happens why’ and under what range of circumstances the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ happen the same way.”

Our desire for certitudes, particularly when it comes to the choices we make as parents, can’t compete with the accumulation of evidence Dominus draws from her research. “The parenting choices that many caring parents agonize over,” she’s forced to conclude, “have much less effect on children’s outcomes than we have all been led to believe.”

What does matter a great deal, fortunately or not, is luck. Dumb luck, broadly defined to include a child's genetics, socioeconomic status, birthday (the oldest kids in a grade tend to be the most successful; the youngest often internalize the sense that they can't measure up) and timing (those who reach college age at a point when family finances are strong do better). Dalton Conley, a Princeton University sociologist sought out by Dominus for his work on twins, is unintentionally brutal in driving the point home. When it comes to raising whole families of successful kids, he told her, "Every once in a while, in a very rare while, if you pull the slot enough times, it is going to come up all cherries."

"The Family Dynamic" will no doubt disappoint readers looking for bullet-pointed parenting-for-success tips. It's just not that kind of book. It's better. Dominus is smart, honest and wise, and at her best, very funny. Her findings offer a science-based reality check, while her fluid, artful writing can give parents a much-needed break.

Judith Warner's most recent book is "And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School."

The Family Dynamic

A Journey Into the Mystery of Sibling Success

By Susan Dominus

Crown. 368 pp. \$30

A NOTE TO OUR READERS