

**Bowlby J.** *Maternal care and mental health: a report prepared on behalf of the World Health Organization as a contribution to the United Nations programme for the welfare of homeless children.* Geneva: World Health Organization, 1951. 179 p.  
[World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland and Department for Children and Parents, Tavistock Clinic, London, England]

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.]

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Working as a child psychiatrist before the Second World War, I was struck by the high incidence of seriously disrupted mother-child relationships during the early years among delinquent and sociopathic children. This led me to make a study of the problem and to publish a monograph.<sup>1,2</sup>

After the war, there was much concern about homeless children, which led the Social Commission of the United Nations to make a study of their needs. When the specialized agencies were approached for their suggestions, the World Health Organization offered to contribute a study of the mental health aspects, and, because of my known interests, the organization invited me to prepare a report. Engaged as a consultant for six months during 1950, I visited professionals dealing with homeless and/or disturbed children in Europe (Switzerland, France, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Britain) and the US. A proposal to visit Eastern Europe was not agreed to by the authorities there.

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<sup>3</sup> and René Spitz<sup>4</sup>—and the problem 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 spring.

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 *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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.

1. Bowlby J. Forty-four juvenile thieves: their characters and home-life (I & II). *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 25:19-53; 107-28, 1944.
2. ———. *Forty-four juvenile thieves: their characters and home-life.* London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox, 1946. 56 p.
3. Goldfarb W. The effects of early institutional care on adolescent personality. *Child Develop.* 14:213-23, 1943.
4. Spitz R. Hospitalism: an enquiry into the genesis of psychiatric conditions in early childhood. *Psychoanal. Stud. Child* 1:53-74, 1945. (Cited 360 times.)
5. Bowlby J. *Attachment and loss.* New York: Basic Books, 1969-1980. 3 vols.
6. ———. *Child care and the growth of love.* Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1953. 190 p. (Cited 155 times.)
7. Rutter M. Maternal deprivation, 1972-1978: new findings, new concepts, new approaches. *Child Develop.* 50:283-305, 1979. (Cited 95 times.)