What Happens When You Did Not Feel Loved as a Child?

A review of

The Loveless Family: Getting Past Estrangement and Learning How to Love
by Jon P. Bloch
$37.00

Reviewed by
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In The Loveless Family: Getting Past Estrangement and Learning How to Love, Jon Bloch directly addresses persons who never felt loved in their lives while growing up. Bloch, chair of the Department of Sociology at Connecticut State University, conveys through anecdotes and descriptions the lack of pride and the feelings of isolation, of being unwanted, unimportant in the eyes of family members, unappreciated, and un-cared about: namely, the lot of children brought up in families where love is not the free and fundamental gift that every child should receive as a birthright.

Bloch shares anecdotes from his own family, where he felt unloved. He discloses, as a result, that even in adulthood, he felt uneasy with compliments: “They seem unreal and untrustworthy” (p. xii). His goal for this book “is aimed at trying to help the reader recognize behaviors and attitudes that emerge from growing up in a loveless family as well as how to
work . . . to try to get beyond these limitations” (p. xvi). He describes a wide variety of different family syndromes that lead to a child feeling unloved. Emphasizing the prevalence of this problem, he notes that a million youths have left home because life is so unbearable there and that there are an estimated 200,000 homeless youths per year in the United States (p. 3).

Bloch does not explain for the reader that the origins of many insecurely attached children lie in the lack of nourishing intimacy their own parents may have experienced as young children. Researchers for decades have explored the behaviors that lead to a secure or insecure attachment of an infant to a caregiver. Secure attachment enables a child to thrive emotionally and to develop positive mental health.

Bowlby and Ainsworth (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1972) were pioneers who taught us that the fundamental basis for feeling loved is embedded in the ways in which adults care for a little one consistently throughout the early years. Adults need to provide tenderness, careful holding and cuddling, and attuned attentiveness to signals of distress; as well, they need to engage in prompt and effective ways to ease that distress (Honig, 2002).

Extensive research on the sequelae of attachment behaviors shows that securely attached children grow up feeling loved, are able to learn well, and are better able to deal with the emotional vicissitudes that life sometimes entails. When parents are uncomfortable with warm snuggles and are unavailable when a little one is needy—for feeding, cuddling, reassuring loving company—children grow up to become insecure—“avoidantly attached.” Research shows that as preschoolers, they are more likely to bully other children (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). Children who receive inconsistent care from narcissistic mothers often become insecure, ambivalently/hesitantly attached, and may grow up to become “victims” in interpersonal relationships.

Bloch does not mention whether in his earliest years he had received attentive, attuned care. It is evident from his recollections that, while growing up, he did feel excluded from the world of adult attention and attunement to his wishes. For example, he reports extreme misery at being forced to kiss an aunt he barely knew.

Because Bloch does not report being beaten, starved, or sexually assaulted, it is of importance for psychologists to realize how sensitive children can be. Even when clothed and well fed, sensitive children feel the icy loneliness of not being known for who they are, and they suffer from feeling essentially neither of interest nor personally cherished in the family.

As the philosopher Martin Buber taught, an I–Thou relationship with a caring other leaves a lasting feeling of having been deeply known, loved, and appreciated. As an example, Mr. Rogers, looking directly at the TV camera, would assure each child watching that “I like you just the way you are.” And his words epitomized for many children the glowing, positive power of this message.

Temperament and culture styles also differentiate family members. Some children are easygoing, some feisty and triggery; some are fearful, shy, and slow to warm up (Honig,
1997). There are family members who are more prone to hug and embrace with warmth; others do not like close contact. They kiss, but perfunctorily and without warmth.

Some parents express delight in spending intimate personal time with children and genuinely admire the separate special person each little child grows up to become. In other families, the rule is that “children should be seen but not heard.” Bloch notes that some families put impossible pressures on children to “succeed” according to family wishes—for high grades, for getting into prestigious schools, or for excellence in sports. Some have more flexible and others more rigid discipline styles.

It would have been helpful for readers had Bloch included a description of Baumrind’s (1977) three major child-rearing styles. The authoritative parent sets high standards and is also deeply invested in the child’s well-being, genuinely admires the child, is personally cherishing, and acts for the well-being of the child. Other families Baumrind characterized as either permissive (where the child has all rights but few responsibilities), whose children often grow up demanding and spoiled, or authoritarian (where parents have all the rights and the child has all the responsibilities), and those children grow up often acting fearful or as callous and punitive with others as they were treated.

Bloch shows great insights into the variety of experiences for persons who grow up feeling loveless, but he does not go into detail and explain about attachment theory, temperament classifications, or parenting styles. This might be added to a future edition. Yet, the adult who feels unloved for long years will indeed, on reading this book, experience the author’s empathic caring and concern for loveless feelings.

**Descriptions of Different Types of Loveless Families**

Bloch explicitly and in detail delineates how the wounds from a loveless childhood last and lead to deep feelings of insecurity and uncertainty throughout life. He describes different situations resulting in lovelessness, such as when one child is treated as a “star” and is favored over another, and when a parent exhibits violent rages or dangerous behaviors, or meddles intrusively, or is highly critical.

In separate chapters, the author describes each nefarious parenting cluster of behaviors with colorful metaphors. A person feeling unloved would recognize the kind of example that his or her parent set during childhood. Bloch describes these difficult behaviors metaphorically as *syndromes*. They include the Volcano, the Iron Butterfly, the Ostrich, the Short-Distance Runner, the Clueless Meddler, and the Interloper.

These descriptions of the family behavior patterns that eventuate in the adult’s feelings of being loveless are indeed vivid. But this book needs further to explain to each “unloved” reader how to assess and think about the role of attachment relationships, temperament, and parental discipline styles in the family as they merged into the experiential
world that left the adult feeling “loveless” and thus wanting to read this book for the comfort of truly being understood.

Bloch offers practical advice for the loveless such as the following: not confusing “no” with abandonment; intimacy cannot be achieved solely through sex; and don’t expect a partner to heal you. This is good advice but difficult for a hurt person to act upon.

Yet, persons who have suffered the keen viper’s sting of lovelessness may well find comfort in how clearly this author seems to understand those feelings. A person who feels worthless, lonely, and suspicious of others needs above all to find a good therapist, as Bloch forthrightly suggests. Healing takes work, and finding how to forgive takes courage. The author ends with these healing words: “Let there be love” (p. 176). Therapists might want to recommend this book to clients who need to recognize that many others have trudged this difficult path in life and that the long adventure of trying to heal is worthwhile.

References


