

Book Review: The Colors of Grief

Contributed by Mila Ruiz Tecala, LICSW, DCSW

Book review of *The Colors of Grief* {mosgoogle right}

The Colors of Grief: Understanding a Child's Journey Through Loss From Birth to Adulthood, by Janis A. DiCiacco, Ph.D., Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 2008, 171 pages(including bibliography), \$19.95.

Since I specialize in grief therapy and I teach "Complicated Mourning" around the country. I have read just about every grief book that has been published. There are many excellent books out there, although there are a few (or more than a few) that are mediocre.

However, the book *The Colors of Grief* is top notch, in my opinion. The book is drawn from the latest research in neurology and psychology. Most of the grief books on children are based on psychology and the developmental process. DiCiacco illustrates the child's grieving process by describing the stages of development ranging from preverbal infancy (0-2 years) to early adulthood (about 25 years old).

I belong to a school of thought that believes when infants (preverbal) experience a life-shattering experience, they are somehow protected from the tragedy. And yet, I know that child adoption has much higher success when the child is adopted from birth to 6 months. My belief was supported by the necessity that an infant up to the toddler stage can be protected from the negative experiences of grief if the child is given all the love and caring in a stable home life.

Additionally, the child should be given an age-appropriate explanation of the death. DiCiacco contends that when loss occurs before one can speak, the experience is forever and indelibly imprinted in the implicit (unconscious) memory. In her glossary, implicit memory is defined as "the primary memory made during the first three to four years of life.

The behavioral patterns emerging from learned association, often termed conditioning. Implicit memory functions to enhance survival because it is the primary source of learning and behavior, basically running on an unconscious (preverbal) level. Dominant for preverbal organizations is emotional memory, sensory-motor memory, visceral memory and procedural memory." This was such an eye-opener for me!

DiCiacco discusses in great detail the different stages of development and how children progress through these stages, which can lead to cognitive, emotional, and social difficulties. She also explains the connection between bereavement, attachment issues, and social dysfunction. DiCiacco introduces each developmental stage (birth to toddler, age 0-2; toddler through early childhood, age 2-6; middle childhood, age 6-10; early adolescence, age 11-15; middle adolescence, age 15-17; late adolescence, age 17 to mid-twenties) with case histories and useful checklists of cognitive, emotional, and physical considerations.

DiCiacco also connects grief experiences to other losses, not just death. Additionally, the author also suggests easy-to-use activities for intervention at each stage, including but not limited to infant massage, aromatherapy, and storytelling.

This is an excellent book for parents and professionals working with or caring for infants, children, or young adults who have experienced loss. The way children deal with these feelings has a lasting impact on their life as they grow.

Reviewed by Mila Ruiz Tecala, LICSW, DCSW, a widely recognized international authority on counseling people who have experienced a personal loss. Tecala is a clinical social worker in private practice in the Washington, DC area.