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# Sense and sensitivity

They become tearful when they sense your stress. They sulk for days after a little playful teasing. They know what you are feeling before you do. Meet the highly sensitive child. By Dr Nicola Davies

**H**ighly sensitive children are both a challenge and a joy. They are like sponges when it comes to emotions and can absorb the moods of everyone around them. So how do parents know if they have them? How do they cope with the challenges that such raw nerves bring? And how do they bring out the best in such children so that sensitivity, far from being a handicap, becomes a gift?

The term 'highly sensitive' is used to describe personality and character traits that have a biological basis. Highly sensitive children are born with a nervous system that is extremely reactive to environmental cues or to other people. They are easily aroused and easily distressed by their environment. It's not an illness, but an inborn trait which may be found in nearly 1 in 5 children.

## How parents can help

Dr Elaine Aron, author of *The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them*, says that 'it is primarily parenting that decides whether the expression of sensitivity will be an advantage or a source of anxiety'. Parents are encouraged to see high sensitivity not as an illness or a nuisance, but as a gift.

Many parents and professionals tend to perceive high sensitivity negatively as being shy, fearful, or fussy. But research shows that there are many advantages to being highly sensitive.

With a heightened sense of awareness, these children are often extremely intelligent and creative. It is a trait

frequently found in artists and innovators. Their ability to sense emotions means that many of them demonstrate genuine compassion and empathy towards other children at an early age.

Importantly, just as negative emotions are experienced with full force, so are positive emotions. This means highly sensitive children can enjoy the positive aspects of the small things that others often miss.

Despite the many rewards of parenting a highly sensitive child, there are also many challenges. Such children may develop anxiety and depression both in childhood and adulthood. They are prone to withdraw from experiences to protect themselves from bad emotions. But raising a happy and healthy sensitive child is perfectly possible using sensitive parenting.

Highly sensitive children do need 'sensitive handling' to prevent feelings of intense anxiety or fear of failure. They need to be raised with understanding and empathy, which can be harder if you are not highly sensitive yourself.

Barbara Carter has a highly sensitive daughter. She says: 'I am not a highly sensitive person at all – but I am intuitive and while I didn't understand why she reacted the way she did, I did know when things weren't right. This helped me to adapt our lives to avoid the things that caused problems. We became excellent at choosing our battles and understanding her needs and our own. It took time and care on our part but we got there.'

Barbara describes how when her daughter started school everything 'fell apart'. She explains: 'With 400

## What to look out for

Suspect that your child is highly sensitive if she

- Startles easily
- Complains about clothes fabric being too rough
- Seems able to read your mind
- Finds it difficult to get to sleep after an exciting day
- Finds change difficult
- Is a perfectionist
- Asks lots of questions
- Prefers to play quietly
- Notices subtle changes in the environment or your mood
- Feels and thinks deeply
- Dislikes loud noises.

If you have ever thought of your child as 'too sensitive,' 'too shy,' or 'too intense' or if you have ever told them to 'toughen up' then it is likely that your child is one of those children born with a hyper-responsive nervous system. Brain imaging studies show that highly sensitive children are more reactive to their environment because of how their brains are wired. They have a hyper-responsive amygdala, which is the part of the brain that assesses threats and controls responses to fear.

There are two types of highly sensitive children:

- Children who actively express their sensitivity. They tend to be loud, intense, and persistent.
- Children who internalise their sensitivity. They tend to be calm, quiet, and thoughtful.

Whether your child is outspoken or reserved, all highly sensitive children feel the full force of their emotional and physical environment. They need time to process the constant stream of sensory information that is around them. Judith Orloff, a psychiatrist and author of *Emotional Freedom*, says: 'It's like feeling something with 50 fingers as opposed to 10.'

*"With a heightened sense of awareness, these children are often extremely intelligent and creative"*



children, scratchy uniforms, and inflexible timetables, she disintegrated. It wasn't until we moved her to a smaller school with more flexibility that she flourished and her anxiety levels dropped'. At school, highly sensitive children can really thrive with a little encouragement – or struggle greatly with slight discouragement.

Because we live in a world where there is an emphasis on masculinity, it can be particularly hard for boys to cope with being highly sensitive. These boys are prone to repress their feelings, leaving them open to anxiety or depression in adulthood. Providing highly sensitive boys with a home environment where emotional expression is accepted is especially important.

### It's a gift

The 15-20 per cent of children who are born to be highly sensitive have a very special gift. The more you understand them, the better equipped you will be as parents to nurture this gift. Barbara Carter read widely around the topic and now quotes Dr Aron when describing her daughter: 'If you want to have an exceptional child, you must be willing to have an exceptional child.'

'Remembering this has carried me through many difficult and emotionally charged times,' says Barbara. 'I tell myself: my daughter is exceptional.' If any of your children are highly sensitive, they too are exceptional, so rejoice in this.

### More info

Growing Happy Kids: [www.growinghappykids.com](http://www.growinghappykids.com) set up by Maureen Healy, a practising expert in parenting and children's emotional health.

The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them by Elaine N. Aron PhD (published by Three Rivers Press).

## How to be a sensitive parent

### ✓ Accept your child's sensitivity

Rather than trying to change them, help them to harness their gift. Messages to 'toughen up' can lead to low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and further withdrawal from a world they find overwhelming.

### ✓ Partner with your child

This involves working with them to learn ways of coping with heightened emotions. Learn their triggers and help them to develop tools for coping with overwhelming feelings, such as deep breathing. The team effort can bring you closer, and prevent your child from repressing emotions that need to be expressed.

### ✓ Focus on your child's strengths

See strengths (such as creativity) before weaknesses (such as heightened negative emotions). This helps you accept the challenges of raising a highly sensitive child, while staying focused on the rewards.

### ✓ Create a sense of calmness and stability

Highly sensitive children can be affected by lighting, colours, sounds, and surroundings. Make an effort to create an environment that doesn't over stimulate their senses. Even if this can't happen throughout the house, try to have at least one room where your child feels at ease.

## 'I was amazed that he could be so gentle at such a young age'



**Suzanne Maloney describes her son, nine-month old Connor, who is a highly sensitive child.**

'From six months old we couldn't have an argument around him. If a discussion becomes heated, even if we aren't raising our voices, Connor will quickly become agitated and pull at our trousers to get our attention.

'At eight months he started having nightmares. He would get particularly upset if he saw a baby crying on television. We have to be very careful now about anything he is exposed to, or watches on TV.

'One incident in particular comes to mind. One week at playgroup when Connor was seven months old, we saw a little girl about the same age sitting alone on the mat looking sad. Connor was crawling around playing, but kept pausing to look at the girl. After a while he approached her and held out his hand. She ignored him. He crawled nearer and gently touched his forehead to hers. Finally, she looked up and smiled at him. I was amazed that he could be so gentle at such a young age.'

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