

THE SENSITIVE CHILD

How to Nurture Special Gifts

by Maureen Healy



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It is primarily parenting that decides whether the expression of sensitivity will be an advantage or a source of anxiety.

~Elaine Aron

Highly sensitive children need extra nurturing care so that they can learn to see their sensitivity as a strength and begin empowering themselves with tools to tap into their positive traits such as insight, creativity and empathy, while simultaneously learning how to manage their rich emotional lives.

Elaine Aron, Ph.D., a practicing psychotherapist in Mill Valley, California, who studies sensitivity using functional magnetic resonance imaging, advises, “A highly sensitive child is among the 15 to 20 percent born with a nervous system that’s highly aware and quick to react to everything.” She offers a free online questionnaire to help assess a child’s level of sensitivity at HSPerson.com/test/highly-sensitive-child-test.

Highly sensitive children are incredibly responsive to their environments, from sounds and smells to the overall mood of people they encounter. Other indicators may range from a preference for quiet play to noticing details or asking many questions. With a sharpened sense of awareness, they are often gifted intellectually, creatively and emotionally, demonstrating genuine compassion early on.

The downside is that these intensely perceptive children can also be easily overwhelmed by crowds, noises, new situations or sudden changes. Criticism, defeat and the distress of others deeply affect them.

Parenting a highly sensitive child can be highly rewarding, but some parents find it exhausting. Special skills help in gracefully raising a healthy, happy and well-adjusted sensitive child without wearing ourselves out.

Accept, rather than seek to change them. Embracing a child as being highly sensitive is step one. No one can change them into less sensitive, more traditional kids. Accept their specialness as part of the family’s shared journey.

See it as a gift. It’s easy to get frustrated or angry with a child if they continually cry, withdraw and shy away from social situations. Instead of viewing these behaviors as flaws, see them as providing the child a special gift. Sensitivity often characterizes artists, innovators, prodigies and great thinkers.

Partner up. Sensitive children respond far better to requests for desired behaviors when acting in partnership with the adults in their life. Harsh discipline can elicit emotional meltdowns

and outbursts of energy in temper tantrums, crying or yelling. Partnering with a child includes learning to avoid their triggers and giving them ready tools to use when they feel overwhelmed, such as breathing exercises. Professional counselors can help shape the relationship.

Focus on strengths. Remembering that a highly sensitive child may be incredibly talented is essential when they are acting out. Training ourselves to see a child’s strengths first—such as their incredible creativity, perceptiveness and keen intellect—helps us accept their challenges, such as being overwhelmed, highly emotional, introverted at times, shy, picky about clothes and other preferences, or overly active.

Create calmness. It’s worth taking the time to create spaces that match a child’s sensibilities. Create a “peace corner” at home designed to deliver the serenity that highly sensitive children crave by using just the right lighting, colors, sounds and surroundings; elements might include headphones, favorite plush toys and coloring markers.

Instill inner discipline. Establishing gentle structure and clear limits with respect goes a long way. Reasonable reminders of what’s needed now and why yield better results than shouting and warnings of consequences.

Connect with peers. Like everyone else, highly sensitive children are drawn to other “birds of a feather”, and getting these kids together to nurture each other’s strengths is good. It may mean some extra effort by parents to help a child find kids that get along together and make play dates.

A highly sensitive child can be steered in a helpful emotional direction by well-adjusted, happy and healthy sensitive adults. Sensitive children need especially good role models because they are learning how to use their incredible gifts in a world that sometimes doesn’t value their inherent worth.

Maureen Healy, of Santa Barbara, CA, runs a mentoring program for highly sensitive children based on her social and emotional learning curriculum for K-8 students, child psychology training and current scientific research. She is the author of Growing Happy Kids and The Energetic Keys to Indigo Kids (HighlySensitiveKids.com).