Predictors of crying, feeding and sleeping problems: a prospective study.

Background Infant regulatory problems, that is, excessive crying, feeding and/or sleeping difficulties, are precursors of adverse development. However, the aetiology of regulatory problems is still unclear. The aim of this study was to investigate pre-, peri- and post-natal neurophysiological and psychosocial predictors of single and multiple regulatory problems at 5 months of age.

Methods This prospective longitudinal study included all children born at neonatal risk in a geographically defined area in southern Germany. The data of n = 5093 singleton infants (83.6%) were analysed using crude and multivariate logistic regression analyses. As outcome measures we used single and multiple regulatory problems, that is, crying, feeding and/or sleeping difficulties at 5 months of age, which were assessed via a standardized interview with the parents by study paediatricians as part of a neurodevelopmental examination.

Results In total, 30.7% of the sample suffered from single or multiple regulatory problems at 5 months. Breastfeeding increased the odds of single sleeping problems 5.12-fold, but decreased the odds of single feeding problems [odds ratio (OR) 0.51; 95% confidence interval (CI) 0.35-0.74]. Very preterm birth was predictive of single feeding (OR 1.79; 95% CI 1.25-2.55) and multiple regulatory problems (OR 2.03; 95% CI 1.19-3.46), and foetal abnormalities increased the odds of single feeding and multiple regulatory problems from
1.53- to 1.64-fold. Family adversity and psychosocial stress factors were associated with single crying and multiple regulatory problems. Conclusions Pre-, peri- and post-natal neurophysiological and psychosocial factors are predictive of single and multiple regulatory problems. The results may be useful in terms of early recognition of at risk groups for regulatory problems.

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