Understanding the Highly Sensitive Child
What is Sensitivity?

The Bouncy Castle Metaphor:

Without having knowledge about high sensitivity is, we might label highly sensitive children as:

- Hyperactive
- Aggressive
- Defiant
- Unmotivated
- Distracted
- Withdrawn

These labels are usually based on behavioural observations, but do not take into consideration what is going on for the child behind the behaviour.

Definition of sensitivity:
Two scientific explanations of sensitivity:
The following are academic terms referring to one’s sensitivity to the environment around them.

1. *Biological Sensitivity to Context (BSC)* – Boyce & Ellis:
   - BSC refers to one’s sensitivity to the environment
   - Research on BSC shows that people high in context sensitivity are influenced intensely by both positive and negative environments, including prenatal environments.
   - The sensitivity to environment that these individuals show is reflected in the reactivity of the nervous system.
     - Our nervous systems are responsible for the communication between our brain and different parts of our body. Our nervous systems help us to take in information and respond to that information. Our nervous systems are responsible for our fight, flight, and freeze responses.

2. *Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)* – Elaine Aron
   - SPS refers to the way in which one processes and transmits information from the environment.
   - HSC are considered to have high SPS, and thus, have a higher level of arousal to the environment.

*Important Note***

High sensitivity is not a disorder or disability – it is biologically based at birth.

High Sensitivity is normal, and is found in 15-20% of the population (Aron, 2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dandelion Children</th>
<th>Orchid Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

What is High Sensitivity – Elaine Aron: D.O.E.S
Depth of processing –
Overstimulated easily

Emotionally reactive and empathetic
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdBINzpAi5A
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwpMkZ2i4wM

Sensitive to subtle stimuli

The D.O.E.S qualities of your HSC might manifest behaviourally:

- Picky eaters
- Stubborn
- Shy
- Anxiety/worry
- Aggression
- Mature for his/her age
- Specific about clothing, routine, etc.
- Perfectionistic
Compassionate
Extremely caring and loving
Wise beyond his/her years

Supporting the Highly Sensitive Boy:


Responding to Highly Sensitive Children

Considerations:
- What do HSC need? Is it different for HS boys than HS girls?
- How does environment impact the HSC?
- How does caregiver temperament play a role in supporting HSC?
- What is behind the behaviour?
- How can I use effective discipline with my HSC?
- How can I foster resiliency in my HSC?

Some of the needs of a HSC:
1. Help to foster high self-esteem and self-worth:
2. Help to calm and regulate emotions:

3. Patience with slow start-ups:

4. Help create and nurture outlets for their sensitivity – often these are creative outlets

When Orchid Children Flourish

- The importance of environment
- Vantage Sensitivity - Michael Pluess:

Strategies for the Non-HS caregiver:
1. Take care of yourself
2. Accept that this is genuinely how your child is
3. Put aside the “dreams” you had for your child that might not be important or possible
   - Create new dreams with your child – one’s that are important to him or her!
4. Focus on the positive
5. Pay close attention to what your child’s “sensitivity triggers” are
   - These include sensory, environmental, and emotional triggers
6. Mediate your child’s triggers when you can
7. Be conscious of your responses to your child
   - If you need to, take time [if appropriate] to cool off and regulate before responding in a big way that your HSC might personalize
8. Take a note from your HSC and be compassionate – with yourself!
   - You are doing the best you can
   - You are trying because you care
   - It is not easy to learn another language, which is what you are doing with our HSC
   - Practice makes perfect, and you are practicing because you love your child
   - You will make mistakes – and that’s OK!

**Strategies for the HS caregiver:**

1. Take care of yourself
2. Normalize your HSC experiences
3. Keep your traits in check
   - Remember there is variance in HSP
4. Be careful not to over identify with you HSC
5. Again – be gentle with yourself!
   - You are doing the best you can
• You are trying because you care
• It can be hard to separate yourself when you identify so closely with someone
• Practice makes perfect, and you are practicing because you love your child
• You will make mistakes – and that’s OK!

Look at the WHY of your child’s behaviour:

Disciplining the HSC –

Too often we forget that discipline really means to teach, not to punish. A disciple is a student, not a recipient of behavioral consequences.

- Dr. Dan Siegel, The Whole-Brain Child

Defining “meltdown” behaviours:
• Hurting self or others
• Aggression in speech or behaviour
• Shouting
• Crying
• Refusal to cooperate
• Etc.

Preventing a meltdown:
- Remember the iceberg metaphor – your child’s meltdown’s might be predictable at times

- If you are anticipating a meltdown, use your expertise as a parent to navigate how to best support your little one.
| Avoid language that is blaming and shaming. Remember, HSC are great internalizers already | Recognize that this is a “downstairs tantrum.” This requires you to help regulate your child’s emotions before jumping to problem solve or administer consequences |
| Avoid yelling and disciplining out of anger. Remember, HSC are sensitive to volume and tone. When we haven’t regulated our own anger, we can’t think logically about what we are saying | Practice first regulating your own emotions. This will help to keep a gentle but serious tone, volume, and pace to your voice when you are responding to your child. Remember that HSC are specifically sensitive to how we respond. |
| Avoid withdrawing love as a punishment. The problem with time-outs... | Connect and Re-direct |
| Name it to tame it | Name it to tame it |
| Use time-ins | Use time-ins |

Connect and Re-Direct (Dan Siegel – “The Whole Brain Child”)

Name it to Tame it (Dan Siegel – “The Whole Brain Child”)

COPYRIGHT © 2019 Institute of Child Psychology
www.instituteofchildpsychology.com
Time-ins:

Partnering with school:

- What you can do:
  - Explain what a HSC is to your child’s teacher and other staff who are a part of your HSC life
  - Discuss your child’s triggers and helpful responses – this can help teachers to prevent meltdowns in the classroom
  - Plan with your child for difficulties at school
    - Meet the teacher before the year starts
    - See the classroom before the year starts
    - If necessary, advocate for your child in regards to a specific teacher or classroom with a known friend

**Fostering Resiliency in Highly Sensitive Children**

1. Do what you can to create the most supportive environment for your child – these means managing triggers, responding to meltdowns, and being her biggest advocate – HSC have a great potential to blossom given a positive environment
2. Helping to tame big feelings so your HSC can engage in her strength of self-reflection
3. Make sure your non-verbal communication is reflective of embracing your child’s sensitivity

4. Use positive language and talk lovingly of their HS traits

5. Take time to connect 1-1 with your child – a positive relationship is a sure way to build resiliency
   - Name it
   - Schedule it
   - Put away all distractions
   - Let your child take the lead
   - Don’t use it as a reward or punishment
   - Don’t give advice or modify the child’s ideas
   - End with affection
   - Enjoy the time and your child!