

INSIGHTS

Supporting a highly sensitive child



Does your child cry easily? Is she prone to becoming overwhelmed in loud or busy places? Does your child seem sensitive to the moods and emotions of others? Does he tend to “meltdown” or “shutdown” when there is a lot going on? Does your child startle easily? Do you consider your child to be highly sensitive?

Raising a highly sensitive child can come with a unique set of parenting challenges but it also gives you—the parent—more influence to positively shape your child’s development! Yes, that’s right. Parents have even more influence on the development and wellbeing of their highly sensitive child compared to less sensitive kids.

Research shows that highly sensitive children are more strongly affected by their environment, including parenting, than less sensitive children. Let me explain.

Just as we all differ on temperament traits such as extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, we also differ on another temperament trait: sensitivity. All of us fall somewhere on the sensitivity continuum from low sensitivity to high sensitivity.

Approximately 30% of us—and our kids—are highly sensitive. Highly sensitive kids tend to process information from the environment more deeply, are prone to overstimulation, have greater emotional reactivity (think more crying and more intense emotions) and higher empathy, and have a greater capacity for sensing subtleties in our environment. We can think of highly sensitive kids as living smoke detectors who are capable of detecting subtle changes in the environment that the majority of people may miss. It is thought that a finely tuned, highly reactive nervous system underpins high sensitivity.

Research shows that highly sensitive kids tend to do exceptionally well in nurturing and supportive environments but are at higher risk for developing a range of physical and mental health conditions in harsh and unsupportive environments compared to children who are less sensitive. In other words, highly sensitive children are more sensitive to their environment for better and for worse.

So how do we support our sensitive kids and provide them with the nurturing environment they need?

Understand and accept your child’s sensitivity

Our temperament is biologically based, it is not something we can simply switch on and off or turn up and down. Learning more about our child’s temperament will help us to understand them better.

By seeing our child’s temperament as an important part of who they are, we can practice accepting their sensitivity rather than seeing it as something problematic that needs to be changed or ‘fixed’. Your child doesn’t need to be less sensitive. They need their sensitivity to be understood.

This can feel like a relief to parents who have been thinking that perhaps they had somehow caused their child to be sensitive. While nature and nurture do interact to shape our child’s development, your child was born with their own unique temperament, including their sensitivity.

Provide your highly sensitive child with the nurturing relationship they need to flourish

Highly sensitive children thrive in nurturing and supportive environments. We know that children don't benefit from harsh or punitive parenting, but this is especially true for our highly sensitive kids who need a more nurturing parenting approach. In healthy parent-child relationships, our kids use us as their "safe haven" to come back to for protection and nurturing when they are tired, sick, stressed, or experiencing big feelings.

Often parents of highly sensitive kids will report that their child is "clingy" and tends to stay close to their parent until they feel comfortable in a situation. This is rarely cause for concern. Clinging is a child's way of signalling that they need their parent to help them feel OK again. Sometimes they simply need our presence, other times they may need our affection and gentle words. We live in a society that has a history of discouraging children from being "too dependent" or "too clinging". Often this view comes from a place of not understanding child development and not understanding children's attachment needs. By trusting our child's needs and responding to those needs with atonement and sensitivity, we can provide our kids with the support they need so that they can grow-up feeling secure in their relationship with us (knowing that we have their back), and, in turn, feeling secure in themselves and the world.

Be an emotion coach for your child

Highly sensitive children often have big emotions and lots of them! This means that your highly sensitive child will need your help to understand and manage their emotions. From as early as you can, label your child's emotions to help them develop their own emotional vocabulary so that they can express their emotions as they get older. You can say things such as, "you look sad" or "I can see you are angry". Once you've labelled your child's emotion, it's important to show your child that you accept their emotions—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

It's important that you validate your child's emotions and avoid dismissing their emotions, even when your adult brain might judge their emotion as an "over reaction". Instead of saying, "don't be so sensitive" or "it wasn't a big deal, she didn't mean to hurt your feelings", you can say things such as, "it's okay to feel angry, I get it" or "I know you feel sad, that hurt your feelings". By accepting and validating the full range of our child's emotion, we not only help to soothe them in the moment, we also teach them healthy ways of responding to their own emotions—this is a lesson they will carry with them throughout their lifetime.



Rachel Samson

Rachel Samson is an Australian-based Clinical Psychologist and Family Consultant with a passion for supporting parents to develop healthy parent-child relationships that promote optimal child development. For further details visit [Instagram @australianpsychologist](#) and [Facebook @sensitivityproject](#).