Effects of Early Childhood Attachment and Care Status on Eating Behaviour during Adolescence

Background

Local Authorities in England are responsible for some 68,110 children\(^1\). These children present problematic eating behaviour such as aberrant eating (unusual eating behaviour), excessive eating, food acquisition and maintenance behaviours, food maintenance syndrome and pica-type eating behaviour (eating inedible objects)\(^2\). They are also not being protected from the dangers of obesity\(^3\). The purpose of this study was to see whether perceived early childhood attachment and care status could predict eating behaviour during adolescence.

Method

Participants were Looked After Young People (LAYP) (n=9 male/23 female) and non-LAYP (n=9 male/23 female) aged 16-25. They completed questionnaires about their perception of their relationship with their main caregiver when they were aged 0-5\(^4\)& and their relationship to food\(^6\), level of picky eating\(^7\) and food disgust\(^8\) during adolescence. Participants were recruited through one Local Authority. The study received a favourable ethical opinion from the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Surrey. The results were analysed using t-tests, correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis.

Results

LAYP experienced significantly poorer relationships with their main caregiver during early childhood, and perceived worse levels of early childhood care than their non looked-after peers. They also reported high levels of picky eating and food disgust during adolescence. For LAYP, food held a negative meaning and was used as a form of control or as an emotional regulator during adolescence. For non-LAYP, food held a positive meaning and was used as a way of forming and maintaining relationships during adolescence. Multiple regression analysis showed that care status and perceived early childhood attachment significantly predicted picky eating, food disgust, control over life, family life, and social interaction.

Conclusions

The results suggest that LAYP are more likely to have experienced negative early childhood attachments, and, as a result, are more likely to be ‘fussy eaters’, to find more food disgusting and use it as a means of exerting control during adolescence. Eating behaviour is more likely to be problematic for LAYP than their non looked-after peers. These problems are significantly associated with early childhood attachment problems. It is crucial that carers and other adults working with looked after children form trusting relationships with them with a view to encouraging them to develop positive attachments. By promoting the development of healthy attachments, carers and other adults working with these children are likely to teach them to foster a positive relationship with food and improve eating behaviour.

References