

# Understanding the Sensitive Child...



## ...from the Inside Out

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When my beautiful son entered this world, like many parents, I had a belief that if I just loved him and was a good parent, everything else would fall into place—like baking a cake right? It didn't take long to realize the universe had other plans for me and I had some learning to do. You see, my son came into this world a very sensitive being. Sensitivity can manifest in many ways and present differently in children. Many sensitive children experience tactile sensitivity—their clothes are itchy, tags need to be cut off, socks and underwear pose great problems. A child may have an auditory sensitivity. I had to warn my infant son every time I turned on the blender or vacuum cleaner to avoid him breaking into a wail. His sense of smell was heightened and even rice cooking in the kitchen would send him gasping for air. Some kids are ‘super-tasters’ and experience the taste and texture of certain foods as too intense. This makes their range of good food choices very narrow. For other children visual stimulation can be overwhelming. Transitions can also be very difficult and too much stimulation is exhausting often resulting in irritable behavior. One of the most common manifestations of sensitivity is that these children feel very deeply, and their feelings

are easily hurt. A certain tone of voice can seem very harsh to them. So many times I have heard parents of a sensitive child tell me their child claims they are “yelling at him” when the parent only had a bit of impatience in their voice.

Dr. Neufeld describes sensitive children as having heightened sensory receptiveness, making them more easily affected by sensory stimulation than other children. These children are intense and often very bright and/or creative. They are also prone to their brain having to protect them since they don't have ‘the skin’ that others do to cope with their world. Frustration and alarm are two primary emotions that sensitive children often experience. Because they are greatly affected by their world, they are more susceptible to their brain erecting defenses to shield them against feeling too overwhelmed.

The greatest gift we can give our sensitive children is to make sense of them from the inside out. During my son's early years there were many times I needed to protect him from overwhelming situations that other children seemed to be able to handle. Well-meaning friends would warn my husband and me not to over-protect yet it was so clear that we were providing the protection he needed for his brain to

relax. From all my years of being an educator, I knew that children learn and thrive when they are secure and their anxiety is lowered. This is what we endeavored to do to help our son grow and mature.

Many parents of sensitive children have learned that too much exposure to overwhelming situations is not a good thing. They also confess they have felt very judged and their child misunderstood. As parents we need to protect our sensitive children from that which would overwhelm and erect too many defenses in the brain. They need those defenses at times—to shut out the noise, to stop feeling the intense emotions, to cope with their world. But at some point, when they are in the safe haven of our care, those defenses need to come down and their hearts need to remain soft so they can feel and grieve and love and care. When the defenses are evoked too often for too long, the brain will become chronically defended and the child will start to harden up. Feelings are lost, attention suffers and sadly sometimes the child will defend against attaching to the adults who were meant to take care of them. When the heart becomes too wounded the brain will take care of the child by building up a wall but emotional growth comes to a halt. As parents of sensitive children, the more we can understand the importance of

protecting our children from overwhelming situations, the more we can protect their hearts and soften their defenses, the more they can feel safe and flourish.

This is not to say we need to jump in and fix everything for them, spoiling their opportunity to experience a bit of a challenge and denying them an opportunity to become resilient. As parents we need to be in charge, set limits and nudge when appropriate for them to find their courage to try something new. Our challenge is to protect when necessary and at times help them to adapt to situations they must face or cannot control. All the little losses, disappointments and sadness need to be felt. Tears need to be shed in loving arms. Through their attachment to us, through our insight, warmth and patience, we can protect the hearts of our sensitive children so that their beautiful gifts can be shared with the world. These children have the capacity for great caring, compassion, and empathy as long as their hearts can be protected and remain soft. Although the world can seem too much for them, we can be their best bet in seeing their potential, believing in their capacity to handle things, and knowing when to protect them from experiences that are too much to bear. Educating ourselves and using our intuition to guide us are essential for parenting our children. 

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