

Using food to soothe: Maternal attachment anxiety is associated with child emotional eating



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ABSTRACT

Attachment anxiety (fear of abandonment) is associated with disinhibited eating in adults. Both maternal disinhibited eating and use of emotional feedings strategies are associated with emotional eating in children. On this basis, the current study sought to determine whether attachment anxiety is an underlying maternal characteristic that predicts parental reports of child emotional over-eating via its effects on maternal disinhibited eating and emotional feeding. Mothers of a preadolescent child ($N = 116$) completed an internet-delivered questionnaire. Maternal attachment anxiety and dietary disinhibition were assessed by the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire and the Three Factor Eating Questionnaire, respectively. The Parental Feeding Strategies Questionnaire and the Child Eating Behaviour Questionnaire were used to quantify emotional feeding and child emotional over-eating, respectively. Bias-corrected bootstrapping indicated a significant direct effect of maternal attachment anxiety on child emotional over-eating (*i.e.*, controlling for maternal disinhibited eating and emotional feeding). There was also a significant indirect effect of maternal attachment anxiety on child emotional over-eating via emotional feeding strategies. In a subsequent model to investigate bi-directional relationships, the direct effect of maternal attachment anxiety on emotional feeding strategies was not statistically significant after controlling for child emotional over-eating. There was, however, a significant indirect effect of maternal attachment anxiety on emotional feeding strategies via child emotional over-eating. These findings highlight the influence of maternal attachment anxiety on parental reports of aberrant eating behaviour in children. While this may be partly due to use of emotional feeding strategies, there is stronger evidence for a “child-responsive” model whereby anxiously-attached mothers use these feeding practices in response to perceived emotional over-eating in the child.

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1. Introduction

Attachment orientation refers to a representational model of personal relationships that is usually abstracted from early interactions with caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment orientations are conceptualised in terms of two orthogonal dimensions; anxiety about abandonment and avoidance of intimacy (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Anxiously-attached individuals are thought to have an impaired ability to internally regulate emotion in response to distress (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998), which may lead them to rely on external sources of comfort such as consuming food (Mauder &

Hunter, 2001). Consistent with this prospect, previous research indicates that attachment anxiety in adults is associated with the general propensity to over-eat (*i.e.*, disinhibited eating) (Wilkinson, Rowe, Bishop, & Brunstrom, 2010). This disinhibited behaviour may be the result of a specific affect regulation strategy that is employed by anxiously-attached individuals to alleviate negative emotional states.

The tendency to eat in response to negative emotions (*i.e.*, emotional over-eating) has also been found in young children (Carper, Fisher, & Birch, 2000). This is cause for concern because emotional over-eating in children is associated with greater caloric intake and obesity (Braet & Van Strien, 1997). Emotional over-eating is likely to be a learned behaviour that is transmitted to the child via interactions with parents or caregivers and this process may occur through various pathways. First, children might

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model parental or caregiver disinhibited eating. In support of this “role-modelling” hypothesis, studies have shown that maternal disinhibited eating is associated with disinhibited eating and overweight status in the child (Cutting, Fisher, Grimm-Thomas, & Birch, 1999; de Lauzon-Guillain et al., 2009; Zocca et al., 2011).

Second, parents may “teach” children to emotionally eat via use of emotional feeding strategies. This is where the parent offers food when the child is anxious, angry or upset. There is growing evidence that maternal use of emotional feeding strategies is associated with child emotional eating (Blissett, Haycraft, & Farrow, 2010; Rodgers et al., 2013, 2014). For example, Blissett et al. (2010) found that children whose mothers often used emotional feeding strategies ate more chocolate in response to a negative mood induction than children whose mothers used this feeding practice infrequently. Emotional feeding strategies are likely to serve a variety of functions; however, one possibility is that offering food for emotion regulation may increase interpersonal closeness between parent and child (Hamburg, Finkenauer, & Schuengel, 2014).

Third, parents might feed their children in the same way that they feed themselves. Wardle, Sanderson, Guthrie, Rapoport, and Plomin (2002) found that mothers with high emotional eating scores reported higher levels of emotional feeding. In addition, the association between parent and child emotional eating was found to be mediated by emotional feeding (Tan & Holub, 2015). Furthermore, negative affect in mothers (depression, anxiety and stress) has recently been shown to predict maternal emotional eating and, in turn, use of emotional feeding strategies and child emotional eating (Rodgers et al., 2014).

Given that attachment anxiety tends to be associated with disinhibited eating, interpersonal insecurity and negative affect, it may be an underlying maternal characteristic that predicated use of emotional feeding strategies and child emotional eating. This possibility has not been previously investigated; however, it is consistent with recent evidence that insecure caregiver-child attachment is associated with high-calorie food intake in preadolescent children (Faber & Dube, 2015). On this basis, the current study sought to determine whether there is an association between maternal attachment anxiety and emotional over-eating in the child. Specifically, it examined whether the relationship would be explained by one or more of the following three pathways (see Fig. 1) (i.) maternal disinhibited eating (*i.e.*, role-modelling), (ii.) maternal use of emotional feeding strategies, (iii.) these two mediators operating in series (*i.e.*, whereby higher maternal disinhibited eating is associated with greater use of emotional feeding strategies which, in turn, predicts child emotional over-eating).

There is also evidence to suggest that the relationship between parental feeding style and child eating behaviour is bi-directional; specifically, while some feeding strategies may increase obesogenic eating behaviours in the child, parents may also use particular practices in response to the child's pre-existing weight and eating

behaviour traits (Rodgers et al., 2013; Webber, Cooke, Hill, & Wardle, 2010). For example, Rodgers et al. (2013) found a reciprocal relationship between maternal emotional feeding and child emotional eating over a 1-year period. On this basis, a secondary aim was to test an alternative hypothesis that the association between maternal attachment anxiety and emotional feeding strategies might be mediated by child emotional over-eating.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

One hundred and sixteen mothers of a preadolescent child (aged between 3 and 12 years) completed an internet-delivered questionnaire. They were recruited via local primary schools, an electronic database of research participants, and through advertisements on popular parenting websites in the United Kingdom. The study was advertised as a “Parent and Child Survey on Eating Behaviour”. Mothers were instructed to answer the child-relevant questions about one child in their family (where mothers had more than one child in this age range, they were asked to answer the questions about their oldest child only). Individuals who completed the questionnaire were voluntarily entered into a prize draw to win a £50 shopping voucher. The study protocol was approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.

2.2. Measures

Maternal attachment anxiety was quantified using the 18-item attachment anxiety subscale from the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) questionnaire (Brennan et al., 1998). On a seven-point scale ranging from ‘disagree strongly’ (1) to ‘agree strongly’ (7), participants rated their level of agreement with statements about their experiences of interpersonal relationships (*e.g.*, “I worry a lot about my relationships”). The attachment anxiety scale score was obtained by calculating the mean response on all items comprising the scale (minimum score = 1, maximum = 7). In the current sample, Cronbach's α for the anxiety scale was 0.93. It is to be noted that the ECR measures global attachment orientation (general approach to relationships), as opposed to specific attachment orientation (approach to a particular relationship).

Maternal disinhibited eating was assessed using the 16-item disinhibition subscale of the Three Factor Eating Questionnaire (TFEQ) (Stunkard & Messick, 1985). Items on this subscale refer to over-eating and loss of dietary control, for example “When I feel anxious, I find myself eating”. The disinhibited eating scale score was obtained by summing the responses of all items comprising the scale (minimum score = 0, maximum = 16). Cronbach's α for the current sample was .83.

Maternal use of emotional feeding strategies was assessed using the Parental Feeding Strategies Questionnaire (PFSQ) (Wardle et al., 2002). This 27-item instrument assesses parental use of feeding strategies in relation to four scales (Instrumental feeding, Control, Emotional feeding, Encouragement). Responses on the Emotional Feeding scale only (*e.g.*, “I give my child something to eat to make him/her feel better when s/he is feeling upset”) were examined in the current study. For each item, the response options were “Never; Rarely; Sometimes; Often; Always”. The Emotional Feeding scale score was obtained by calculating the mean response on all items comprising the scale (minimum score = 1, maximum = 5). Cronbach's α for the current sample was .70.

Child emotional eating was assessed using the parent-reported Child Eating Behaviour Questionnaire (CEBQ) (Wardle, Guthrie, Sanderson, & Rapoport, 2001). This 35-item instrument assesses eight dimensions of eating style in children, however only

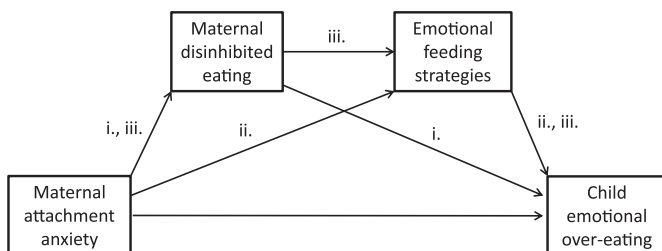


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the proposed relationship between maternal attachment anxiety and child emotional over-eating via one or more of the following pathways; (i.) maternal disinhibited eating, (ii.) maternal use of emotional feeding strategies, (iii.) the two mediators operating in series.

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