

# HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN

A visual guide to detect high sensitivity

and help children blossom

in an overwhelming world

with scientifically proven facts and strategies



The highly sensitive child

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# How to recognize highly sensitive children?

**Highly sensitive children experience the world differently than others. Each child may express his or her sensitivity in a different way.**<sup>6</sup>

Please keep in mind that each highly sensitive child is different. It can vary heavily how sensitive a highly sensitive child is and what it is sensitive about. These variations are caused both by genes and by the environment, which might moderate how the behavior, emotions and feelings of an highly sensitive child look like.

## Awareness of subtleties

Highly sensitive children are highly aware of small changes in their environment.



They are much more impacted by their five senses since their senses are more astute and their brain is processing information in a deeper way. For example, they may notice a small temperature change and register subtle changes in someone's moods.<sup>1</sup>

## Increased depth of processing

Since highly sensitive children process information more thoroughly, they tend to be deep thinkers.



They generally seem to notice more and think about their experiences. They like to consider different perspectives which sometimes can make them slow decision makers or in need of more time before approaching new environments. Highly sensitive children often need more time to reflect but also tend to remember more compared to children of their age.<sup>7</sup>

## Ease of overstimulation

Due to the high awareness of their environment, highly sensitive children can easily become overwhelmed when there is too much going on.



The brain is taking many sensory inputs, more than the brain of a low sensory child, and this can, if the environment is not well structured, too chaotic or overwhelming, lead to a sense of feeling trapped and confused by too many stimuli. In such environments the brain is taking in so many sensory inputs that the individual can more easily feel distressed, tired or distracted by what is going on around. A sensory overload can be triggered by things such as a loud bang, ticking in the background, a crowded place, or having to do too many things at once.



## Emotional intensity

It's scientifically proven that highly sensitive children have an increased emotional reaction to both positive and negative experience.<sup>1</sup>



They feel more strongly and therefore have more intense reactions. They can be **extremely happy** in positive environments but be **incredibly sad or angry** if overwhelmed or if they perceive an injustice. Highly sensitive children can be more at risk of internalizing symptoms as sadness, or tend to ruminate more on negative things when the environment has been less than optimal.

This emotional intensity can lead children to feeling overwhelmed even in positive but overstimulating environments – such as for example at a birthday party or at the amusement park.

# What does highly sensitive mean?

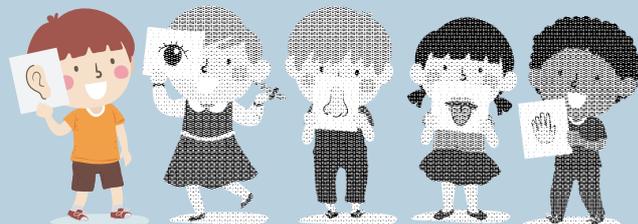
**High sensitivity** refers to a genetically based temperament trait which involves **heightened perception** and **deeper processing** of one's experience.

In other words, highly sensitive children are born with a tendency to **notice more details** in their environment and to **reflect more thoroughly** on everything before acting.<sup>1,2,3</sup>



It is important to remember that being highly sensitive is not a psychological disorder. Sensitivity is a common human trait. Everyone is sensitive to some degree.

20-30% of people are particularly sensitive.<sup>3,4,5</sup>



Highly sensitive people are like orchid flowers: they make beautiful flowers but only in very specific environments, while 30% of children are low in sensitivity and are like dandelions. The remaining 40% have medium sensitivity and can be thought as tulips.<sup>5</sup>



# Benefits of being a highly sensitive child

Brain scans show that highly sensitive people have increased brain activity in particular brain structures that process emotions and empathy, which makes them feel emotions more intensely whilst also being more aware of other's emotions.<sup>8</sup>

Precisely because they are more aware of others' emotions, some highly sensitive children may tend to accommodate other people's needs before their own, which might make highly sensitive children more vulnerable compared to less sensitive children.

**Highly sensitive people are precious for the society precisely because they process the environment more deeply.**

High sensitivity potentially makes children more scared, easily overwhelmed or upset when the environment is less than optimal. This might represent an additional challenge for the rewarding, yet demanding task, of being a parent or caregiver.

They are more aware of **dangers, subtle changes, and potential problems** compared to others.

Highly sensitive people are **more empathetic and creative** compared to the general population because their **brain areas tend to be more connected.**



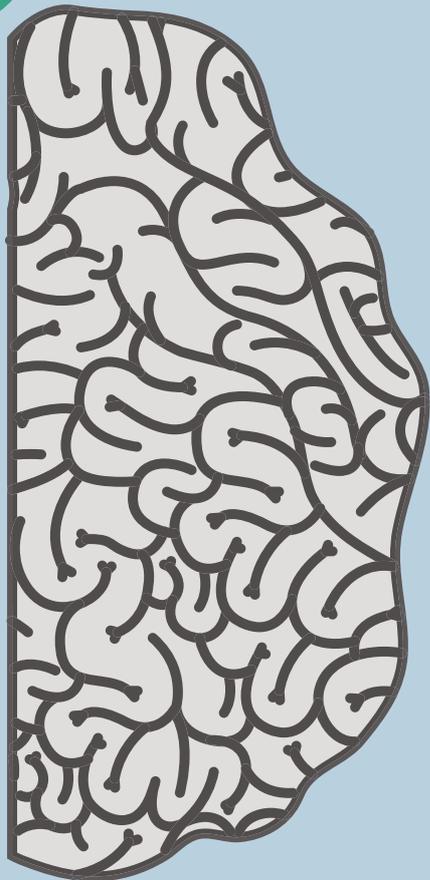
## High sensitivity can be considered a survival strategy:

Since highly sensitive individuals are more responsive and notice more subtle changes compared to the general population, they have an

**enhanced awareness of opportunities**

and can also function as an

**early warning system to threats.**



This natural survival strategy is effective if it is found in a minority of individuals who have the task to warn the general population. That's one reason why only about 20-30% of the people have higher sensitivity.<sup>7</sup>

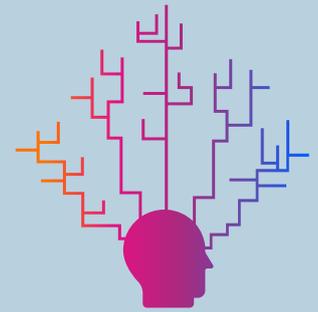
# Differences to ADHD and Asperger



Highly sensitive children could sometimes be mistakenly thought by teachers or caregivers as having ADHD (Attention Deficit or Hyperactivity Disorder), or Autism Spectrum Disorder (level 1, also referred to as Asperger syndrome).

Highly sensitive children can, like children with ADHD be easily distracted because they notice so many details in the environment.

Yet, highly sensitive children can usually manage themselves and focus well if they are in a supportive environment without distractions, while children with ADHD have troubles stopping themselves and focusing even in calm environments.<sup>9</sup>



The right side of an highly sensitive child's brain is more active in comparison to children with ADHD where the left side of the brain is more active.<sup>9,11</sup>



Children with Asperger syndrome, as highly sensitive children, notice many details in the environment and are more easily overwhelmed compared to the general population.

Yet, highly sensitive children are empathetic and skilled at understanding others' emotions, while children with Asperger syndrome have difficulties understanding other people's feelings, as confirmed by a study performed with brain scans. Importantly, sensitivity is a normal temperament trait, not a disorder.<sup>9,10,11</sup>



# What are typical errors?

Highly sensitive children are uncomfortable with

**new environment,  
large groups,  
crowded places,**

such as in chaotic classrooms or performing competitive sports.



Highly sensitive children need a  
**structured,  
supportive,  
peaceful,**  
environment in order to flourish!



Parents, teachers, and caregivers can find it useful to consider typical mistakes committed when interacting with highly sensitive children:

**Don't tell the child how to feel.**

Avoid saying "nothing happened", "stop crying" or "you are taking it too seriously".



Rather, try to understand their difficulties  
**validate their feelings**  
(without necessarily telling them that they are right), by showing your support, for example by hugging them or with validating statements such as "I understand this must be difficult for you", "tell me more about it".

## Do not compare them with other children

i.e., by making them notice that others don't cry or are not scared. It will make them feel upset with themselves and inferior. Do not push highly sensitive children too hard to try new things but try to gently encourage them.<sup>2</sup>



## Do not underestimate their fears.

The brain of highly sensitive children processes dangers more thoroughly compared to other children.



When a child frequently has **headache or stomach pain** consider that pain could be a sign of discomfort with the situation. Never disregard them as tricks to get attention.

# Appropriate coping strategies<sup>7,12</sup>

## 1. Build-up self-esteem.

Prize the child's sensitivity, for example his/her ability to notice details.



## 2. Provide buffers to avoid overstimulation.

For example, provide earplugs when going somewhere loud, even in school.



## 3. Help a sensitive child identify and express emotions.

Make a list of activities to do for coping with negative emotions.



## 4. Give a sensitive child enough time to calm down and reflect.

Don't overload days with activities. Allow the child to have time by him/herself.



## 5. Make routines.

For example, make activities in the same way and at the same time so the child is confronted with less surprise.



## 6. Prepare a sensitive child step by step if change is coming.

Talk about scenarios that could happen and provide an environment that is able to be caring and provide boundaries at the same time.



## 7. Teach self-calming tactics.

Practice the IMPROVE distress tolerance activities (based on DBT).<sup>12</sup>

**When you can't escape a situation but want to make it easier to deal with, IMPROVE the moment.** <sup>12</sup>

I

### Imagery

Imagine a safe place. Imagine life is going well. Imagine a relaxing place.



M

### Meaning

Find a reason for it. Focus on the positive. Think of how you'll be better.



P

### Prayer

Ask for strength. Turn it over to a higher power.



R

### Relaxing

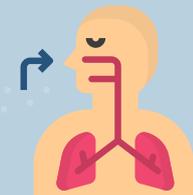
Listen to relaxing music. Spend time in the nature.



O

### One thing at a time

Be mindful. Focus on one thing. Breathe slowly. Practice mindfulness.



V

### Vacation

Take a break from what you are doing. Get in bed for 5 minutes. Take a breather from work.



E

### Encouragement

Cheerlead yourself. "It will get better!"



## The questionnaire: Is a child highly sensitive?



The questionnaire you find at this link is scientifically validated:  
<https://sensitivityresearch.com/self-tests/test-for-parents-and-children-8-18-years/>

It's not a diagnostic tool because high sensitivity is not a disorder

### Reference book:

The highly sensitive child by Elaine N. Aron

A useful reference book specific for children with intense emotions: "Parenting a child who has intense emotions: Dialectical behavior therapy skills to help your child regulate emotional outbursts and aggressive behaviors" by Harvey and Penzo

### Scientific References:

- 1 The Highly Sensitive Brain: Research, Assessment, and Treatment of Sensory Processing Sensitivity. By B. Acevedo Ed. (2020)
- 2 Individual differences in Environmental Sensitivity. By M. Pluess (2015)
- 3 Sensory processing sensitivity: A review in the light of the evolution of biological responsivity. By Aron et al. 2012
- 4 Environmental sensitivity in children: Development of the Highly Sensitive Child Scale and identification of sensitivity groups. By M Pluess et al. (2018)
- 5 Dandelions, tulips and orchids: Evidence for the existence of low-sensitive, medium-sensitive and high-sensitive individuals. By F. Lionetti et al. (2018)
- 6 Relationship between the Temperament Trait of Sensory Processing Sensitivity and Emotional Reactivity by J. Jagiellowicz, A. Aron and E. N. Aron.
- 7 The Highly Sensitive Child by Elaine N. Aron (2002)
- 8 The highly sensitive brain: an fMRI study of sensory processing sensitivity and response to others' emotions. By B. P. Acevedo, E. A. Aron, A. Aron, MD. Sangster, N. Collins & L. L. Brown (2014).
- 9 The Relationship between Sensory Processing Sensitivity and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Traits: A spectrum approach. By M. Panagiotidi, P. G. Overton and T. Stafford (2020).
- 10 Psychotherapy and the highly sensitive person: Improving outcomes for that minority of people who are the majority of clients. By E. Aron (2011).
- 11 Nickerson Institute of Integrative Medicine, Highly Sensitive Person Certification Training Program, 2021.
- 12 Parenting a child who has intense emotions: Dialectical behavior therapy skills to help your child regulate emotional outbursts and aggressive behaviors. By Harvey, P., & Penzo, J. A. (2009).



# WHAT IS THIS BOOKLET ABOUT?

High sensitivity refers to a genetically based temperament trait which involves heightened perception and deeper processing of one's experience. In other words, highly sensitive children are born with a tendency to notice more details in their environment and to reflect more thoroughly on everything before acting.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

This booklet is based on solid scientific evidence and aims at informing parents and caregivers about high sensitivity in children and provides them with ways to recognize high sensitivity as well as strategies how to avoid typical errors and help highly sensitive children thrive in a supportive environment.

## For further information:



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