

# Did You Know?

## The Highly Sensitive Child

**Is your child “highly sensitive”?** Do you hear comments like: *“Oh, your daughter is so shy...”* or *“Don’t you worry that your son isn’t more happy and carefree? He sure seems to worry a lot.”* Maybe nobody else says anything, but you worry that your daughter seems to get her feelings hurt so easily, or your son melts down when he is teased. Perhaps you secretly wish your child wasn’t so intense...so emotional...or so slow to warm up.

Elaine Aron, Ph.D., author of **The Highly Sensitive Child** and **The Highly Sensitive Person** began studying highly sensitive people in 1991. She researched and interviewed thousands of individuals, eventually honing a questionnaire for adults and one for children. Contrary to what many people think, highly sensitive people are not neurotic, depressed or shy, as many folks think. They have been that way since birth.

### What Is HIGH SENSITIVITY?

**Highly sensitive people notice more, reflect more, feel more, and avoid overstimulation.** They are “born with a tendency to notice more in their environment and deeply reflect on everything before acting, as compared to those who notice less and act quickly and impulsively,” insists Aron. Their

70 % of highly sensitive people are introverts... a tendency that is probably part of their strategy to reduce stimulation.

brains seem to process information more thoroughly. As a result, highly sensitive children and adults “tend to be empathic, smart, intuitive, creative, careful, and conscientious. They are more easily overwhelmed by ‘high volume’ or large quantities of input arriving at once. They try to avoid this, and thus seem to be shy or timid or ‘party poopers.’ When they cannot avoid overstimulation, they seem ‘easily upset’ and ‘too sensitive.’”

### Every species shows evidence of different temperaments. Did you

know that all across the spectrum of life, in every species, there are these sorts of “temperament” differences? They are *not* disorders or impairments. These distinctions have evolved to serve a specific function. In most animal species, we find two ‘personalities’ or breeds: the BOLD (larger group) and the SHY (smaller group). There are the ones who charge right in, and there are others who pause to see what happens. There are the “sitters” and the “rovers.” Why is this? Biologists insist this division increases the chance of survival of the species. The bold ones rush out to eat the grass, while the hesitant ones pause to see if there are any predators lurking. In humans groups, we need the action-oriented adventurers and risk-takers to push us to new heights and make things happen. But we also need the sensitive ones who are able to pause and reflect, to think carefully about consequences and potential dangers. There is no good and bad, no better and best. The two always work best in combination. We need both!

### HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN...

- Become easily overwhelmed
- Are cautious in new situations
- Notice *more* (changes, subtleties, relationships, other’s people’s moods & expressions, etc.)...
- Think more about what they have noticed
- Have rich inner lives
- Feel things intensely
- Are unusually empathic
- Are highly intuitive
- Are conscientious
- Are exceptionally creative
- Are exceptionally cooperative and kind—except when overwhelmed
- Are more likely to become fearful, shy, worried, or sad
- May stand out as “different”

### The “Pause-to-Check System”

*Highly sensitive persons have a very active “behavioral inhibition system.” They pause to check their memory to see if any past situations were threatening before they go forward.*

*The right side of their thinking brain (frontal cortex) shows more activity. Babies with more blood flow to this side of the brain are more likely to be highly sensitive children.*

*Non-highly sensitive folks have a stronger “behavioral activation system.” They have a stronger “go-for-it” mechanism.*

## INSIDE THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD

**Highly sensitive children often have a “specialty.”** Aron has found that some children are more tuned into relationships and social cues, noticing the moods and expressions of others. Others mainly notice the natural world, such as changes in the weather or the qualities of plants, or they seem to have an uncanny ability to communicate with animals. Some are great at expressing subtle concepts. Some children are particularly alert in new surroundings, while others are bothered by change any change in their familiar routine.

**All highly sensitive children NOTICE more.** But they don’t just *notice* more, they *think* more about what they have noticed. Sometimes this noticing and thinking is obvious and conscious (i.e.: they are asking you questions/talking about things, etc.)—but often their processing is entirely unconscious. They are just “intuiting” something.

### Highly Sensitive Children Become EASILY OVER-STIMULATED

They often deal with it by...

- Complaining a great deal—especially about “small” things
- Choosing to play alone
- Refusing to speak up, talk to adults, talk in class, etc.
- Avoiding typical “fun” activities (parties, play dates, outings)
- Trying to be compliant and obedient (hoping no one will notice them if they are ‘perfect’)
- Having a meltdown with lots of tears
- Bouncing off the walls
- Throwing tantrums and rages
- Getting a stomach ache
- Becoming fearful
- Withdrawing

**Highly sensitive children FEEL more, too.** Because they are taking in and processing more, this often brings a strong emotional response. They feel stronger emotions. What they feel, they feel deeply. Sometimes, it’s intense pleasure. But it can also be intense fear or sadness or anger—because children are confronting new and stressful situations every day. Most highly sensitive children are unusually empathic, Aron insists, so “they suffer more when others suffer.” They can imagine for themselves what others feel. Highly sensitive children have rich inner lives. Early on they tend to seek meaning in their lives.

**Highly sensitive children stand out as “different.”** Aron says they are not problem-kids in the usual sense. But they are more likely than others to become fearful, shy, or sad—especially if they have had a few bad experiences. With support and guidance, however, they are exceptionally creative, cooperative and kind—*except* when they are overwhelmed. That presents challenges!

**Highly sensitive children become easily over-stimulated and overwhelmed.** They are bothered by things that other children do not even notice. Unfortunately, this is the part that most people find difficult to deal with. It’s the “down side of sensitivity.” Highly sensitive children can become totally overwhelmed by a noisy classroom, a big family reunion, a long afternoon with a playmate, or even their very own birthday party.

**How do highly sensitive children deal with over-stimulation?** They often complain a lot, especially about things that don’t bother most other people. You might call it “the small stuff.” They may not like the texture or taste of the food being served. Or, they get upset by the itchy fabric on their clothes, or their hair not looking how they want it to, or mom buying them the wrong color jacket. They might complain that their teacher gave them a mean look and “she hates me” or that nobody likes them and they will *never* go to school again. Physical complaints are common. Not only is this their body’s reaction to the stress of overstimulation, but not feeling well actually offers them a solution, Aron suggests, by allowing highly sensitive children to withdraw and go away to rest.

## TAKE a GOOD LOOK at YOUR CHILD



Rate your child on the following characteristics. Check off each characteristic that applies.

Types of Sensitivity	
<b>Physical, low threshold</b> Ex: Sensitive to fabrics, tough socks, tags in clothes. Notices low sounds, subtle scents.	
<b>Physical Intensity</b> Ex: Reacts more to pain than other children. Bothered by loud noise.	
<b>Physical Complexity</b> Ex: Does not like crowds or bustling places. Does not like foods mixed or complex seasonings.	
<b>Emotional, low threshold</b> Ex: Picks up the moods of others Good with animals, babies, bodies, plants (beings that cannot talk)	

<b>Emotional Complexity</b> Ex: Has interesting insights about what is going on Has vivid, complex dreams	
<b>Emotional Intensity</b> Ex: Cries easily Deeply upset by another's suffering	
<b>Novelty, low threshold</b> Ex: Notices small changes in room or your clothing. Prefers little or only gradual changes.	
<b>Novelty, complexity</b> Ex: Does not need or like many new things happening. Dreads a major change such as moving to a new town.	
<b>Novelty, Intensity</b> Ex: Does not like surprises, being startled, sudden changes Hesitant in new environments	
<b>Social Novelty, low threshold</b> Ex: Slow to warm up with someone she has not seen for a while Notices small changes in people after not seeing them for a while	
<b>Social Novelty, complexity</b> Ex: The more unusual or unknown the person, the more hesitant.	
<b>Social Novelty, intensity</b> Ex: Does not like to be the center of attention among strangers. Does not like meeting a lot of new people at once. Does not like to be questioned by a stranger.	

## The Six Most Common Problems

Aristotle said that we are happiest when we are *doing what we were born to do*. Aron believes highly sensitive children were born by nature to be *fully aware*: “Being good at what they do best by nature will bring them their highest happiness.” Highly sensitive children will have a deeper awareness of all of life, both the beauty and the suffering in the world. This doesn’t necessarily mean unhappiness for them, but it does present challenges. As a parent, you will be a part of their working through the consequences of this awareness. Aron presents suggestions in her book for dealing with some of the most common difficulties, which are described below.



### The Vicious Cycle

*You worry, you try harder to shape your child to meet your expectations, but he doesn't behave the way you want--because he can't! Then you worry more, you try harder, and so forth.*

### The Result

***Both you and he feel like failures.***

### The Solution

*Realize that your child's unusual behaviors are not your fault and not your child's fault either. It's simply how your child is "wired." Practice ACCEPTANCE. Parents who are more accepting of this trait and are generally more responsive, allow their child to express his/her feelings. Once the feelings are out, the skilled parent teaches their child how to cope with them. This is better than bottled up feelings, says Arons, because such feelings usually resurface in other ways in adulthood-- when it is much harder to "fix" the problem. (p. 47)*



### 1. Awareness of Subtleties

Elaine Aron says that living with a highly sensitive child can be like living with a smoke alarm! She lets you know when even the smallest thing is not to her liking. (“*You let the egg touch my toast*”) But as it turns out, not all highly sensitive children notice subtleties. Some can be more tuned into their inner world and may seem preoccupied or oblivious. Others may be bothered more by outer intensities—like the bright lights and the “hot and spicy stuff.” Here are some tips for managing your child’s ‘smoke alarm’:

- **Believe your child.** If he says he’s feeling it, he really is!
- **Keep little ones who are highly sensitive fed and rested.** They will be better able tolerate waiting for you to help relieve their discomfort.
- **When he is old enough to understand you, first acknowledge your child’s discomfort.** Then let him know when and how it will end or that you simply cannot do anything about it. If you have communicated your empathy for his ‘desperate need’—and also communicated a valid reason for your delay/or for doing nothing (i.e.: you are changing the baby’s diaper)—that’s enough. He will eventually grow in his ability to wait and understand.
- **Put limits on what you can be expected to do.** Aron suggests that you discuss with your child (out of the moment of crisis) how many times you will try to re-do something to make her happy or to follow her instructions. For

instance, tell your daughter that you will tie and re-tie her shoes five times, but after that, you will stop because you get too frustrated or do not have the time to continue.

- **Stick to your standards of politeness and good public behavior, but remember that emotions are sometimes irrational and overwhelming.** You will learn with a highly sensitive child that sometimes there is *nothing* you can do to make things better. Sometimes all you can do is hold your child, or let her scream/cry, or just stay with her while you sympathize. You can talk with her later about what she can do differently to behave better next time.
- **When possible, put your child in charge of the solution.** Let your child choose! If your son is fussy about his clothes that bother him, have him choose what to wear. Don't take on the problem or the guilt.

"Respecting the REALITY of your highly sensitive child's experience is basic to getting along with her."

(E. Aron)

## ★ 2. Being Over-stimulated and Over-aroused

Remember that highly sensitive children become overwhelmed from too much coming at them at once—both from the outside and from the inside. The more stimulation they experience, the more aroused their body becomes in order to deal with it. They try to calm down, but sometimes they just can't. Think about how hard it is to calm yourself after you've been rattled by an earthquake. Highly sensitive children feel that way more often and need extra help.

- **See that your child has an area of competence.** It doesn't matter what it is. It can be art, fantasy play, a sport, talking with adults, or knowing a lot about one subject area. Just be sure your child meets with success each time.
- **See that your child is so over-rehearsed and so skilled that nothing will faze her.** Never let a highly sensitive child go into something unprepared!! Practice in the same circumstances and setting as your child will be going into. With younger children, use books, stories, play materials, and fantasy play to practice.
- **Talk about things that can go wrong and how to handle them.** Discuss ahead of time what could happen, especially the disappointments. Don't worry about "planting seeds of failure." Your highly sensitive child will have *already* thought of those. You are "planting seeds of coping"!
- **Explain the effect of over-arousal on performance and comfort.** Tell your child that he has the skill—but explain how noise, or a new place, or his nervousness can sometimes get in the way. Use simple words to educate him about himself and how he's wired.
- **See that some of your child's competencies are not affected by pressure.** Many highly sensitive children are naturally inclined toward more individual activities that are personally satisfying, rather than competitive.
- **Help your child enjoy a variety of activities in a non-competitive world.** Arons reminds us that a child doesn't have to try out for a play or join a choir to sing and act. Encourage your child to put on a play for the family at home or sing with you in the car, instead.

Plant  
"Seeds of  
Coping"  
in your  
Highly  
Sensitive  
Child

## ★ 3. Deep Inner Reactions

Because highly sensitive children process everything more fully, they have stronger emotional reactions. Here's the challenging part: *during their initial processing of a situation, their reactions can spiral even higher!* Sometimes you will see these feelings expressed on the outside, but often you won't. More introverted highly sensitive children may repress or withhold their 'unacceptable' feelings (especially worry, anger, and fear), says Aron. Often, parents will see these feelings expressed more in their child's behaviors, rather than words (ex: a child loses his appetite after his

parents have a fight). Parents need to anticipate that highly sensitive children will be more distressed than other children by conflict, unfairness, and suffering. Highly sensitive children also tend to think the worst and expect dire consequences. How can you help a child with such big feelings?

Highly sensitive children need to perceive that help is available to them—especially in unfamiliar or stressful or situations.

They are probably more aware of the degree of support & caring of their mothers and other caregivers than other children.

(E. Aron)

- **Think about how you handle emotions and how you want your child to handle them.** Which feelings did you grow up *not* being allowed to express? Are you doing the same with your child? If you are embarrassed or afraid of the strength of your own/your child's feelings, you will likely convey that it's best to keep feelings unspoken.
- **Read up on "emotional intelligence" and learn skills for becoming an emotional coach.** Here are a few important ones: listen to your child's emotions *first* rather than lecturing about the behaviors, teach him what soothes and calms him, and get to know his emotional cues so you can help him recognize his feelings. (Recommendation: Read Mary Kurcinka's *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles* and *The Out-of-Sync Child*).



- **Talk to your highly sensitive child about emotions.** Aron stresses that these children, in particular, need to be able to *name what they are feeling* so that they can feel more in control over their “inner turbulence.” Name your feelings. Name your child’s feelings.
- **Strive to “contain” your child’s negative emotions until she can do it himself.** What’s ideal? Take your child off to a nice, quiet place with less stimulation and let her fully vent her emotions while you remain calm. Don’t try to talk her out of her feelings. It’s best, though difficult, to adopt the attitude of “*tell me more, tell me all about it, and what else, and what else....*” Doing this can help both of you unwind what is really bothering her. More than anything, you are teaching your child to learn to “hold it” so that she can learn to do this for herself someday.
- **Be attuned to positive emotions, too.** We often respond to negative emotions more intensely, but try to remember to respond to positive feelings equally. Listen for them and reinforce them.
- **Be aware of how being over-stimulated and over-aroused can increase all emotional reactions—especially**

It can help to have a good  
“Temperament  
Counselor” or Therapist  
available to help you  
when you get stuck!

**the negative ones.** Feelings are temporary. They come like the tides. In and out. With a good night’s sleep, things can feel very different. A word of caution--sometimes staying up late and trying to “talk it away” can only add to a child’s over-stimulation.

- **If any powerful emotion lasts for several days, you may want to seek some help.** You don’t necessarily need to drag your child into the psychologist’s office. Start by talking to a professional yourself. An expert may be able to help you figure out what’s going on without ever involving your child.



#### 4. Awareness of Other’s Feelings

Aron claims that being keenly aware of subtleties—along with having an intense emotional life—combines to create children who tend to be *very* alert to other people’s needs and feelings. Highly sensitive children are “exquisitely attuned to those who take care of them,” she writes. It will help your child enormously if you can identify and be honest about your *own* feelings. It is very important that you learn to send secure messages to your child. One of the biggest problems for older highly sensitive children, claims the author, is their being aware of another’s feelings, even when the other person is not. It can make these children feel crazy when the people they love deny their own feelings. It is critically important, therefore, that you be truthful about your own feelings.

(Note: when highly sensitive children are overwhelmed, they can become temporarily *unaware* of others’ needs.)

- **Be aware of how you handle your own awareness of other’s feelings.** If you show little feeling for another’s problems, your child will be left alone with his big feelings—and tend to think less of you. If you deny the problem of worrying about what others think, she will feel ashamed and different. Elaine Aron suggests that one of the joys (and challenges) of having a highly sensitive child is being forced to confront the “big questions” in life.
- **Teach your child what can be done.** Talk with your child about what is helpful and what isn’t. For instance, it isn’t helpful to feel bad all the time—about others or yourself. Aron likes the “Fifty-Fifty-Rule” for coping with others’ judgments. “*You can always expect that 50% of people will like what you do and 50 % will not. So you might as well do what you think is right. You can’t please them all.*”
- **Look at how you balance the needs of others around you with your own needs.** Remember that your child will imitate you. Especially a highly sensitive child who is even more attuned to you and your actions.
- **Teach your child that he has a right to say “no” or to ignore another’s opinion.** Highly sensitive people can easily lose sleep over what others think. They need to learn how to set healthy boundaries to protect themselves from emotional over-load and burnout. Coach your child to “listen to her insides” and do what *she* really wants to do.
- **Be careful about sharing too many of your own troubles or your criticism of others with your child.** Highly sensitive children can make wonderful friends, confidants, and counselors. “But this is too much for even the wisest child to handle,” insists Aron. These children are still learning to cope with an over whelming world. They need a parent’s strength—not feeling it’s their job to support their parent emotionally.
- **To promote your child’s sense of his own needs and wishes, insist that he make choices whenever possible.** This is the only way a child will learn to trust himself. (“*Do you want to have Mateo over to play or do you want to go to his house?*” “*Do you want a story or a song?*”)
- **See that everyone’s wishes in your family are heard and respected equally.** Aron cautions parents to “practice equal empathy,” rather allowing the highly sensitive child to garner it all! Don’t allow your sensitive child to blackmail others with her emotions. Here’s an idea she suggests: allow your children to alternate being “Ruler of the Day.” The “Ruler” gets to decide where to sit in the car, what to see on TV, etc.

Give  
Equal Empathy  
in your family!

Avoid the tendency to  
give it all to your highly  
sensitive child.

Don’t let her win  
attention and power  
through her emotions.



## 5. Caution Before Proceeding in New, Possibly Dangerous Situations

- **Remember the advantages of your child's caution—this will help you not to be disappointed when it seems “uncool.”** Remind yourself that he is “pausing to check.” His brain is searching his storehouse of memory for ‘dangers.’
- **See it from your child's viewpoint.** Every situation is new for young children. Noises are louder, rooms seem larger, hours stretch longer, adults are bigger, children are unpredictable, and strangers are intimidating. Children haven't developed a repertoire of experiences and coping strategies, the way we have.
- **Point out what is familiar or what resembles past situations that your child has mastered.** Kids are very concrete and literal. They have difficulty imagining what they haven't experienced. It's a smart idea to link something new to something old they've already mastered. Aron suggests giving examples like these: *“The family reunion will be a lot like Grandma Mary's birthday party at the big restaurant, remember?”* or *“The ocean is just like a huge bathtub, and the waves are the kind you make when you move around in your bath.”*
- **Take it one step at a time.** Help your child take “baby steps.” Highly sensitive kids need us to break things down into manageable pieces for them. (*“You don't need to talk to anyone at first. You can just watch.”* or *“We will go to the party, but you can sit next to me.”*)
- **Provide a retreat.** This is an important coping strategy. When your highly sensitive child is young, you will need to help her remove herself when you see her getting overwhelmed or over-stimulated. You may even have to pick her up and leave a party that is in full swing. Later on when she is older, you can coach her ahead of time, telling her, *“If the party gets loud or you feel grumpy, you can go up to your room when you need to get away (or rest/or be alone, etc.).”*
- **Success is the key to your child exploring new situations in the future.** Don't lose sight of the fact that “your child *does* want to explore,” reminds Aron, “as long as the risks aren't too high.” So emphasize what she will gain—and minimize the risks. Be strong and encouraging. Notice the times your child has tried something new, although she was scared at first: *“Look how many friends you have at school now. Remember when you were worried on the first day?”*

Don't be afraid to talk about how your child feels “different.” He knows it.

★  
These kids are highly intuitive. Pretending doesn't work with them.



## 6. Being Different

One of the challenges of raising a highly sensitive child is not due to the trait itself—but to how others view it. Every child who is in a minority must face feeling “different,” whether we like it or not. Being different can attract attention.

- **Examine your own attitude toward this trait.** In our extraverted American culture which values competitiveness and outer expressions of strength, there can be a subtle prejudice against “shy” or “sensitive” children who are perceived as weak and vulnerable. Research indicates that shy sons are often their mother's least favorite child, while shy daughters are often encouraged to stay home and be their mother's special friend (p. 64). Aron says bluntly, “you must over-ride this reaction for the sake of your child.”
- **Talk about the trait with your child.** “Ignoring your child's difference will not work. Your silence will speak louder than words,” says the author. These kids know!! They FEEL their difference. (They are highly sensitive, after all!) Help them by putting words to it. Talk about temperament (*“We are all wired differently.”*) Understanding something helps children to feel less helpless. You can talk about the challenges that sensitivity presents—but talk about the gifts, too.
- **Think through how you want to respond to comments from others, especially when your child will overhear you.** It helps to be prepared. Have an arsenal of responses ready to use to educate those who don't understand. (See section below.) The more your child hears these, the more he will internalize them.
- **Insulate your child from undue attention, praise, or pity.** Try to avoid both extremes. Protect your child from pity/criticism—but also from being made “special” or superior in any way, due to his sensitivity.

## Parenting Challenges with a Highly Sensitive Child

### When You Are **Not** a Highly Sensitive Person Yourself

First of all, take the test at the end and determine whether or not you are highly sensitive also. Remember that it is all about “goodness of fit.” Having a different temperament than your child can have its advantages. But a lack of fit—within culture, family, or parents—can be problematic. If you realize there has been a “lack of fit,” the first thing that Elaine Aron stresses is that you will need to learn to *adapt*.

Learning and training can greatly affect goodness of fit. The same parenting methods can affect two children very differently—depending on their temperaments. The most important thing you can do as a parent is try to create a good

fit between you and your child. Research shows that when parents are trained to understand their child's temperament, the children of these parents have far fewer problems! Along this line, Arons says: "I am saying right here that it is smart to have a top notch temperament counselor or therapist you can turn to while raising your highly sensitive child." That way, you don't have to go looking for someone when you are in a crisis.

NOTE to FATHERS: Read this section! In our culture, men are more likely to take on the perspective of a non-highly sensitive parent because "being a man" is equated with insensitivity (i.e.: "take it like a man!"). In the author's research (p. 69), fathers turned out to be unusually important in the adjustment of highly sensitive children, because they traditionally teach children how to manage in the world. Also Arons suggests that even if you test out only in the mid-range, you could be highly sensitive too.

"Highly sensitive children tend to communicate with hints, gestures, nuances, glances, and tones of voice."

### Benefits to Your Child When You Are NOT Highly Sensitive

- **You will give your child more adventures.** Without a doubt, you will probably push your child to new heights—to try new adventures, to experience new activities. This will be your gift. "When a strong push is needed," says Aron, you will "probably more often dare to give it."
- **You can/will provide grounding and balance.** You will be able to calm your child when she is overwhelmed by her strong feelings, as long as you are not angered by her intense reactions/feelings. If you can remain in control of your feelings, she will learn from you.
- **You will speak up and protect your child more readily than a highly sensitive person might.** When you confront the pushy cousin who "just wants a hug" with words that say, "Not today," you are showing him how to say "no" when something doesn't feel comfortable to him.
- **You are probably fairly communicative, saying what is on your mind without a lot of hesitation.** This kind of "running commentary," as Aron calls it, "gives a highly sensitive child a sense of how an adult thinks and copes." It's very helpful for a child.

If you are not highly sensitive, you will tend to communicate more bluntly, even harshly by your child's standards....

Your child may be so over-aroused by your style that she will not even hear the content."

Aron (p. 76)

### Where to Be Careful If You Are NOT Highly Sensitive

- **You will have trouble believing that your child is having a *different* experience of the world.** It will be hard for you, because you simply can't imagine someone could feel that way. It will be easy for you to fall into thinking, "she's just faking it..." or "he's just trying to get attention."
- **You will often feel impatient.** It will be particularly tough if you are someone who is used to speaking out easily or acting quickly. "Patience will be a real challenge," cautions Aron. You may find it frustrating to have to wait for a long time for your child to put his thoughts into words.
- **Your volume will be too loud.** Highly sensitive children can feel easily overwhelmed by your intensity. This is as much about the *force* of your voice as it is your loudness. These children often get so over-aroused by a parent's strong style that they are unable to absorb the content, says Aron. Your child will likely hear your thoughts differently from how you mean them. This is especially true if you are disapproving or critical.
- **You may find your child boring at times.** Highly sensitive children actually *like* to be quiet. They enjoy spending long periods of time lost in thought. They are prone to daydreaming, getting lost in a book, or staring out the window without saying anything. They actually *need* this down time. But you may feel bored by the lack of conversation when you want to engage.

#### Speak very gently

when your child is telling you about his deepest feelings...as if the two of you are handling sea creatures you brought up from the depths of the ocean that are not used to bright light.

E. Aron (p. 76)

- **You may feel rejected by your child not wanting to be with you more or not wanting your physical touch.** This is one of the most common feelings reported by parents of highly sensitive children who do not understand their child's temperament. They feel hurt and rejected. To them, it feels like their child "goes away" sometimes, and they assume this periodic lack of connection means that their child doesn't like them. Not true! Your child trusts you enough to be himself. At home, he needs lots of time to recharge. He feels safe there.
- **You may find yourself unintentionally taking advantage of your child's sensitivity.** Because these children are so empathic and aware of others' feelings, it is easy to fall into the trap of asking them to give a little more to others. It can be easy to tell them your troubles, because they listen so well. Watch out that you don't script your child into the role of "my good, helpful, wise child."

## What You Can Do to Make a Better "Fit" ...if you are NOT highly sensitive yourself

### ■ When you have trouble believing that your child is having a different experience of the world...

Do all you can to understand your child's experience. Ask him how he sees it. Get to know some highly sensitive adults and learn from them. Consider temperament counseling. If your child has an experienced, understanding teacher, ask him/her about your child. Try not to push too hard. Don't expect your child to enjoy the same things as you enjoyed as a child—and don't feel sorry for him "missing out on things."

### ■ When you feel impatient...

"Work on it!" advocates Aron. She insists that "patience is a necessity for parenting a highly sensitive child." If you ask a question, don't be impatient for the answer. It will take longer for your child to answer if you pressure him. Give your child plenty of time to make a decision. (If there isn't enough time for a slow decision, don't ask.) If you want your child to try something new, get her into it slowly. Take it step by step. Understand that your child will be anxious about scary and traumatic events—like fires, break-in's, kidnappings, and so forth. His imagination will run overtime. Try not to get annoyed by his need for reassurance and extra physical security, like checking all the locks!

### ■ Be aware of your louder volume.

Always tone down your intensity with highly sensitive children. The author suggests avoiding sudden, harsh questions. Also avoid teasing or jokes about them that can be misunderstood, she advises. If you have to correct your child, use a calm, low tone—and never ever threaten to withdraw love. Be careful about "thinking out loud" if you're upset. Your child can be prone to worry about you. Leave some silences so your child has space to enter in. If you are always doing all the talking, he won't have a chance. When highly sensitive children are telling you their deepest feelings, treat them gently—with tender hands.

### ■ To avoid feeling bored...

Change your expectations. Expect to be bored sooner than your child, says Aron. Bring along a something to entertain you. Expect that your child will take longer to get used to something. He may just start to enjoy the play group when it's over! On long boring car trips, use a CD with earphones. But check in now and then with your child. Explicitly ask if he wants to talk or do something.

### ■ If you feel rejected when your child wants to be alone or doesn't want to be touched...

Don't take it personally! Remind yourself that your child "just needs privacy, quiet, and down time." Think of yourself as your child's *protector*, who very much needs you to understand and buffer her from overstimulation. She will love you deeply for understanding her needs. Learn to read the signs when your child is tired or over-stimulated and stop before she reaches the breaking point. Don't try to pry information out of your child...just stay open and "present." Keep reaching out in a gentle way.

### ■ Don't take advantage of your highly sensitive child.

Sometimes, the highly sensitive child can be the perfect "Cinderella—listening too much, caring too much, and doing too much, without complaining. Watch out for this, especially as your child gets older.

## When You Are *Both* Highly Sensitive People

When you are both highly sensitive people, the first priority in parenting is your own stability. "Since highly sensitive children are so deeply affected by how their parents are feeling, it is important for sensitive parents to find ways to be calm, happy, and healthy," insists Aron, in spite of their life stresses and strain. You need to take care of yourself so that your child does not suffer.

### Advantages When You Are *Both* Highly Sensitive:

- **You understand your child's experience.** You will intuitively know what it feels like to be overwhelmed by a wild party or a room full of strangers!
- **You have real experience coping with the disadvantages of your trait.** You can tell how you felt when someone once called you "too sensitive." You can also affirm how even though it was difficult, things turned out to be okay.
- **You can raise your child's self esteem just by liking yourself.** This is so critical! If you learn to honor and respect your sensitivity, Arons says, "Your child will absorb the antidote from you easily, like the air he breathes."



It's so much easier to raise a child  
right than try to fix an adult,  
believe me.

So you are not being selfish when you  
take care of yourself. You are being  
very considerate of your child and  
those who will have to live with your  
child and possibly heal her if you  
are not healthy yourself.

(Elaine Aron p. 93)



- **You have some answers to, or at least some experience with, the questions highly sensitive children tend to ponder.** You will know how to listen and understand. You have been on the search for meaning yourself.
- **You have the right “volume.”** Sensitive people tend to communicate “more gently,” says Aron. They tend to be more careful with their tone of voice, their questions and they are comfortable with silence. Your toned-down “volume” will make communication much easier with your highly sensitive child. You will be aware of what he is dealing with and will know how to be supportive.
- **You share interests and tastes to some degree.** Usually, you share similarities about food, aesthetics, and how to spend your leisure time. Even though generations change, you probably will agree on more than a non-highly sensitive parent would.

### Where to Be Careful If You Are Highly Sensitive

- **No matter what, how you parent your child will probably be deeply affected by how you were raised.** You will be inclined to go the other way in order to be a different kind of parent to your child. You may project your fears and anxieties onto your child.
- **If you miss the mark, you will probably be over-protective.** Parents who were pushed or overwhelmed or misunderstood by their parents will jump to rescue their child such a fate.
- **You may not expose your child to enough new experiences.** You may want to spare your child unnecessary risks. But these were your choices, not your child’s. He needs to make his own discoveries about what he likes and doesn’t like. They could be different than yours.
- **You will suffer when your child suffers—and that affects your child’s ability to handle the pain.** Your child needs a parent who can “stay calm and contain these intense emotions,” but if you are so overwhelmed by your own pain, your child cannot borrow your strength and learn from it. Your fears could handicap him.
- **You may have difficulty being assertive for your child’s sake.** You may not be comfortable standing up and saying, “No, she doesn’t want to do that.”

### What You Can Do

...if you are BOTH highly sensitive

- **To stay open and avoid over-identification with your child...**  
Be familiar with *all* your child’s qualities.
- **To avoid over-protection and to be sure your child is exposed to new experiences...**  
Rein in your anxieties. Don’t burden your child with your fears.
- **If child shows an interest in something new...**  
See that he tries it, even if you have no interest in it. Listen to what he likes. Then let it happen.
- **If your child is not developing interests...**  
See that the menu is broadened. You may have to make an *extra* effort. Try one new thing each month. Talk about any regrets you have about not trying something when you were younger.
- **When you are hurting because your child is...**  
Take a larger perspective. Use whatever works— friends, faith, belief in God, or anything that helps you cope. You need to help your child find a way to rise above it.
- **Learn to assert yourself for your child.**  
When it is appropriate and when your child can’t do it alone, you have to do it for her. Get support if you need to. Learn to get stronger. Never let your child feel that she is without support!
- **Learn to assert yourself with your child.**  
Sometimes your needs have to come first. It’s important for your child to learn that others have needs, too. Otherwise, he will become self-centered and demanding.
- **When you are having trouble taking care of yourself...**  
Remember the lesson of the oxygen mask on the airplane. Put yours on first! Self care is a necessity for your child. If you need a 20 minute time out, take it. Don’t ignore your needs.
- **Imagine that you *chose* to be born highly sensitive.**  
Why? Because of all the gifts you could bring to this world.
- **Try not to be overly guilt-ridden.**  
Don’t be apologetic for every mistake you make in parenting or every sacrifice your child must endure. This does NOT help your child.

- **You may have trouble asserting your own needs within the family.** Highly sensitive people often try to meet everyone's needs perfectly. Others can learn to just "let her do it." This isn't good for your child.
- **Whatever bad feelings you have about your sensitivity/or yourself, your child will learn these from you.** Arons challenges you to like yourself. You can't fake it, she says. You have to like your sensitivity.
- **You may mistakenly assume you are more like your child than you really are.** You might begin to think your child is so much like you that she's almost your clone. A big mistake!

## Keys to Raising a Highly Sensitive Child

### ★ Promote Self-Esteem

Highly sensitive children can be vulnerable to low self-esteem. They are often harsh self-critics. They process their mistakes thoroughly within, and they punish themselves. Thus, claims Aron, "they need extra help in developing an inner answer or antidote" to not getting enough of what they need. They also need to learn how to deal with their "shadow side," which they are more aware of than others. Your child will need to learn that having "bad" thoughts is different from doing "bad" things.

#### Your Words Count!

Validate your child's feelings.

Acknowledge his wishes.

Respect his thoughts and opinions.


Reframe his sensitivity in a positive way.

Teach him to use emotional earplugs.

If you want to promote self-esteem in your highly sensitive child, first look at yourself. Your child will pick up your bad feelings, anxieties, or fears like an infectious virus. Your words count, too, the author reminds us. Reframe your child's sensitivities in a positive way ("*Of course you're tired, you were noticing so much today!*"). But don't overdo it, either. Kids see through our trying to puff them up to compensate for our worries about them. "Spend time with your child....It heals all sorts of wounds," says Aron.

From the beginning, one of the most helpful things you can do to promote your child's self-esteem is to show respect for your child's feelings, needs, opinions, and decisions. Even if you can't give him what he wants, acknowledge his wishes and preferences. Validate your child's feelings ("*I know you really want a cookie right now, but you'll have to wait till dinner.*"). Highly sensitive kids crave this sense of "being seen" emotionally.

Help your child understand himself in relation to non-highly sensitive people. Talk about people having "different styles" and different temperaments. Teach your child that some kinds of people simply don't "hear" the way he does—they don't get "hints," they don't hear soft voices, or they don't pick up your feelings. Teach her to use "emotional

  
"You cannot control what is said to your child when you are not around."

You can only prepare your child's mind to interpret correctly what he hears."

E. Aron (p. 114)

earplugs" when friends say harsh things: "*I wonder if she was just in a bad mood? You know how sometimes people say things they don't really mean?*" You can help your child practice giving a stronger response to non highly-sensitive remarks. He can learn to say, "*Let's do it my way now,*" or "*Stop that. I don't like that,*" or, "*No!*" These are words that will help your child feel less helpless and more personally powerful.

### ★ Reduce Shame

Highly sensitive children are prone to shame. Be aware of this, but don't go to the other extreme and fail to discipline your child. Research has shown that the worst cases of shame-proneness were caused by a total lack of discipline—not

by harsh discipline. Look at yourself. Many people were raised by shaming parents. Sometimes we can find ourselves unknowingly repeating the same words our parents said to us ("*What's wrong with you? Are you stupid?!!*") Change any old habits. Try not to over-emphasize achievement. A little encouragement is useful, but be cautious that you don't go overboard. Encourage your child to think about what *he* wants to be when he grows up, or what *she* enjoys doing, rather than painting your vision or dreams. Be extra cautious about making comparisons between your children or other kids. Focus on each child's strengths—but don't compare them.

Teasing is another shame-prone area. Highly sensitive children are easily wounded by hidden, hostile messages underlying teasing. Look at your own teasing behaviors. Some people grew up in families where teasing was commonplace. They claim it was just a way of "showing love." But highly sensitive children won't be fooled. They can feel what's underneath.

Above all, make sure your child doesn't feel that she's the cause of any family troubles. All children often take on responsibility for bad things

#### Keep It Gentle!

Calm yourself first.

Stay out of the heat of the fight.

No spanking, no shaming.

No withdrawal of love or isolating.

No global or irreversible threats.

in their family. However, highly sensitive children are particularly at risk for thinking, “*I’m such a difficult child,*” or “*Mom and Dad are fighting because of me.*” A highly sensitive child is always picking up the underlying tensions and rifts in a family. Don’t allow her to personalize them. It is always best to talk honestly and openly with your child. Giving simple explanations for what is happening (and why) will correct any misperceptions.

### ★ Know How to Discuss Sensitivity with Others

Elaine Aron suggests that whenever you discuss your child’s temperament with others (teachers/ family/ friends/other parents) you keep in mind the person and the context. Most people will be on your side and will want to help. But many do not understand and people need educating.

Think about these questions: How open is the person? How much time do you have to “state your case”? Do they have any power over you or your child? Will you have to get along with this person in the future? Creating some ready-made responses can be helpful for those times when you are caught off guard. Consider the suggestions to the right.

### ★ Use Wise Discipline Strategies

Highly sensitive children need to be corrected and disciplined, says Aron, but they are quick to shame themselves. Unless you know how to do it properly, cautions Aron, highly sensitive children are “likely to take a parent’s corrections as global messages about their worth.” They are natural “internalizers.” They do break rules, but they feel upset about it later, and often punish themselves with their regret. Prevention helps. Keep your standards age-appropriate and make them clear ahead of time.

#### Basic Steps for Correcting a Highly Sensitive Child

- 1.) Consider the state of arousal of your child and yourself. First calm yourself—and then calm your child. You have to get back in control first!
- 2.) Listen and empathize.
- 3.) Restate your standards and, if your child is old enough, your reasons.
- 4.) Decide whether there should be further consequences.
- 5.) State what your child can do in the future.

#### When You Have to Use Real Discipline

- 1.) Keep consequences short, mild and related to the behavior.
- 2.) Be consistent—unpredictable punishment creates additional anxiety.
- 3.) With an older child, if the behavior is not going away, try to explore why with your child.



### Conclusion

Parenting a highly sensitive child can be one of the greatest and happiest challenges. Elaine Aron claims that *parents make more of a difference*, so the rewards are greater. But goodness of fit matters more than anything else. “There is always a good fit,” she says, “when parents *accept* their children for who they are—and then adapt their methods to suit their child.” If you have a highly sensitive child, welcome to the joys! But be ready for the challenges, too. If you find yourself having difficulty accepting and adapting to your child, reach out for help. Come in and talk with me. I am here to help you explore the amazing and mysterious labyrinth of parenting a highly sensitive child.

## HOW to TALK to OTHERS ABOUT YOUR CHILD

### CREATE A SOUND BITE:

“It may help you to know that my child is one of those 15–20% of kids born with a very sensitive nervous system. He notices every subtlety, but is also easily overwhelmed when a lot is going on/or by change/or by...”

### QUICK RESPONSES:

“Your child is so shy...”

“That’s interesting...I don’t think of her as shy. She may seem that way, but often she’s just watching or getting used to things. When she’s ready, she warms up nicely. I think of her as being highly sensitive—not shy.”

“Your child is so sensitive...”

“I rather like her sensitivity. Is there something specific she’s doing that is a problem for you?”

“What’s the matter with her? All kids like parties!”

“Actually, research shows that children really vary. It all depends on their innate personalities.”

Rudeness or pushiness...

“No, my child does not wish to do that.”

“This is not helping her/us.”

“That doesn’t work for her.”

(Aron, p. 145-146)

Source:

Elaine Aron, Ph.D. *The Highly Sensitive Child—Helping Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them*. Broadway Books, 2002.

Anne Kangas, L.C.S.W., Family Services Director 1/08

Go to Next page





## Are You Highly Sensitive?

### A Self-Test

#### I am:

- ☐ I am easily overwhelmed by strong sensory input.
- ☐ I seem to be aware of subtleties in my environment.
- ☐ Other people's moods affect me.
- ☐ I tend to be very sensitive to pain.
- ☐ I find myself needing to withdraw during busy days, into bed or into a darkened room or any place where I can have some privacy and relief from stimulation.
- ☐ I am particularly sensitive to the effects of caffeine.
- ☐ I am easily overwhelmed by things like bright lights, strong smells, coarse fabrics, or sirens close by.
- ☐ I have a rich, complex inner life.
- ☐ I am made uncomfortable by loud noises.
- ☐ I am deeply moved by the arts or music.
- ☐ My nervous system sometimes feels so frazzled that I just have to go off by myself.
- ☐ I am conscientious.
- ☐ I startle easily.
- ☐ I get rattled when I have a lot to do in a short amount of time.
- ☐ When people are uncomfortable in a physical environment I tend to know what needs to be done to make it more comfortable (like changing the lighting or the seating).
- ☐ I am annoyed when people try to get me to do too many things at once.
- ☐ I try hard to avoid making mistakes or forgetting things.
- ☐ I make a point to avoid violent movies and TV shows.
- ☐ I become unpleasantly aroused when a lot is going on around me.
- ☐ Being very hungry creates a strong reaction in me, disrupting my concentration or mood.
- ☐ Changes in my life shake me up.
- ☐ I notice and enjoy delicate or fine scents, tastes, sounds, works of art.
- ☐ I find it unpleasant to have a lot going on at once.
- ☐ I make it a high priority to arrange my life to avoid upsetting or overwhelming situations.
- ☐ I am bothered by intense stimuli, like loud noises or chaotic scenes.
- ☐ When I must compete or be observed while performing a task, I become so nervous or shaky that I do much worse than I would otherwise.
- ☐ When I was a child, my parents or teachers seemed to see me as sensitive or shy.

**Instructions:** Answer each question according to the way you personally feel. Check the box if it is at least somewhat true for you; leave unchecked if it is not very true or not at all true for you. **Scoring:** If you answered more than fourteen of the questions as true of yourself, you are probably highly sensitive. But no psychological test is so accurate that an individual should base his or her life on it. We psychologists try to develop good questions, then decide on the cut-off based on the average response. If fewer questions are true of you, but extremely true, that might also justify calling you highly sensitive.

Copyright, Elaine N. Aron, 1996

## Is Your Child Highly Sensitive?

My child:

- ☐ startles easily.
- ☐ complains about scratchy clothing, seams in socks, or labels against his/her skin.
- ☐ doesn't usually enjoy big surprises.
- ☐ learns better from a gentle correction than strong punishment.
- ☐ seems to read my mind.
- ☐ uses big words for his/her age.
- ☐ notices the slightest unusual odor.
- ☐ has a clever sense of humor.
- ☐ seems very intuitive.
- ☐ is hard to get to sleep after an exciting day.
- ☐ doesn't do well with big changes.
- ☐ wants to change clothes if wet or sandy.
- ☐ asks lots of questions.
- ☐ is a perfectionist.
- ☐ notices the distress of others.
- ☐ prefers quiet play.
- ☐ asks deep, thought-provoking questions.
- ☐ is very sensitive to pain.
- ☐ is bothered by noisy places.
- ☐ notices subtleties (something that's been moved, a change in a person's appearance, etc.)
- ☐ considers if it is safe before climbing high.
- ☐ performs best when strangers aren't present.
- ☐ feels things deeply.

### A Parent's Questionnaire

**Instructions:** Please answer each question as best as you can. Check answer if it is true or at least moderately true of your child, or was for a substantial time in the past. Leave unchecked if it has not been very true of your child, or was never at all true.

### Scoring:

If you answered true to 13 or more of the questions, your child is probably highly sensitive. But no psychological test is so accurate that you should base how you treat your child on it. If only one or two questions are true of your child, but they are extremely true, you might also be justified in calling your child highly sensitive.

