



Sense and Sensitivity: Understanding the Sensitive Child

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

Sensitive kids are everywhere. Their numbers are estimated to be between 15 to 20% of children in a North American context, but they are often misunderstood or not recognized as being sensitive. What does it mean when we say a child is “sensitive” and how would you know if your child is among them?

To make sense of sensitivity, it is easier to start with understanding what it is not. It is often confused with a child who has strong emotional reactions or whose feelings seem to get more easily hurt. Sometimes it is confused with a child who seems to be more considerate of other’s needs or who is gentle or kind. While children with sensitivity may display some of these characteristics, these are not typical of all sensitive kids, nor do they help us understand what is at the root of their different way of being in the world.

Talking senses

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. For example, I remember watching a boy run for the door in his Mommy & Me music class every time the noise started to escalate. The cacophony of sounds was neither soothing nor fun but instead crashed into him, flooding him, and overwhelming him. As he instinctively darted for the door to escape, there were some adults who saw him as disobedient or defiant, but in truth, he was simply overwhelmed.

It is important to see sensitivity not as a disorder but as part of the diversity in human temperament. Sensitivity doesn’t seem to be a mistake when you look at it from an evolutionary perspective. You can find sensitivity in other mammal species (even in fruit flies!) lending support for the idea that it is not a mistake but perhaps adaptive in some way. What is clear is that sensitive kids need adults to “get them” and to take care of them. This is true for every child, but much more so for the sensitive ones among us.

How do you know if your child is sensitive?

Sensitive kids reveal themselves soon enough to their adults. The child will seem more easily triggered or comforted through a sense, or combination of them. In some cases overly-stimulating environments may prove to be provocative or upsetting to young ones. Likewise, the sensitive child may also find comfort in certain senses: for example, a child with tactile sensitivity may only sleep when they are held or touched, or one with an auditory sensitivity may prefer hearing your soft voice as they fall asleep.

Sensitive kids often seem to have an unusual alertness even as babies. They may sometimes be described as “old souls” or the ones who watch everything. They can sometimes display exceptional memory and become preoccupied with their thoughts. Their questions are often probing and reveal a unique way of looking at the world. They can have a range of interests or can become squarely focussed on one area in particular. Sensitive kids are often described by adults as being intense, passionate kids with big ideas and plans. When they are happy they can infect a room with their enthusiasm just as when they are upset, they can fill a room with hurricane- force levels of frustration.

As the parent to two sensitive kids I have experienced first-hand what comes with caring for them. One of my children is visually sensitive and sees too much at times which appeared when she was 1 1/2 years old as she yelled at strangers to stop looking at her. It felt unnatural to be seen by someone she didn't know, and their attention was unwanted and alarming. She was also the same child who would never perform or dance in front of other parents at school because “they were all strangers.” Her visual sensitivity brings gifts like the ability to remember details, see patterns, and create novel and new designs—like her “candy wall” when she was three. At the same time, it can become unbearable when there is too much stimuli, particular scary movies with sounds, images, and suspense.

Research suggests there is often a genetic component to this enhanced receptivity, or that it may be due to birth practices, as well as prenatal experiences.¹ Genetics play a strong role in determining the intensity or prominence of each affected sense. As mentioned, it can be any combination of the five conventional senses, or internal senses like the vestibular (balance) system, proprioceptive sense (movement), or the complex sensing apparatus we call “the gut.”

Parents need only pay attention to what stirs a child up and to consider how much is too much for them in order to figure out which combination of senses are enhanced. The key to understanding a sensitive child is to not hold their big reactions against them but to appreciate how they are being impacted by the world around them, and how to deal with them effectively.

Providing a sense of security

Brain development is a phenomenal thing—especially in young children. With ideal conditions, a sensitive child's brain will develop so that it can increasingly handle and process sensory information. They can develop neural wiring that can manage the sensory overload and find ways to compensate for too much stimuli. In other words, nature has a solution for a child's sensitivity, but it needs our help for them to internally cultivate these answers. If we can create ideal developmental conditions for a child, then nature can take over and grow the child up and through their sensitivity.

1. Strong, caring adult relationships

Sensitive kids need strong caring relationships with adults who convey to them that they are not too big, too difficult, or too much of anything. Sensitive kids are usually more aware of the vulnerability inherent to relationships; that is, if you give someone your heart, they may hurt you. It is emotionally vulnerable to trust someone, to get close, and to rely on them for care taking. Adults need to take a strong lead and convince a child they can count on them especially when it comes to dealing with a child's mistakes or their challenging behaviour.

Separation-based discipline such as time-outs, 1-2-3 magic, or consequences can often go too far and create insecurity in relationships. Attachment-based and

developmentally-friendly discipline is key to being an emotionally safe caretaker in the hearts of our sensitive kids.

Little things can go a long way in cultivating a connection with a sensitive child. It could be the small things we remember, the patience we take to draw them out and hear their story, and all the ways we communicate that we enjoy being with them. Relationships matter to all kids but sensitive ones don't "suffer fools gladly" and they often wait to see if someone can be trusted before giving them their heart. We need to work to earn their trust and be patient until we are there. Whoever cares for a sensitive child will need to work on a relationship with them to get them to follow and take their cues. This is true in a childcare environment as well as in school with their teachers.

2. Know when to protect from and when to encourage exposure

If a child does not have a thick skin to protect them from sensory overload, then it will fall to their adults to compensate for this. We can start by changing the child's environment. For example, some kids prefer white noise to cancel out environmental stimuli or may benefit from headphones. Caregivers need to be patient and accept that their child may not want to engage in activities that are overwhelming such as playing with a lot of kids or music classes.

While it is important to reduce arousal and stimulation where appropriate, it is also important to think about if and when you can gently expose sensitive kids to the things that are overwhelming for them. For example, one mother had a child with a number of sensitivities and loud sounds were particularly difficult. She begged her mother not to walk by a construction site near their house because of the loud sounds of the big trucks and "diggers." The mother took note that this was a challenge for her daughter and took a different route as they walked to school each morning. On one morning she said to her daughter, "We are just going to quickly walk by the construction site and I want you to put your hands on your ears so that it won't be too loud for you." As they ran by, her daughter spied the diggers and the hole in the ground and became fascinated. As the week went on, the mother continued to walk by the construction site with her daughter, watching, and eventually stopping. One day her daughter took her hands off her ears and listened, and eventually, she was able to walk by the site without feeling overwhelmed. What sensitive kids need is an adult who understands them and who knows when to shield them and when, and how, to gently and patiently encourage exposure to the things that are hard.

3. Make room for their emotions and tears

Sensitive kids can be stirred up by the world around them and this can create big emotions inside of them that need to be released. The best thing we can do for them is to help them express feelings through words, play, or through their tears. Sometimes we need to encourage play that will draw out their frustration, fears, or desires. It is often easier to face things in play when it isn't for real or can't really hurt you. If we are to move a sensitive child to their words or tears, they will need to trust us and to see that our relationship is unwavering even when they are having a hard time.

When we have to deal with issues regarding their behaviour we may make better headway outside of the incident. They may be more receptive and able to hear us when we talk to them when they are less stirred up and feeling close to us. Sometimes they may not want to talk about issues or tell us they can't remember. We can simply tell them we will make it fast, and easy, and it won't hurt but we just need to say a few things. We may need to lead them into vulnerable territory but if

we fail to do so then they will have a harder time having a relationship with the emotions inside of them.

If there were a secret to caring for sensitive kids it would be to realize that they often act in congruence with the sensory world that exists inside of them. They are not trying to give us a hard time—they are simply having a hard time. While there are challenges posed by their sensitivity, there are also gifts, which caregivers learn to recognize as coming from the same place. If we can hold these things in mind when dealing with them and invite them to rest in our care, then we will be able to become the strong caretakers they need.

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Dr. Deborah MacNamara is the author of ***Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one)***, is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute, and Director of **Kid's Best Bet**, a counselling and family resource center. For more information please see www.macnamara.ca and www.neufeldinstitute.org.