

# Boyce delivers tips for a successful life

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*“The Orchid and the Dandelion: Why Some Children Struggle and How All Can Thrive” by W. Thomas Boyce. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 304 pages, \$27.95 (hardcover).*

## The Orchid and the Dandelion

Why Some Children  
Struggle and How  
All Can Thrive

W. Thomas Boyce, M.D.

“Why do some children struggle and others succeed?” W. Thomas Boyce asks near the beginning of *“The Orchid and the Dandelion: Why Some Children Struggle and How All Can Thrive,”* his new treatise of one of the most enduring mysteries in social science. “Why are some people’s lives filled with rank misfortune and others with satisfaction and happiness? Why do some people get sick and die young, while their peers live into healthy older age? Is it simply chance and luck, or are there early patterns of development revealing lawful pathways into bounty or calamity?”

“Why did my sister’s life consign her to growing desperation and an enduring, slow-moving catastrophe, while mine led to unanticipated and often undue successes?” Boyce continues. “These were the questions that fired my imagination, inspired my education as a young pediatrician and eventually drove my quest to understand the vivid divergences in child development and pediatric health that shape the adults we become and the lives we lead.”

Unlike some books dealing with similar themes that seem to slowly and methodically capture your attention the further you venture into them, *“The Orchid and the Dandelion”* piqued my

interest pretty much from page one. As noted in the title, the book is ostensibly about unraveling the many inter-related factors that seem to push a person’s life in either a positive or negative direction from a very early age. It was the author’s masterful subtext of embedding the task at hand within the architecture of his own life that I found most compelling. The volume succeeds on two levels; first, as an autobiographical chronicle of personal growth and exploration, and second, as a relatively straightforward description of where the research presently stands on evidence-based best practices as they animate contemporary theories of child development.

Before proceeding, it might be helpful to provide a little illumination on the title of the book, since this distinction is at the heart of Boyce’s entire thesis. In a nutshell, as T. Berry Brazelton notes in his forward, “Orchid children are uniquely fragile, needing special nurturing to achieve their best. Dandelions are more rugged and likely to overcome any difficulty, but are often average or ordinary in outcomes.” Within the current context, the author is obviously the dandelion, whereas his sister is the

orchid. With each ensuing chapter, you begin to get a more comprehensive sense of how the category to which you have been assigned can – but does not necessarily have to – determine your “fate” in life.

What distinguishes Boyce’s contribution to our collective understanding of the forces that dominate our life trajectories is his unflinching conviction that genes play a much larger role in our development – especially during childhood and adolescence – than has been previously assumed by his predecessors. He is convinced that certain variant genes have the capacity to systematically precipitate several conditions that adversely impact an individual’s life in profound ways; these include a statistically significant susceptibility to depression, anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as the increased prevalence of behaviors that can be best defined as antisocial, sociopathic or even violent.

Here comes the intriguing part. Most psychologists and behavioral scientists tend to see these predispositions as being inherently counterproductive and, as such, ideal candidates for interventions designed to mitigate their detrimental consequences. Boyce, on the other hand, sees these hereditary deviations as being capable of contributing to behavioral, cognitive and affective characteristics that can actually help the children who possess them to far exceed their peers in a number of tangible ways that have been linked to overall life success and satisfaction. The key, as the author so eloquently articulates, is to expose the children who possess these genes to the right environments and practices.

“We have evidence for important effects of genetic variation – that is, differences in DNA sequences – on an individual’s vulnerability to a specific disease, on his or her chances for a long and healthy life, and on differences in susceptibility and sensitivity to experiences within social constructs,” the author observes in “Where Do Orchids (and Dandelions) Come From?,” the fifth chapter. “Nearly always, these genetic effects are due to differences in multiple genes (sometimes in scores or hundreds of genes that together define ‘polygenic risk’ – risk that inheres in many genes), rather than the impact of a single mutation or variant within a single gene.”

Boyce is the Lisa and John Pritzker Distinguished Professor of Developmental and Behavioral Health and chief of the Division of Developmental Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. A member of the National Academy of Medicine and co-director of the Child and Brain Development Program of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, he has published more than 200 scholarly papers and journal articles on individual differences in children’s biological sensitivity to social constructs, such as the family, classroom and community. This is his first book. As might be expected given the subject matter, the manuscript is extensively researched, with 20 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and 10 relatively dense chapters. The author also includes a glossary that I found to be very beneficial as I made my way through some of the more challenging portions of the narrative.

One of the endearing features of “The Orchid and the Dandelion” is Boyce’s unwavering though guarded optimism that these newfound insights can be marshaled for the ultimate good of both orchids and dandelions. As he notes in “The Arc of Life for Orchids and Dandelions,” the ninth chapter and one of my personal favorites: “Our role as parents, teachers, health care providers and friends is to understand keenly the nature of each child – his or her location on the scale of orchid to dandelion – and to abet and model the most positive and life-giving responses to the events that may befall them.”

Absolutely; I could not agree more. I recommend this one highly to those who want to help others lead more successful and fulfilling lives, regardless of whether they are 7 or 70.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.