


## HELPING THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD IN THE CLASSROOM



**CEBM**  
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May 26, 2022      [edegosztanyi@rsb.qc.ca](mailto:edegosztanyi@rsb.qc.ca)

*"Building the Capacity of the English School Boards of Quebec"*

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### NEUFELD DEVELOPMENTAL PARADIGM

# Maturation

# Vulnerability

# Attachment

# Emotions


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### WHO IS THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD?

- Autism spectrum disorder
- Gifted
- Highly reactive
- Slow to react
- Shy
- Sensory processing issues
- Anxious
- Oppositional

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
### SENSITIVITY: A CONTINUUM



Hypo-sensitive

Under sensitive

Hyper-sensitive



Over sensitive

- Needs MORE input to feel what the typical individual feels
- May get hurt and not realize it
- May appear clumsy or disorganized – low body awareness
- Under-reactive to sounds
- Under-reactive to touch

- Extreme sensitivity to touch, taste, hearing and smell
- Overly sensitive to being touched
- May be choosy about fabric, texture and foods
- Startles easily
- Reacts with a stress response to normally tolerated events

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**Olfactory**  
Sense of smell  
Info. received through the nose

**Tactile**  
Sense of touch  
Info. received by contact through the skin

**Proprioception**  
Awareness of body in space and strength needed to complete actions

**Gustatory**  
Sense of taste  
Info. received through the mouth

**8 SENSES**  
THE SENSORY SYSTEM

**Interoception**  
Awareness of internal bodily states

**Vestibular**  
Sense of balance and spatial orientation

**Auditory**  
Sense of sound  
Info. received through the ears

**Visual**  
Sense of sight  
Info. received through the eyes

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### RESEARCH ON SENSITIVITY

**Sensitivity research stretches back 100 years;**

Research has led to the discovery that sensitivity should be considered along a continuum (everyone is sensitive to an extent). However, **hypersensitivity occurs in 15 to 20 % of the population**

**Carl Jung (1921)**, argued that some people are born being more sensitive than others and that this innate trait shapes and interacts with their experiences and their perception of the world.

- He observed that when sensitive individuals are given the same degree of stress in childhood as non-sensitive individuals, they are more likely to develop depression, or anxiety later in life.
- However, if sensitive individuals experience lower levels of stress or experience a nurturing upbringing that provides a good match to their innate trait, they show no more of these difficulties than the non-sensitive individuals.

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**RESEARCH ON SENSITIVITY**

Thomas Boyce, M.D. and his colleagues have generated over 200 scientific publications

They have found a subset of children - "orchid children"

- who demonstrate exceptional biological sensitivity to their social environments
- who show higher cortisol levels for "normal" stressors
  - bear higher risks of illness and developmental disorders in settings of adversity and stress
  - ON THE OTHER HAND, these same characteristics make them responsive to positive influences and sensitive to social and emotional cues – when raised in supportive environments

"They can really blossom into extraordinary people."

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**RESEARCH ON SENSITIVITY**

Elaine Aron – describes these children as

- being shy and fussy
- having sensory-processing sensitivity
- being startled easily, are sensitive to pain, sensitive to bright lights, strong smells and coarse fabrics and, also deeply moved by art.
- tending to notice more about the people around them and their physical environment, but they are also easily overwhelmed.

Jelena Obradovic "These are the kids that if you approach them too quickly, or make too loud a noise in their face, get fussy and irritated."

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**CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD**

American psychologist Elaine Aron has developed a check list to assess whether children are highly sensitive to their environments.

Does your child...

- Notice the slightest unusual odour?
- Prefer quiet play?
- Complain about scratching clothing, tags in clothes or seams in socks?
- Startle easy?
- Perform best when strangers aren't around?
- Feel things deeply?
- Notice when others are in distress?
- Have trouble falling asleep after an exciting day?

Is your child...

- Sensitive to pain?
- A perfectionist?
- Bothered by noisy places?

The full questionnaire can be found on the website [hsperson.com](http://hsperson.com)

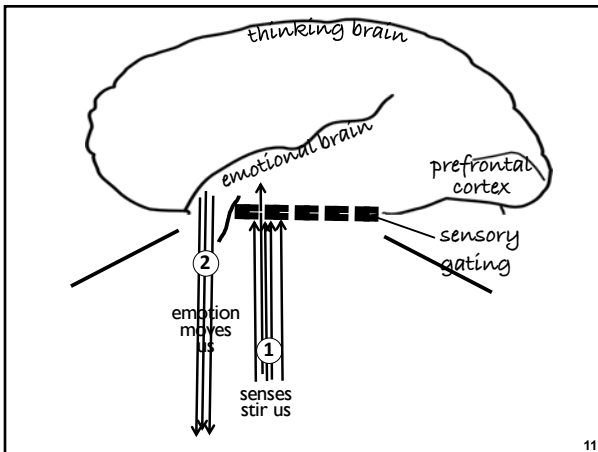
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**EDITORIAL: *Sense and Sensitivity: Understanding the Sensitive Child***

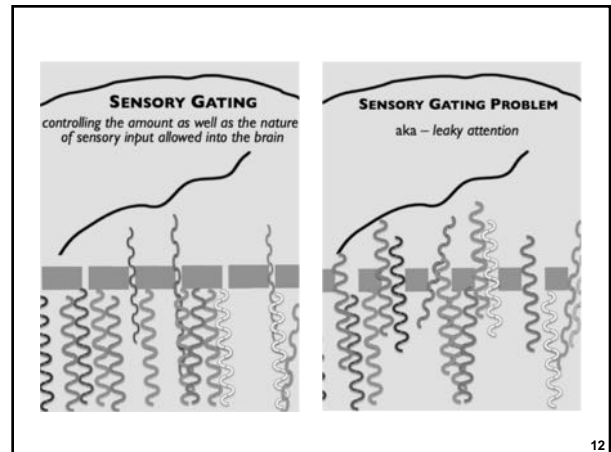
While no two sensitive kids are alike, their enhanced receptivity to sensory information leaves them without a "skin" against the world. Things can feel too much, too big, too cold, too loud, too hot, too smelly, too painful, and too overwhelming. In other words, they can easily feel bombarded by stimuli and this can stir them up emotionally. They are also likely to be more activated and reactive in environments that stir up their senses.

Deborah MacNamara

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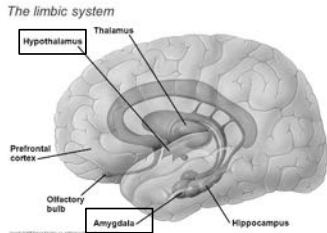


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Where does the "being stirred up" come from?

**BRAIN'S ALARM SYSTEM:**

- Mediated by the **LIMBIC SYSTEM**
- **Amygdala** registers the threat (like a smoke detector)
- **Hypothalamus** orchestrates the response (it links the nervous system to the endocrine system via the pituitary gland)
- Which triggers the **SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM**
- **Hippocampus** – Memory



The limbic system

Hypothalamus Thalamus

Prefrontal cortex


Olfactory bulb Amygdala Hippocampus

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**SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM**  
**the system of ACTIVATION**

- **Cortisol** – increase blood sugar – suppress immune system
- **Adrenaline** – increases heart and respiratory rate
- **Norepinephrine** – responsible for vigilant concentration
- **Growth Hormone** – increases glucose
- **Constricts blood vessels**
- **Sharp Increase in Breathing & Heart Rate**
- **Blood diverts to Muscles**
- **Suspends "rest & digest"**



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**SENSITIVITY X STRESS**

- **Genetics**
- **Pre-natal stressors**
- **Peri-natal stressors**
- **Separation**
- **Shame**
- **Alarm**

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**Challenges for Sensitive Children**

- Senses get easily overwhelmed
- School is difficult because there is too much sensory stimulation which results in emotional overload
- Brain quickly goes to sympathetic nervous system more easily which can result in alarm and anxiety
- The brain sets up defenses to cope with being overwhelmed by the sensitivity
- Behavior challenges arise from overwhelmed senses and/or defendedness

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**REACTIONS TO SENSITIVITY**



When they feel vulnerable they get prickly, just like a hedgehog

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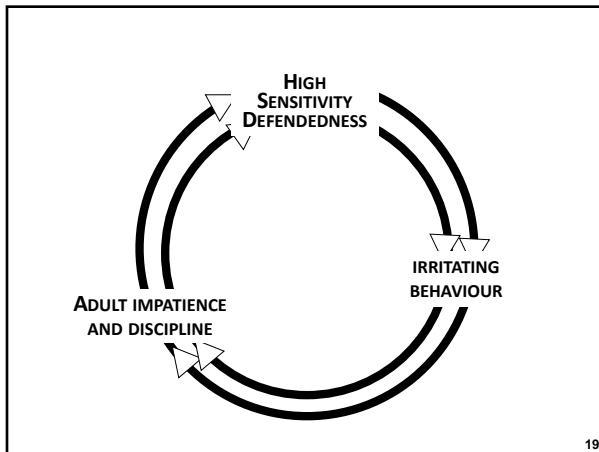
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**HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD POSSIBLE BEHAVIOURAL MANIFESTATIONS**

- Struggles to come into the classroom
- Fidgety, restless, paces around the room, struggles to remain in a determined area
- Often seems upset for no reason
- Requires repeated prompts to follow simple requests
- Struggles to follow daily routine
- Hyper vigilant, scans around the room, obsesses with what others are doing
- Struggles to begin and complete academic tasks
- Disorganized, loses and misplaces materials regularly
- Struggles to attend to task and to retain information
- Struggles to wait their turn, wants to be first all the time
- Physical outbursts with objects, towards peers and/or adults
- Unable to take responsibility for their his/her actions and words
- Cannot read social cues from teacher
- Invades other's personal space
- Doesn't tune in to instructions, hence does not know what to do when its time to do it
- Fatigues easily, becomes exasperated with multi-step tasks
- Rushes out of the room, goes to 'Safe Place' or to hide (usually same place)
- Complains about temperature, noise, smells

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### INTERVENING WITH THE HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD

- Create a strong **attachment**
- Reduce the effects of sensitivity by providing **tools** to help with sensory issues
- Compensate for **immaturity or lack of capacity** by providing the external structure their brain is not yet ready to provide naturally
- Be patient with their sensitivity and defenses, protect their **vulnerability**

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### SENSITIVE CHILDREN: ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER

Toughening up sensitive children is <b>NOT</b> the answer	The Brain at rest is one that grows
Less stimulation is better	Play, expressive arts, movement and nature are especially beneficial

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### INCREASE ATTACHMENT

CULTIVATE A STRONG RELATIONSHIP: to ATTRACT ATTENTION

- Greet with warmth
- Engage in a pleasant activity – puzzle table
- Collect before you Direct
- Redirect instead of correcting
- Provide time to react

Even attachment can be overwhelming

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### WHAT SENSITIVE CHILDREN WOULD LIKE YOU TO KNOW ABOUT THEM

- Their head can be very busy processing their world
- They are more prone to feeling stronger emotions when stirred up by their world
- Relationships with others can take additional time to create
- They are prone to feeling coerced and are more likely to resist other people's agendas
- Structure and routine provide safety and security

Deborah MacNamara

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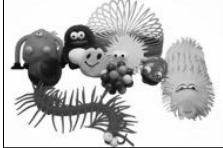

### PROVIDING TOOLS

- Figure out which sensory tools work best for the student
- Create a sensory retreat for the student
- Include Sensory breaks as part of the school day
- Provide choices for sensory input opportunities
- Make sensory activities fun and engaging
- Help the student to recognize their internal cues and when they need a break

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### SENSORY ITEMS

#### FIDGET TOOLS

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### HOW TO INTRODUCE FIDGET TOOLS AND OTHER SENSORY MATERIALS



<b>Introduce</b>	Introduce the materials. Explain and model how they are intended to be used. Make sure students understand it's a tool and not a toy.
<b>Explore</b>	Have students explore their own unique sensory preferences.
<b>Structure</b>	Set up parameters and clear expectations around the What-When-Where and for how long.
<b>Set up</b>	Set up an Individual Bin for that student in which the selected materials can be placed.
<b>Safety</b>	Students need to be reminded and coached to ensure safe use of the different tools and taking care of the materials at their disposal.

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### PERSONAL BIN

Contains


- activities to engage the student if they need a moment of respite
- less demanding educational work
- can be easily transported to another location or another room



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### MINIMIZING SENSORY INPUT

#### NOISE CANCELLING EAR PHONES





#### WEIGHTED ITEMS


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### MINIMIZING SENSORY INPUT

#### PRIVACY CARREL

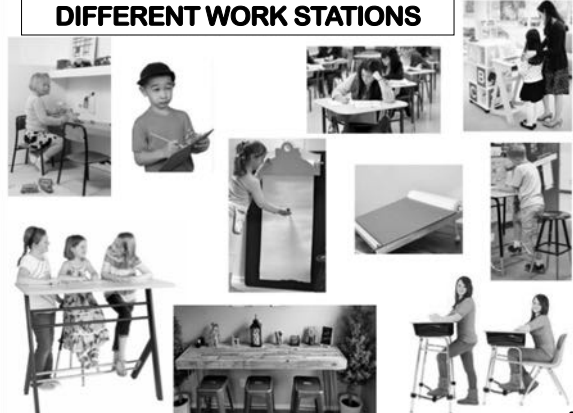



#### MODIFYING NEON LIGHTS

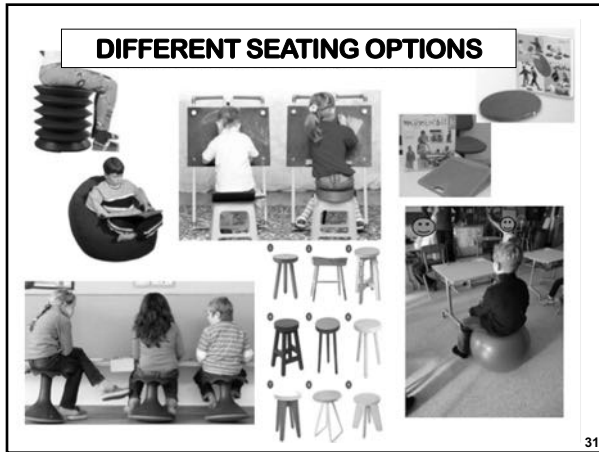


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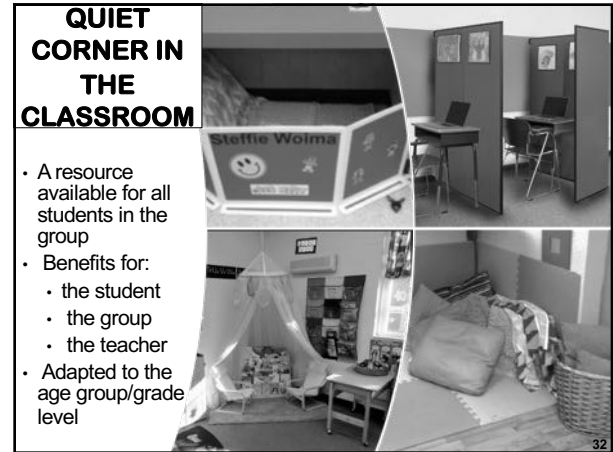
### DIFFERENT WORK STATIONS



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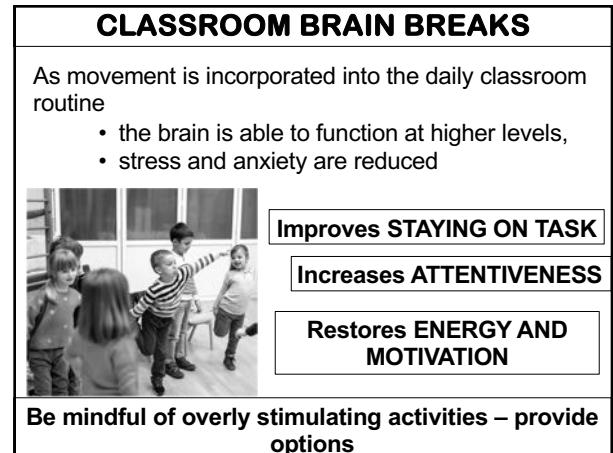
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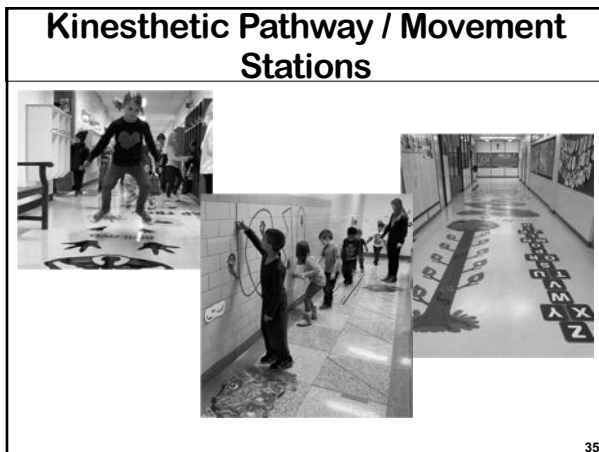
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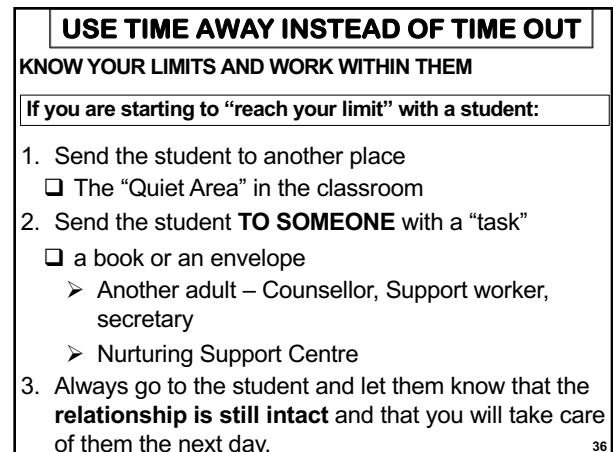
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**COMPENSATE FOR SENSITIVITY**

<b>ANTICIPATE</b>	<b>WHEN SENSITIVITY CAN BE OVERWHELMED</b>
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Provide **ADVANCE** NOTIFICATION of:

- Changes in schedule or routine
- Special events
- New adults e.g. substitute teacher

This allows the student to get “used to” the change and will likely prevent an over-reaction.

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**COMPENSATE FOR SENSITIVITY**

<p><b>When? Where? With whom?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Recess / Breaks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ With extra supervision</li> <li>✓ Organized activity</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Hallways</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Away from other students</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Bathrooms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Under supervision</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Lunch time</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ In a quieter space</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Substitute teacher</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Make introductions or</li> <li>✓ have an alternate “person” the student can be with</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Work with your <u>school team</u> to change the <u>circumstances</u> rather than just trying to control or change the student.</p>	
<p>Prevent problematic situations</p>	

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**SUPPORTING SENSITIVITY**

Find a balance between “Pushing” and “Protecting”

- Recognize when the child has reached a “limit” of being stirred up and needs pressure to be removed
- Encourage the child to try challenging activities but in small steps.

Remember that these children experience higher cortisol levels for “normal” stressors than other children. And we need to help them to tolerate some level of “stress” but not too much.

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**BRIDGE THE FALLOUT OF THE SENSITIVITY REACTION**

- **Bridge** any separation from one time of connection to the next – these student struggle to hold on to adults. Adults need to go the extra mile to hold on to them and keep them in connection with them. **“Looking forward to...”**
- Reassure the student that you will continue to help and support despite their “difficulties”. **“We’ll try again tomorrow.”**

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**SCHOOL TEAM**

**Use your existing a school team to**

- Plan regular meetings to discuss students with challenging behaviours and how best to help support them so they can handle being in school
- Put together a team of adults to share the responsibility of caring for these students
- Use adult resources in the school creatively
  - Identify one “key” adult to connect with the student – to try for a regular check-in or recap at the end of the day by means of another activity e.g. breakfast programme, recycling, exercise “group”.

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**INTERVENTION PRINCIPLES**

1. Preserve and maximize the **Attachment** relationship
2. Respect and compensate for the level of **Sensitivity**
3. Protect the **Vulnerability**
4. Come along-side the emotional experience by allowing **Emotional Expression** and encouraging **Play**

**Working with behaviour at its roots for lasting change.**

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Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management  
[www.cebm.ca](http://www.cebm.ca)

Members site password: CEBMmembers



THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT (CEBM)

Welcome to our site! As a support to the 10 English School Boards of Quebec, the CEBM aims to enable boards and their staff to find developmentally friendly and trauma informed interventions that are effective in helping students who are struggling with behavioural challenges in the school setting.

Upcoming Events 2021-2022

**A website that helps schools to use a developmental-trauma-responsive-attachment friendly approach**

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In a group setting, to the group (grade 5/6), how might I explain the hypersensitive child's moods or outbursts (which from the outside looks like poor sportsmanship or controlling behavior) to give them a more compassionate understanding, without it seeming like the hypersensitive child got his/her way because of the outburst?

- Reframe the behaviour as Emotions "got the better of them."
- Deal with the situation, if necessary

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The hypersensitive student wants to stay with me all the time when we go playing outside. I asked him why and he says he feels safe to be with me and not like to play with whoever or whatever. I tried to put him in the group of boys who are in his class to play with, he cried and just follow me. How to talk with this kind of child?

- Recognize that you are this student's safe place.
- Respect the need for "protection" of sensitivity
- Invite one other student to join you.

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A child always complains about his friends looking at him with anger, and sometimes complain that other children are talking about him. He is going to push to the children who are doing bad things to him but in fact, there is nobody doing anything to him. When I talked to him, he said that was true and he just doing something (pushing) as response. How to deal with this child?

- Recognize that this is his interpretation of what he sees due to high sensitivity.
- Encourage the student to come to an adult before reacting
- Listen to the EMOTION, don't search for facts
  - "You're upset because you don't want your friends to be angry with you."
  - "You thought he might hurt you so you wanted to protect yourself."

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Can a hypersensitive child turn very angry or aggressive, as he/she gets older?

- Yes, aggression comes as a result of too much frustration.
- Highly sensitive children live with a lot of frustration.
- If not recognized, over time the child might start to lash out.
- Help to reduce frustration by reducing overstimulation
- Allow for non-hurtful ways for frustration to be vented – play and art

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Thank you for your participation.  
Please complete the **feedback form**.  
The link can be found in the chat box or on our website

Two Bonus PD sessions:

**TUESDAY, JUNE 7** 4:00-5:00 PM – Online Webinar  
*PLAY and EMOTION*

**THURSDAY, JUNE 16** 4:00-5:00 PM – Online Webinar  
*OVERVIEW OF THE NEUFELD DEVELOPMENTAL PARADIGM*

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# CEBM Resource list for Handling the Sensitive Child in the Classroom

CEBM website: [www.cebm.ca](http://www.cebm.ca)

Members website: Password: CEBMmembers

- **The Sensitive Child:** [www.cebmmember.ca/sensitivity](http://www.cebmmember.ca/sensitivity)
- **Sensory Issues:** [www.cebmmember.ca/sensory-issues](http://www.cebmmember.ca/sensory-issues)
- **Sensory Friendly Practices:** [www.cebmmember.ca/sensory-friendly-practices](http://www.cebmmember.ca/sensory-friendly-practices)
- **Sensory and Occupational Therapist (OT) Perspective:** [www.cebmmember.ca/sensory-and-ot-perspective](http://www.cebmmember.ca/sensory-and-ot-perspective)
- Brain Breaks: [www.cebm.ca/brain-breaks](http://www.cebm.ca/brain-breaks)
- Quiet Corner: [www.cebmmember.ca/cocoon-area](http://www.cebmmember.ca/cocoon-area)
- Anxiety and Alarm Resource page: [www.cebmmember.ca/anxiety-and-alarm](http://www.cebmmember.ca/anxiety-and-alarm)
- Attention Problems Resource page: [www.cebmmember.ca/attention-problems](http://www.cebmmember.ca/attention-problems)
- Disruptive and Alarmed: [www.cebmmember.ca/disruptive-and-alarmed-behaviour](http://www.cebmmember.ca/disruptive-and-alarmed-behaviour)
- Defended and Hard to Reach: [www.cebmmember.ca/defended-and-hard-to-reach](http://www.cebmmember.ca/defended-and-hard-to-reach)
- Emotion and Play: [www.cebm.ca/emotion-and-play](http://www.cebm.ca/emotion-and-play)
- Attention Problems: [www.cebmmember.ca/attention-problems](http://www.cebmmember.ca/attention-problems)
- Managing Behaviour without Rewards: [www.cebmmember.ca/common-practices-to-avoid](http://www.cebmmember.ca/common-practices-to-avoid)
- Emotional Release: [www.cebm.ca/emotion-and-play](http://www.cebm.ca/emotion-and-play)