Evidence that deprivation of maternal care is an important determinant of mental ill-health is reviewed, and measures to prevent or ameliorate its ill-effects are discussed. Whenever possible, strenuous efforts should be made to keep families together. [The Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) indicates that this book has been cited in over 405 publications since 1955.]

At that date, there was little recognition in psychiatric or psychological circles that disrupted emotional relationships during early childhood could have an adverse effect on mental health, and those dealing only with adults were deeply sceptical of any such idea. Nevertheless, there was already published evidence additional to my own—e.g., from William Goldfarb—showing that the loss of a mother was well recognized by child psychiatric and child care agencies. In the first part of the report, I therefore reviewed the evidence pointing to a causal connection, and in the second, considered measures to prevent or ameliorate ill-effects, notably by supporting a child's family to enable it to care for him or her and, if that was not possible, by arrangements such as adoption and fostering. For children in hospital, unrestricted visiting by parents was recommended. My report was accepted by the organization without change and published as a monograph the following year.

Reception was mixed. Those with practical experience of the problem, notably social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists dealing with children, were enthusiastic. Learning theorist psychologists were bitterly critical, pointing to the deficiencies of the data and the lack of theory to link alleged cause and effect (made good later in my work on Attachment and Loss). To my surprise and disappointment, most of my psychoanalytic colleagues were also critical. Freud had long since turned his back on childhood trauma as a cause of neurosis, and emphasis was now insistently on fantasy. Nevertheless, the report proved a best-seller, was translated into 12 languages, and appeared in an abridged English version.

I believe the monograph has become a Citation Classic because it focussed attention on the relationship of a young child to the mother as an important determinant of mental health, with far-reaching practical implications, and has given rise to widespread controversy and extensive research. For a recent evaluation of the field (by an erstwhile critic) see Rutter.

For my work, I have received many honours, including appointment as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire and an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University.