



HOW TO SUPPORT HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

A Guide for Educators





Fragile Power

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Introduction



This guide was created to support teachers, school staff, parents, and anyone working with highly sensitive children (HSCs) and teenagers. Whether you're striving to better understand the students in your classroom or looking to make sense of your own sensitivity – or that of a child close to you – this guide offers practical support and professional insight.

The guide is part of the Fragile Power project, supported by the Erasmus+ programme and developed through a collaboration between teams from the Czech Republic and France. It is accompanied by a graphic novel aimed at teenagers – an accessible and engaging way to explore the world of high sensitivity, its manifestations, and how to navigate it with safety and confidence.

Our mission is to create a safe and supportive environment for HSCs and teenagers.

We believe in the power of empathy, understanding, and acceptance, and we aim to build a community where sensitive individuals feel seen, heard, and respected. Through education and support, we want to help HSCs face the challenges they may encounter and, at the same time, empower them to make the most of their strengths and gifts.

At the heart of this guide are the four pillars of working with HSCs:

- ▶ Supporting healthy self-esteem
- ▶ Reducing feelings of shame
- ▶ Disciplining in a wise and respectful way
- ▶ Teaching children how to talk about their sensitivity

We'd like to emphasize an important point: supporting HSCs doesn't mean labeling them as students with special educational needs. High sensitivity is not a disorder. It is a temperament trait – a way of processing the world more deeply. While it can bring certain challenges, it also comes with notable strengths such as empathy,

creativity, and intuition. Above all, HSCs need to be understood – their responses often highlight aspects of the environment that impact all children. When we truly listen to them, we have the chance to improve learning conditions for the entire class.

So, what will you find in this guide?

- ▶ A clear explanation of what high sensitivity is – and what it isn't
- ▶ Answers to frequently asked questions
- ▶ Insight into how high sensitivity shows up in children and teens, including boys
- ▶ Practical tips for identifying and supporting HSCs in everyday school life
- ▶ Strategies for responding to emotional and sensory needs without isolating students
- ▶ Ways to help all students – including HSCs – understand and regulate their emotions
- ▶ A collection of ready-to-use materials, activities, and suggestions in the appendix

We hope this guide helps you see high sensitivity not as something fragile that needs fixing, but as something valuable and worth working with. Supporting HSCs doesn't have to mean extra work – it can actually lead to more effective and inclusive teaching that benefits everyone involved.

Thank you for joining us on this journey!



Understanding high sensitivity



What is high sensitivity?

The concept of high sensitivity describes a trait of human temperament. According to researcher Michael Pluess, it explains individual differences in the ability to register and process stimuli from the external and internal environment. Highly sensitive people (HSPs) have a lower threshold for processing stimuli and tend to register more of them. The same applies to highly sensitive children (HSCs).

Example

Lena has typical hearing. She notices when the teacher speaks, hears classmates chatting, and can focus on her work without being overly distracted by background noise.

Tom, however, has a heightened sensitivity to sound. Besides what Lena notices, he hears the hum of the fluorescent lights, the rustling of paper, the tapping of pencils, and even the distant sound of a car outside the school. These noises, which Lena barely registers, often feel distracting to him.

Is high sensitivity something new and fashionable?

The term was coined by the American clinical psychologist Elaine Aron and the topic was popularized by her in 1996, when she published her first book, *Highly Sensitive Person*. But it was not a new concept at that time as scholars like C. G. Jung, I. P. Pavlov or Hans Eysenck had already investigated it in various contexts before. Interestingly, similar, but independent theories arose in the mid-1990s, such as “dandelions and orchids” by Boyce or “differential susceptibility” by Belsky. Each of these theories brings a unique aspect to the theory of sensitivity.

Is high sensitivity a scientific concept?

Elaine Aron along with her husband Arthur, a psychology professor and researcher, published her first scientific study about sensitivity in 1997 and a lot of research has been done since that time. The concept is known as Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) in the scientific world.

What does it mean when we say high sensitivity is a temperament trait?

It means that sensitivity is distinct from other temperament traits like introversion, neuroticism or empathy level, although there may be positive correlations to those.

It also means that sensitivity is an innate and heritable trait that is shaped by a specific functioning of the nervous system. Research suggests that HSPs show a distinct activity in some brain areas, which is influenced by specific gene expression.



The heritability of HS has been estimated to be 47 %, which makes it a moderately heritable trait. It follows that people partly share their sensitivity level with their biological families and that they cannot change the very level of sensitivity – only its effects on their functioning. This can be done by accepting the level of someone's sensitivity.

Example

Emma is an HSC who has been encouraged to embrace her sensitivity. Her parents and teachers recognize her deep emotions and heightened awareness, creating a supportive environment:

- ▶ She knows her limits and takes breaks when overwhelmed.
- ▶ She has friends who understand her and respect her need for quiet time.
- ▶ She channels her sensitivity into creativity (art, writing, music) and empathy (helping others).
- ▶ She learns coping strategies, like deep breathing and setting boundaries.

Effect: Emma thrives because she sees her sensitivity as a strength. She becomes a compassionate, self-aware individual who excels in areas requiring deep thinking, empathy, and creativity. It doesn't mean she never experiences challenges.

Liam is also an HSC, but his environment doesn't support him. He grows up in a family or school culture that values toughness and emotional suppression, leading him to reject his sensitivity:

- ▶ He hides his emotions, fearing he'll be seen as weak.
- ▶ He pushes himself too hard, ignoring his need for rest and overstimulation.
- ▶ He struggles with self-criticism, thinking he's „too sensitive“ or „not normal.“
- ▶ He may experience anxiety, stress, or burnout from repressing his emotions.

Effect: Liam struggles because he feels like his sensitivity is a flaw rather than a gift. He might develop low self-esteem, suppress his true nature, and experience chronic stress or emotional exhaustion. If he doesn't learn to accept himself, he may carry these struggles into adulthood.

Is high sensitivity a disadvantage?

Around 30 % of the population is estimated to be highly sensitive. As Aron points out, evolutionally, this is too much to conceptualize high sensitivity as a disadvantage. Since every third or fourth person is highly sensitive, we can think of high sensitivity as a kind of 'minority normal' – common enough to be part of the human experience, but still misunderstood and often dismissed, which can lead to a very real kind of minority stress.

Aron has also noted that the trait has been found in about the same percentage in most animals, from fruit flies to primates. Biologists refer to two different survival strategies of animals and two innate personality types that tend to them (bold versus shy, or hawk versus dove, or unresponsive versus responsive). The strategy of the majority is to move quickly toward feeding without much prior observation of the surroundings, while the sensitive minority avoids risks by observing subtleties before acting. Both strategies – „pause to check“ and „act now“ – can be successful, depending on conditions in the environment.

Example

Sophia is a HSC. During a group project, Sophia is entrusted with the role of the organizer. Her strategy is to listen to everyone's ideas and assess how to allocate work in a way that considers the team's strengths and needs. This deliberate strategy ensures smooth collaboration and prevents misunderstandings.

Ethan is a child who is less sensitive. He loves outdoor sports, and his ability to tune out distractions allows him to stay focused during competitive games. He doesn't get rattled by external factors like noise or pressure, which helps him perform well. When playing soccer, he doesn't hesitate when an opportunity arises to take a shot at the goal. His fast thinking and confidence help him take advantage.

What are typical features of high sensitivity?



Elaine Aron hypothesizes that HSPs (both children and adults) exhibit four basic features, which she describes using the acronym DOES.

D	Depth of Processing	<p>Depth of processing is a fundamental feature. The brain of such a child seeks connections and compares everything to past experiences in similar situations. Although this process can be difficult to observe, it often manifests in deep questions, a clever sense of humour, and difficulty making decisions due to the consideration of many possibilities. These children may also be „slow to warm up“ to new people and situations, as they need time to observe and reflect before acting or joining in.</p> <p>This thorough processing can be unconscious, in which case children experience its results as intuition. When they consciously process information in this way, it may take them much longer, as they carefully consider all options.</p>
O	Overstimulation	<p>Overstimulation is a natural side effect of deep processing. If a highly sensitive child's brain evaluates everything in greater depth, and the situation is complex (with many details to remember), intense (involving noise or chaos), or prolonged, it is understandable that such a child will tire more quickly.</p> <p>Children may feel overwhelmed by loud noises, discomforted by extreme temperatures, or distressed by sudden changes. They may avoid team sports, hesitate to speak up in class, and require extra rest to recover from overstimulation.</p>
E	Emotional Reactivity and Empathy	<p>Emotional reactivity is closely linked to deep processing, as emotions guide our attention, learning, and memory. Sensitive children observe and internalize emotional situations more profoundly, which also enhances their empathy.</p> <p>Such children may display stronger emotional responses, easily recognizing the distress of others and „reading minds“. Highly sensitive children react more emotionally to all events—whether positive or negative. For example, emotions such as joy, gratitude, or relief can move them to tears.</p>
S	Sensing the Subtle (Sensory Sensitivity)	<p>Highly sensitive people notice even subtle details that others overlook. This heightened perception is not due to superior sensory organs but rather to the way their brain thoroughly processes and evaluates information.</p> <p>This ability benefits them in various ways: they experience greater pleasure from positive moments, and are adept at understanding teachers' expectations. Their sensitivity allows them to respond more effectively in social interactions, as they keenly perceive nonverbal communication—such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and subtle gestures. They may instantly recognize another person's mood, sincerity, or encouragement. However, when overstimulated, this heightened awareness may disappear, making it harder for them to process their surroundings.</p>

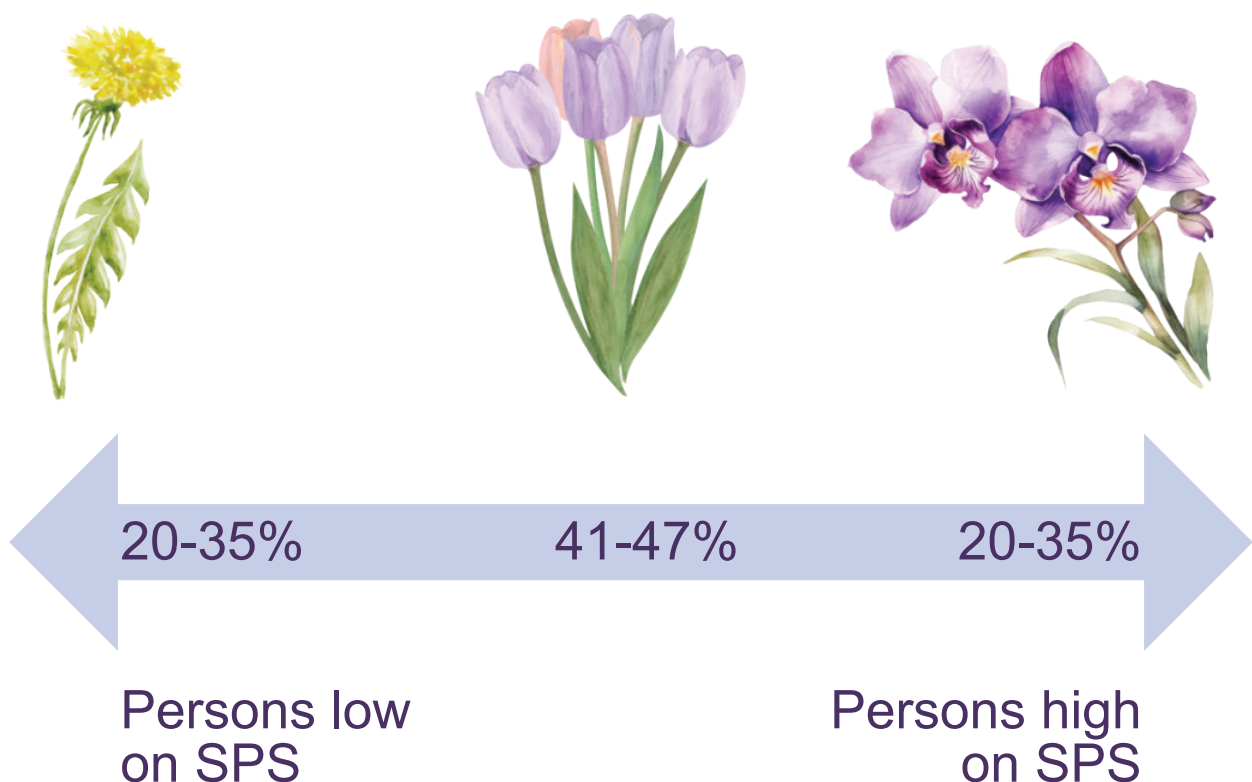
What does it mean when we say HSPs are orchids?

Thomas Boyce introduced a flower metaphor to describe two different groups of children. Orchids are characterized by fragility and require a special educational and upbringing approach, but when such an approach is granted, they thrive very well. These children are different from children called “dandelions”. Dandelions are more durable, they tend to be fine in most circumstances, but do not stand out as much and achieve rather average results.

In 2018, researchers found that people fall in three different groups: about 30 % of the sample population were highly sensitive “orchids”, another 30 % were low sensitive “dandelions”. There was a remaining group of people with a medium level of sensitivity, named as “tulips”, who are not as robust as dandelions, but not as delicate as orchids.

What does it mean when we say HSPs are more susceptible?

According to Jay Belsky, children differ in their general susceptibility to environmental influences. It means that more susceptible (sensitive) individuals are more affected by the negative effects of adverse experiences but also particularly responsive to the positive effects of supportive experiences. If they have a bad childhood, they are more likely than others to be depressed, anxious, or shy, and with good childhoods they can do not just as well as but even better than those who are not so sensitive. They also benefit more from psychotherapy and other kinds of psychosocial support than non-sensitive individuals.



Adapted from: Boyce, W. T. (2019). The Orchid and the Dandelion. New York: Knopf.

Are HSPs typically introverted?

Research shows that most HSPs (about 70 %) are introverts, whereas a minority are extroverts. Introversion and high sensitivity can look very similar. However, introversion is about how someone recharges their energy (alone or with others) and high sensitivity is about how deeply someone processes information. In the past, some authors tended to mix the two. As a result, high sensitivity is still often mistaken for introversion, so highly sensitive extroverts are frequently perceived incorrectly and are thus a group that needs to be especially understood.

Highly sensitive extroverts tend to think more about their experiences and need more time to process them, compared to other extroverts. According to Jacquelyn Strickland, an expert on highly sensitive extroverts, the difference between sensitive extroverts and sensitive introverts is quite small: extroverts prefer to share their thoughts and feelings out loud rather than write them, and socialize more than sensitive introverts. At the same time, they need more time alone to think and reflect, show greater empathy and responsiveness, and are more sensitive to details than non-sensitive extroverts.

In a new environment and among strangers, an extroverted sensitive child may come across as an introvert. Even sensitive extroverted children might not enjoy talking to strangers and authorities. However, when they get used to it, the extroverted component may suddenly emerge.

Is high sensitivity a disorder?

Educators are not responsible for diagnosing students—that important task belongs to trained psychologists. However, it is still valuable for teachers and school staff to be aware of the differences and overlaps between high sensitivity and psychological disorders. Understanding the basics can help educators support their students, respond with empathy and work more effectively with parents and professionals.

In accordance with some above-mentioned research, HSPs tend to be more neurotic (anxious, depressed etc.) than non-HSPs when raised in an adverse environment as children or influenced by it as adults. On the other hand, they improve more significantly when provided with support. In some studies, HSPs with a happy childhood even scored especially low in negative emotionality.

Research also shows that high sensitivity is a compound of several factors. Most often three factors are described: ease of excitation (EOE), low sensory threshold (LST) and aesthetic sensitivity (AES). EOE and LST are more related to traits involving negative affect and AES is more related to traits involving positive affect (like openness to gain information and learning, creativity). There is a good reason to distinguish high sensitivity from hypersensitivity. Hyper indicates that something is too much or over the norm. Hypersensitivity is expected to be a part of various disorders like allergy,

HIGH SENSITIVITY	HYPERSENSITIVITY
Describes a neutral temperament of the person.	Describes a deficit in the person.
Considered to be a fixed trait that should be accepted.	Often viewed as something that can be treated and alleviated.
Not related to hyposensitivity (only as a defence mechanism in overstimulation).	Related to hyposensitivity in other areas (typical for autism).
Not included in ICD or DSM, not relevant for public health system	Relevant for ICD and DSM (a possible symptom of ASD, anxiety, PTSD, borderline personality disorder etc.)

asthma, PTSD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), schizophrenia. Neurasthenia and idiosyncrasy might be related terms to hypersensitivity.

Basically, there are three possibilities of the relationship between sensitivity and disorders:

- ▶ Individuals are misconceived as HSPs but actually have a disorder.
- ▶ Individuals are misdiagnosed as having a disorder, but actually are HSPs.
- ▶ Individuals are HSPs and have an (un)related disorder.

Do HSPs typically have disorders like autism or ADHD?

According to research, high sensitivity is correlated with autism and ADHD. That does not imply that there is a causal link between high sensitivity and one of these conditions. On the contrary, this could simply mean we still cannot fully differentiate – especially between high sensitivity and autism, as many of their symptoms overlap.

The difference from autism spectrum disorder (ASD): HSPs tend to be sensitive to a large variety of sensory stimuli (temperature, noise level, smells, fabrics, pain, etc.) People with ASD are typically very sensitive to some stimuli while ignoring others. Unlike people with manifestations of autism, HSPs are very sensitive to social stimuli and are good at interacting with other people. They also have a rich imagination and diverse interests, again unlike people with ASD, whose focus is often quite narrow. Some HSPs may behave awkwardly in social situations, not because they don't know what to do, but because they sometimes have a low self-esteem and, even more often, because they don't like small talk, often considering it to be superficial and preferring conversation on a deeper level.

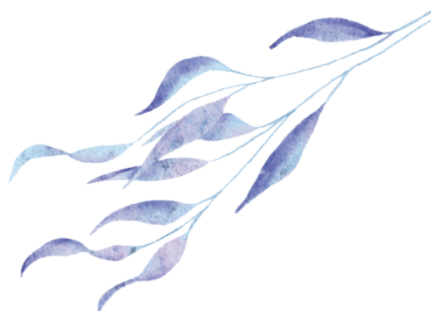
The difference from ADHD: When HSPs are overwhelmed, they may exhibit the typical symptoms of people with ADHD: inattention to detail, lack of attention, inability to organize their work, forgetfulness. But when HSPs are

calm, they do not exhibit these behaviours. They are also not prone to impulsivity and risk-taking, instead they tend to think before they do something (the “get it right first time” strategy) – again, especially if they are not overstimulated. If HSPs tend to do many things at once, it is more likely because they are inquisitive and excited about different possibilities (so called high-sensation seekers), and not because they have – like ADHD – poor executive skills.

Example

Emma notices the smallest details, like a change in her teacher's tone or a tiny scratch on her friend's hand. She gets overwhelmed in noisy places, covering her ears when sirens blare or crowds get too loud. When watching movies, she cries easily, deeply moved by characters' emotions. She is incredibly empathetic, often wishing to comfort her classmates before they even express sadness and pondering whether they would appreciate her interest. After a long day at school, she needs quiet time alone to recharge. Emma is highly sensitive.

Liam loves trains and can spend hours memorizing their schedules and engine models. He struggles with sudden changes, getting anxious if his routine is disrupted or if his favorite toy isn't in its usual place. Loud noises, like vacuum cleaners, make him cover his ears and rock back and forth to self-soothe. He enjoys playing alone, often lining up his toy trains rather than engaging in imaginative play with peers. While he doesn't always express emotions in typical ways, he shows love by sharing facts about trains with his family. Liam is autistic.



Are HSPs typically more gifted?

We cannot say HSPs are typically gifted since there are about 30 % of HSPs but only about 2 % of the gifted in the population.

But research says gifted people are typically highly sensitive.

This is in line with the fact that, according to research, high sensitivity also correlates with: enhanced emotional and social awareness and connection, creativity, higher independence of cultural context, openness to experience. Many of these, like openness to experience, correlate with intelligence themselves.

There could be another explanation: According to the theory of positive disintegration by Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski, the brain of gifted individuals has a more complex structure, takes longer to develop and is more susceptible to possible deviations. Dąbrowski speaks of overexcitability, which could be another name for high sensitivity or hypersensitivity. However, if a gifted child grows up in a supportive environment, these

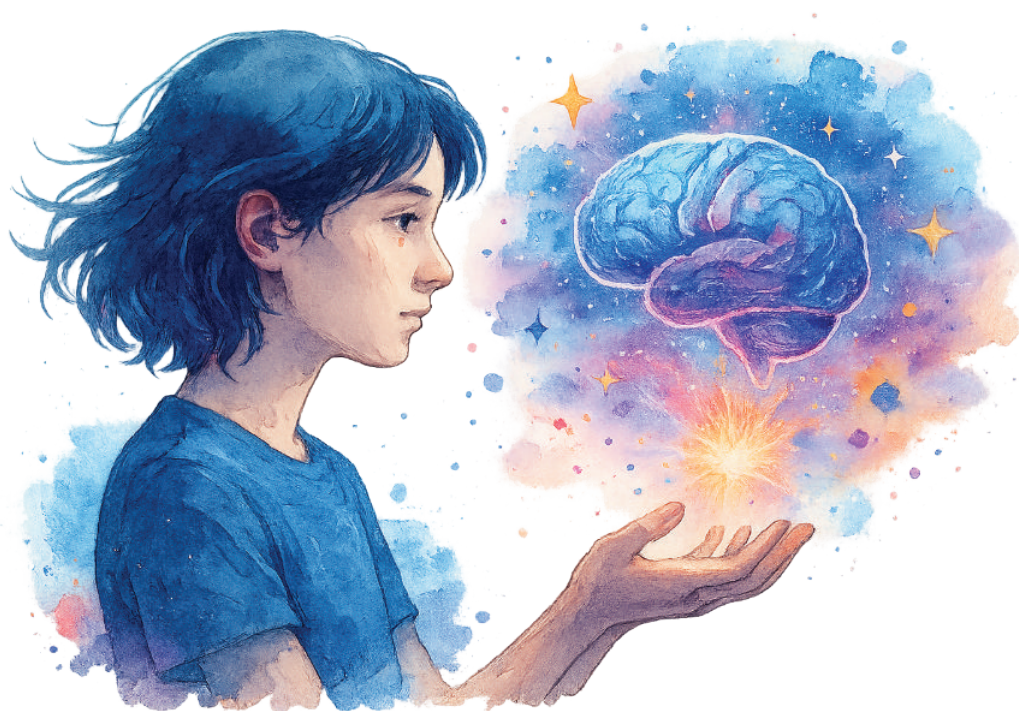
deviations can naturally balance out.

Nevertheless, Dąbrowski says the gifted child takes longer to achieve this balance than the child of average ability.

Are HSPs typically female?

Since high sensitivity is a temperament trait, there should be no differences in its expression in men and women on a biological level. It is true men appear to be less sensitive according to some research but such a result can be misleading. We assume men control the trait in themselves more strongly as our culture does not expect males to be so sensitive and sensitive males can be perceived as effeminate. So cultural norms may often discourage men from expressing sensitivity, which can lead to their shame, emotional suppression and mental health struggles. The same applies to boys.

It is also true that sensitivity can look different in men and women, or generally in all individuals. And last but not least, women can also be discouraged from expressing their sensitivity, with the same risk of mental health issues.



Highly sensitive children and teenagers



Are there tools to test high sensitivity in children?

Yes – there are now several validated tools available to help identify high sensitivity in children, including those designed specifically for use by educators. To support their work at school, we are honored to include in this Guide the Highly Sensitive Child in School scale, developed by Kähkönen, Lionetti, Castelli and Pluess (2024) and shared with kind permission from Sensitivity Research. This teacher-report tool is based on classroom observations and helps identify children who may process their environment more deeply, react strongly to emotions and become easily overwhelmed in overstimulating settings. It offers a strengths-based, easy-to-use format tailored for school contexts. We encourage primary school teachers and school staff to use this tool as a practical support for fostering inclusive, emotionally responsive classrooms. The full scale is available in the appendix and may be freely used for educational purposes only with proper attribution.

In addition, we have included in the appendix the classic parent-report questionnaire developed by Elaine Aron in 2002. While designed for use at home, this tool may offer educators valuable supplementary insights into a child's behavior outside the classroom.

Together, these scales provide a broader perspective on a child's sensitivity, helping both teachers and families work together to support highly sensitive children in a consistent and compassionate way.

What are HSCs like?

These are some typical characteristics of HSCs:

- ▶ are good listeners, perceive other people's moods very quickly, catch the slightest nuance and change in facial expressions;
- ▶ can recognize if other people's interest in them is sincere or if these people try to lie to them. It is therefore difficult for them to fake anything. Authenticity and truthfulness are very important for them and if they try to conform, they have an inner conflict within themselves;
- ▶ have respect and consideration for other people;
- ▶ have a strongly developed sense for all living and nonliving things, for people, animals and plants, and for nature in general;
- ▶ have a natural desire to improve the world. They have a strong desire for justice and are often critical of themselves and others;
- ▶ can keep secrets when confided in;
- ▶ are very good at perceiving details and can recognize minimal differences;
- ▶ have a refined sense of aesthetics and a great sense of order and cleanliness (which doesn't necessarily mean they are able to maintain it). They can perceive the full range of sounds, enjoy food, and safely discern whether something is spoiled or not;
- ▶ tend to be conscientious and responsible. They need what they do to be something valuable. That's why they often need

significantly more time for the tasks they are assigned. They have a very well-developed sensitivity to mistakes and a sense of duty;

- ▶ intuitively know what is right and wrong, what is true and false, how things work and also how parents, teachers, educators and other loved ones “work”;
- ▶ are curious and inquisitive if they overcome their initial fear. They have diverse interests, they have a thirst for knowledge and they like to learn (which does not always translate to enjoying the school environment). They can have novel ideas. If they are passionate about something, their enthusiasm knows no bounds. They like to think, to figure things out, to perceive, to question, to be interested in others;
- ▶ often have a sense of a certain type of beauty. If they are led to do so, they like art and culture but may prefer other fields where beauty reveals itself in logic or in an inner system. They often have a rich imagination and a well-developed subtlety of perception;
- ▶ can recall experiences from the distant past, and in considerable detail. They tend to be drawn into narratives which they remember in detail;
- ▶ are usually conservative – they don't like to take risks if they don't feel safe, as they don't want to fail;
- ▶ are no weaklings. Having to deal with one's highly sensitive nature on a daily basis builds strong willpower, perseverance and stamina. While these qualities are not manifest in every situation or stage of a child's life, they are basically present.

See appendix for more information and tips.

What are highly sensitive boys like?

Being a sensitive boy can be difficult.

According to societal values, men should be aggressive, resilient and in control of their emotions; but this is often the exact opposite of what characterizes a sensitive boy.

Sensitive boys often learn to suppress themselves to be accepted by their peers. Rejection can cause fear, anxiety and low self-esteem.

However, there are some sensitive boys who even like fighting games. There are also sensitive boys who like to discover and enjoy stimulating activities. But it is important to know that such boys can be more easily tired and overwhelmed by stimuli and need extra time to rest after these activities.

According to Aron, most sensitive boys show themselves as introverts at school, perhaps because society tells them that something is wrong with them. Therefore, they behave cautiously in a group and observe how others will treat them.

Example

Noah is an HSC. He often hides his emotions to avoid being teased, feels overwhelmed in noisy environments, and dislikes competition. His deep thinking often leads to overanalyzing, making decision-making difficult. With support and understanding, such as quiet breaks, encouragement in creative activities, and reframing sports participation, he can learn to embrace his sensitivity. When nurtured properly, Noah's thoughtfulness and perceptiveness can become his greatest strengths.



What are highly sensitive teenagers like?

Adolescence is the time in HSPs' lives when they are most inclined to new experiences and most resistant to overload (participation in big sporting events or concerts, loud music, crowds, attracting attention with unusual clothing, multi-tasking), but still get overloaded faster than others. This is a time when HSCs compare themselves to their peers very strongly, are easily vulnerable, self-critical, and want to be accepted as "normal". They may turn to drug or alcohol use to self-medicate anxiety or depression. The need to blend in with another person or group may lead them to engage in risky behaviour. By contrast, such behaviour is rare in supported HSCs, especially if they find a direction that gives them life purpose, e. g. pursuing their hobby. Some may also focus on performance and want to master the same amount of activities as their peers. When this is combined with perfectionism, which they also tend to exhibit, they may overexert themselves, become sick, or approach burnout, for example, before entrance exams.

Girls are also concerned about their appearance and can be very sensitive to any intimations about their body, which could lead to eating disorders.

Girls in particular may react strongly to relationships among classmates. If relationships are not good and girls are struggling, they may develop anxiety, depression or start to self-harm. However, they can make very good use of external support and can then begin to build resilience even in an environment that is not always ideal from their point of view.

Social networks also have a strong influence on girls, while computer games and other technologies are more likely to have a strong influence on boys.



What happens if we accept the child's high sensitivity?

The approach to high sensitivity decides whether it will be an advantage or a source of anxiety. Within a supportive environment, HSCs improve their functioning and reduce problematic behaviour. Support and acceptance don't automatically mean a miraculous solution to all problems, but they certainly provide a solid foundation for developing self-care in HSC (and, in general, in anyone).

The key is understanding that there is nothing wrong with being or not being an HSP – people are just different. Educators' job is to highlight the benefits and offer age-appropriate support and explanation. If HSCs do not understand what makes them different from the majority, they will struggle with feelings that there is something wrong with them (e. g. seeing they are not capable of all the things that others can do) and will deliberately or subconsciously avoid certain life situations or tasks (e. g. through physical or mental illness). Educators have to remember that they don't look for a CURE for high sensitivity. Instead, trying to "cure" the condition leads to more serious problems. On the contrary, sensitive children need to learn to work with the trait, and educators can help them adopt such an approach.

Life experience affects HSCs' mental wellbeing much more than other children's. That is why responsive and sensitive care that helps with stress reactions and with perceiving situations

as threatening is welcome. An environment where negative or intense emotions are repressed is not appropriate, either. The child may then hide his/her emotions in order to be accepted or not cause problems. Then he/she does not learn to manage such repressed emotions and they usually show up in adulthood when they are much more difficult to deal with. No feelings or preferences are wrong. What can be wrong is how people express them and what behaviour they lead to.

Educators can help students recognize and respect their own boundaries by encouraging them to acknowledge what supports their well-being and to keep out what may be harmful. This can ensure healthy self-esteem, appropriate discipline and a positive understanding of high sensitivity.

How often can we say a child is highly sensitive by simply observing the child?

Some children really do seem very sensitive at first sight. And if a teacher studies what high sensitivity as a personality trait is all about, he or she will recognize these traits in some children right away. For example, in children who are reluctant to join a group or a new activity in a new environment, who appear shy or dreamy, who avoid school trips and organised events, or who are often tired in class.

But in other children, often the more extroverted ones, their high sensitivity may not always be so clearly recognisable. Especially if they have good friends at school, they may like to be in the centre of attention.

It also seems that the younger the child, the more recognisable their high sensitivity is. Older children can mask their true self more often.

Some children also fall into the category of the so-called high sensation seekers. They like action or adrenaline fun, which we would not expect in such children. They go into action with enthusiasm and may not always recognize the moment when they are tired. Subsequently, they may experience severe

fatigue or even a state of exhaustion. They need to learn how to recognize even mild signs of fatigue.

It is also true younger children have less autonomy and depend more on adults, whereas older children with more autonomy are already more able to organise their time, so they are often not so limited by their high sensitivity.

Example

David is a HSC who enjoys team sports. He picks up on subtle shifts in mood on the field. Thanks to his intuition, he often can anticipate his teammates' reactions. He enjoys the fast-paced environment of the game and the energy of working towards a common goal. Even if he's sometimes on the bench, he cheers and supports his friends with enthusiasm. After intense training sessions and matches, however, he feels drained and needs to rest, often retreating to his room for some quiet time to recharge.

What are HSCs' typical needs?

Building on the image of highly sensitive children as orchids, psychotherapist Julie B. Rosenshein sees highly sensitive children as flowers that we adults help grow. At first it is not easy to estimate how much moisture the flower needs, so we sometimes overwater it. Before we get to know it well enough, we don't know if more or less sunlight is doing it better, and so its petals can sometimes burn. But if we take care with the sincere wish that the child does his/her best, he/she will hopefully forgive us these minor setbacks, and use his/her strength to awaken to his/her unique beauty even through obstacles. We can view our care as the consideration for the needs of the specific highly sensitive child. Let's review some needs HSCs typically have.

Need for perceived self-esteem

HSCs are very perceptive. Such a child cares immensely about doing things right. If he/she is exposed to any form of criticism, it is not

easy for them to cope with it. He/she has trouble dealing with being treated authoritatively or angrily. Actually, criticism is not necessary at all, HSCs very often show self-criticism, so a more subtle warning in private is usually enough.

Need for calm

HSCs experience the world around them differently – as bigger, noisier, more frightening, but also brighter, more colourful, more varied. It assaults all their senses more intensely. It is very challenging to be exposed to such sensations for a long time. This is why HSCs can very soon feel overstimulated, overloaded and exhausted. It is therefore important that they are given the opportunity to seek a quiet zone, to have the opportunity to retreat. Each child has his/her own way of calming down. Some children need to be left alone, others need to be in contact with their loved ones. They may read, or build a building block, write poems, or play the piano. They may also have an increased need for sleep. The basic requirement is to leave the space that might provoke expressions of irritation.



Need for caution

For a long time, HSCs were perceived as shy, socially awkward, anxious, timid. But they may actually be as extroverted, confident and socially adept as non-sensitive children. The reason they are often viewed differently is because they can stand cautiously by at times while other children throw themselves headlong into activities and games. Another reason might be their frequent tendency to avoid “superficial things” and to refuse to get involved in some activities other children enjoy.

Need for connection

Although HSCs need a quiet corner to retreat

to when the world is too intrusive, it is perfectly natural for them to be in touch with the outside world and to nurture it in their own way. They can care for animals and people to make them feel good. They feel very intensely about any injustice and try to make the world a better place in every possible way. On the one hand, this ability is their key strength, on the other hand, if they care too much, they get exhausted very quickly.

Need to create

A lot of HSCs are creative in some way, and it doesn't matter if it's in the arts, science, fashion, or whatever else. Their need to create comes from the need to do something meaningful, something that makes sense and enriches the world. It is also influenced by their natural tendency towards perfectionism, which comes from the need to do things well.

Need to find meaning

For HSCs who think deeply and feel intensely, finding meaning is very important. It is important for them to know how things work and what they are good for, what this or that means, so they ask deep questions. And when they get an answer, they think about it honestly. It's very important to them that their questions are taken seriously and that they feel they are being listened to. For this reason some HSCs may openly disagree with ideas or information presented by the teacher or school curriculum. Particularly in adolescence, such children often act as rebels. It is important for them to be able to share and discuss their opinions.

See appendix for more information and tips.

How can we categorize HSCs according to their typical needs?

Julie B. Rosenshein says that knowing what an HSC's most significant area of need is will greatly assist you in finding strategies that will enable you to cope with the child when they are not at ease.

Rosenshein has observed that most children can be classified into one of four categories of sensitivity when it comes to defining their

primary needs. But whereas some HSC are highly sensitive only to a particular type of stimulus, many are highly sensitive to a combination of factors. Actually, each child's personality is a mixture and combination of different qualities and needs which together form that unique personality. Becoming more familiar with these categories can help us understand what is going on inside a young sensitive being and where his/her current discomfort may possibly stem from.

Child sensitive to his/her environment and his/her physical body

- ▶ Is sensitive to sounds, noise, crowds, lighting and electronics.
- ▶ Hates tags on clothing, certain fabric textures and types of fabric, ribbing on socks and clothing.
- ▶ Needs everything "right now", no matter if it concerns the temperature outside or the type of fabric.
- ▶ Needs to feel comfortable in the clothes he/she wears and will struggle when it comes to certain types of shoes, collars on shirts, or seams; in terms of materials, he/she prefers velour, cotton; he/she likes to wear sweatpants; he/she prefers slip-on shoes to lace-ups.
- ▶ Scares easily, is very sensitive to pain and usually really dislikes doctor visits, and nail and hair clipping.
- ▶ Wants to change quickly whenever wearing something wet, dirty, spotty, or smudged.
- ▶ Notices subtle differences in smells and is upset by unpleasant odours.
- ▶ Tends to be an anxious eater, having exaggerated reactions to different types of food, combinations of food, or the way food smells and tastes. Often this shifts with age as children gradually incorporate new tastes and tolerate more smells.
- ▶ Is very sensitive to touch. On the one hand, he/she craves to be touched and need a firm hug, on the other hand, he/she does not want to be touched by anyone and is capable of shivering in terror just from being accidentally brushed against.
- ▶ Can have problems with balance, steering, tying laces and is prone to minor accidents.
- ▶ Needs lots of personal space without other

children touching him/her, taking his/her things or occupying his/her work space.

- ▶ Tends to be allergic to cleaning products, carpets, soaps, mould, etc.
- ▶ May be more likely to have ear infections, sinusitis and asthma.



Emotionally sensitive child

- ▶ Is very sensitive to mood changes in other people and is extremely empathetic.
- ▶ Perceives intensely and deeply and this can cause his/her to become overwhelmed, have frequent mood swings, crying fits, or break down.
- ▶ May have intense fits of rage and anger and be very stubborn.
- ▶ Is very sensitive to accusation, shaming, criticism, and conflict.
- ▶ Often prefers animals to people and has illusory friends to talk to.
- ▶ Tends to be artistic and creative; may be socially shy.
- ▶ Needs help with channelling emotions through talking, physical movement and reassurance from adults, and sometimes just needs to be given space so that the most intense emotions can come through or simply be felt by the child.
- ▶ Tends to question why he/she is so sensitive and what is wrong with him/her.
- ▶ Often tries to please adults and may prefer contact with older children rather than children of the same age.
- ▶ Is very intuitive, may know what others need without being told, is extremely compassionate towards people who are less fortunate and desires to save the world in some way.
- ▶ Tends to internalize and take personally things that do not concern him/her. He/she needs a lot of encouragement and positive reinforcement.
- ▶ Notices details and nuances in everything

including people's feelings, the environment, and also the overall energy of a place.

- ▶ Is reluctant to express himself/herself in new environments, with new people and in new places.
- ▶ Notices the dynamics in the family, the mood of his/her parents and the energy in the home. Recognizes the mood of the teacher and students and how their bad mood or strong emotions affect them.

Spiritually sensitive child

- ▶ May convey something important to others through touch, sight, or words.
- ▶ Is often very intuitive and able to tune into other people.
- ▶ Can be very stubborn, has tantrums, and has a hard time with injustice, lying, and manipulation. It needs to live authentically and meaningfully.
- ▶ Will tell you how things are, even if it is rude.
- ▶ May have problems with authority, boundaries, rules and traditional schooling.
- ▶ Insists that people tell him/her the truth and the reasons for what is happening. Does not tolerate inauthenticity.
- ▶ May have a special relationship with nature, minerals, and animals.
- ▶ Doesn't care about time, moves in his/her own space-time, finds it harder to shift from one task to another.
- ▶ Wants to change the status quo, the world, wants to break the old system, has high ideals.
- ▶ Has strong energy, is capable of doing multiple things at once, can be hyperactive, gets bored very easily.
- ▶ Does not want to go to bed because of night terrors and visions and especially a younger child often wants to sleep in a room together with his/her parents.
- ▶ May experience tantrums, mood swings, frequent meltdowns, be prone to depression and talk about his/her insignificance.
- ▶ In adolescence, may be prone to addictions.

Socially sensitive child or child sensitive to change

- ▶ Has difficulty moving from one task to another; has difficulty getting up in the morning and falling asleep at night.
- ▶ Prefers to be in his/her own world, much prefers to be alone, with animals, or playing PC games than with other people.
- ▶ May suffer from social anxiety and may have difficulty making and keeping friends
- ▶ In order to manage the school day, needs to keep an eye on his/her full schedule.
- ▶ Tries to avoid sleepovers with other children and various social events.
- ▶ May find it very difficult to go from home to school and home again from school
- ▶ Is affected by changes in the established rhythm of the day and also by the change of seasons.
- ▶ Tends to be reticent when meeting new people, and may not like school or class events, especially when they involve a lot of people, overnight stays away from home, multiple rooms, etc.
- ▶ Often has problems with school assemblies, and with joining other children at break time or feeling comfortable at lunch.



How can we categorize HSCs according to their typical behaviour?

There are as many types of high sensitivity as there are highly sensitive children. But to simplify, we can notice six main families of HSCs. None is better or preferable to another; there is no judgment or hierarchy. A child may also display some of the characteristics of several profiles, depending on the moment, the atmosphere and the people around.

Cautious child

- ▶ Stays away from groups, agitation and noise.
- ▶ Is calm, thoughtful and very observant
- ▶ Discreet and independent, speaks little, except when confiding in someone he/she trusts.
- ▶ Loves poetry and imagination.
- ▶ Is often very lucid about his/her loved ones and relationships.

Funny child

- ▶ Expressive and expansive, likes to be the center of attention and enjoys making his/her audience laugh.
- ▶ Has little tolerance for contradictions
- ▶ Demands a lot of attention from his/her parents.
- ▶ The fact that he/she is both highly sensitive and quickly overwhelmed by the abundance of his/her feelings can push him/her to be rather self-centered, sometimes clumsy, or seeming to lack delicacy.

Fragile child

- ▶ Scrupulous and very demanding of himself/herself, needs everything to be in order.
- ▶ Can be difficult to please, with a tendency to grumble.
- ▶ Is very sensitive to injustice or the suffering of others.
- ▶ Easily feels misunderstood or rejected. Yet he/she is sympathetic and touching and is appreciated by his/her friends, who easily confide in him/her.

Protective child

- ▶ His/her high sensitivity is combined with powerful vital energy.
- ▶ Devotes himself/herself body and soul to his/her best friend, or even to a child neglected by others.
- ▶ Zorro or a knight in a shining armour, will devote himself/herself to protect others.
- ▶ In the evening, exhausted, settles down and falls asleep quickly.

Rational child

- ▶ Is particularly determined, precise and meticulous.
- ▶ Seeks accuracy and asks lots of questions.
- ▶ Likes to talk to adults and may appear older than really is.
- ▶ Mentalizes a lot, focusing on the rational side of things, preferring abstraction and intellectualization.

Stressed child

- ▶ Gives the impression of being in frequent, even permanent opposition to other children or adults, whom he/she does not hesitate to contradict.
- ▶ May also behave incongruously.
- ▶ Not deliberately provocative: if he/she is, it's an exaggerated reaction to the environment. In reality, he/she is facing a very high level of stress: his/her regulatory capacities (hormonal, cerebral, emotional and rational) have been exceeded. This mainly concerns abused and traumatised children.



Education and support of highly sensitive students



What are HSCs like at school?

When HSCs start school attendance, as in any other new environment they often need considerable time to adjust. The overload of sensory stimuli and the confrontation with a performance-oriented environment can be extremely demanding. Such a child usually looks forward to school because he/she enjoys learning new things. At the same time, however, it tends to be a period that is indeed difficult for the child because it is a period full of change – unfamiliar faces, new responsibilities, new rules.

Because of his/her sensitive nature, he/she likes to withdraw into solitude. In a school environment, where this is not quite possible, this can take a form of daydreaming. But such time is the so-called “down time” that the HSC needs to process information and to be able to focus further on the learning process. This is why it can often appear that he/she is suffering from a perceptual disorder.

If the teachers are not familiar with the HSC's personality set, it is possible that they may make evaluative judgments such as “Are you looking out the window again?”, “Are you not paying attention again?” and do harm. So be tolerant and allow HSCs to integrate at their own pace. Be aware that they need some time just to observe what is happening in the classroom. Do not pay too much attention to them – this could slow down the process. Do not judge their behaviour as shyness or fear. Given enough space, HSCs become highly communicative, creative, insightful and lively learners. And a certain type of HSC usually has a very warm relationship with teachers. That is why he/she seeks their presence more often than other children. HSCs act as a litmus test in the classroom.

When the classroom collective is healthy and the social processes taking place within it are fair, such children also feel comfortable. But it is possible to discern unhealthy undercurrents through such children because they are very attentive to incipient problems and function as an emotional “sponge”.

HSCs – typical class dreamers – tend to become the target of not only criticism but also ridicule, which can at some stage escalate to bullying.

HSCs want to do well on their own. What's more, they want to do it especially well, so they torture themselves with high expectations and might ask repeatedly for feedback. Sometimes they are completely unaware of their perfectionism, and a teacher can help them set more realistic expectations of themselves. It's also important to know that praising HSCs at a stage when they are subjecting themselves to criticism is not good, as they will get the impression that you don't understand them seriously. It is advisable to be kind, yet honest.

On the other hand, criticism is taken very personally, even when it is not directed, and punishments given to the entire class may have a disproportionate effect on HSCs. If HSCs do not have enough space for regular rest and quiet at school, their overload and exhaustion may be so great that it manifests itself in a breakdown: they may cry, scream, kick, not speak, walk away from activities, use vulgar language, refuse food, refuse going to school, manifest themselves in restlessness, headaches and other somatic symptoms.

While at home HSCs usually feel safe and free to be themselves, it is often not the case at school. It is important for the teachers to know the reserved child they see in their classroom

is the same as the lively, eager, spontaneous, outgoing child at home.

At the same time HSCs tend to have a brilliant poker face. It may seem it affects them little at school, but it all may build up and come out at home. There are often tears and tantrums after a busy day with no signs of any issue while the child is at school. Other children tend to keep stress and exhaustion inside of them and then these conditions manifest themselves, for example, in headaches or physical fatigue. Some HSCs need help on a social level as they can be slow to make friends. However, one close cherished friend is often enough for the HSC, rather than a large group.

For the above reasons, some experts advise to consider delaying HSCs' primary schooling to the latest possible date. The idea behind this is that the older and more mature HSCs are when starting school, the easier it will be for them to adjust to their new environment. Later starting school has nothing to do with intelligence or skill, but is intended to help the child become more mature and balanced and therefore stronger.

Why is treating HSCs as a special needs group problematic?

Educators may worry that dealing with HSC means creating individualized plans, similar to special needs accommodations. However, while the intention behind this approach is often to provide the best possible support, categorizing HSCs as a special needs group is problematic and limits our broader understanding of their role in the classroom.

The approach of individualized solutions of accommodating HSCs assumes that their sensitivity is an inherent weakness that must be managed. But HSCs do not overreact; they perceive and process their environment deeply. Their sensory processing should be trusted and they should be helped to decode what they are feeling and why. Their heightened awareness highlights systemic issues, social dynamics, classroom atmospheres and instructional methods that

affect all students, not just themselves. Labelling their sensitivity as a problem isolates them and leads to exclusion rather than inclusion and improving classroom conditions. Instead of removing HSCs from challenging situations, educators should address root causes, benefiting everyone. Only if the issue cannot be resolved otherwise, individualized solutions should be considered.

Viewing HSCs as classroom barometers rather than problems allows teachers to refine learning spaces for all students. Recognizing HSCs' insights fosters a more thoughtful, inclusive environment rather than pushing responsibility solely onto them. Supporting HSCs means improving the classroom for everyone – not treating them as a separate group in need of special individualized interventions.



What could help educators deal with HSCs effectively?

ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT

- ▶ Educators should recognize and accept difference as a specific perception of reality. Ask how HSCs view situations and genuinely listen to them. They will know if you're sincere.
- ▶ Accept the children as they are – avoid both overestimating and underestimating them.
- ▶ High sensitivity is not something that can be „cured“ or eliminated; instead, HSCs need to learn to work with their sensitivity. Support them in understanding their uniqueness.
- ▶ Encourage self-acceptance and avoid

labelling sensitivity as a weakness.

- ▶ Foster a positive self-concept in HSCs by identifying and supporting their strengths through specific projects or roles.
- ▶ Avoid the “it’s just them” mentality. HSCs are not the only ones affected by negative environments; they simply notice and react to issues others may not be aware of. Their insights help create a better classroom for all.

BOUNDARIES AND RESPECT

- ▶ While understanding and support are necessary, set clear boundaries and demand respectful behaviour. Respecting feelings, opinions and needs does not always mean conforming – mutual respect is the key.
- ▶ Agree on reasonable boundaries and responsibilities for the child and the consequences if they are not followed in the future. Do not make decisions on your own during a heated situation. The goal is not just to resolve the situation, but to learn how to negotiate.
- ▶ Use sensitive communication techniques. Avoid phrases like “must”, “but”, or “problem”. Focus criticism on actions rather than the person to avoid damaging his/her self-esteem.

CLASS ORGANIZATION

- ▶ Incorporate creative activities such as art, crafts, creative writing, emotionally complex literature and problem-solving

activities. Nature-related projects (school flower beds, class pets) and peer assistance can also benefit HSCs.

- ▶ Use different forms of self-expression (art, writing, public speaking) that match their abilities and interests.
- ▶ Use a variety of assessment methods (oral presentations, creative tasks, essays, quizzes, no time pressure, etc.) to reduce nervousness and anxiety about assessment.
- ▶ Create a calming classroom environment with minimal noise, proper lighting and temperature, clean, orderly spaces, fresh air. Decorate with natural elements, like plants or pictures of nature. Even a computer monitor displaying nature motifs can have a calming effect.
- ▶ If possible, include physical activities like exercises involving joint compression – jump rope, trampolines or at least a quick body shake to release excess energy.

SUPPORT IN ACTIVITIES AND PARTICIPATION

- ▶ Give HSCs advance notice before calling on them. This helps them prepare mentally and reduces unnecessary stress.
- ▶ Encourage safe participation by starting with manageable tasks (e.g. pair-sharing or untimed assessment). If necessary, break down the required tasks into small steps.
- ▶ Avoid excluding HSCs from challenging activities, such as speaking in front of



the class. Instead, provide gradual exposure (e.g. practicing in pairs or small groups first).

- ▶ On the other hand, it is typical especially for older HSCs to pursue certain interests at a very advanced level, which is important for their self-esteem. Encourage them, therefore, to discover an area of interest that is close to their hearts, to develop in it and to find a room for self-realization.
- ▶ Provide them with enough challenges so the school does not bore them. HSCs are often bright children, but may look disinterested or lacking concentration if they hear the same thing again.
- ▶ Give them time to observe before participating – this is not disinterest but a way to process their environment. Impatience will only worsen the situation.
- ▶ Avoid labelling them as “shy” as this has negative connotations. Use phrases like, “They need more time to get used to new situations and people.”
- ▶ Don't tease or taunt HSCs, as they may interpret it as hostility.
- ▶ Set routines, rules, and rewards that build positive habits and relationships.
- ▶ Explain routine changes or upcoming events (a change in classroom rules, a change in teaching approach, substitute teachers, special trips or events, etc.) well in advance.
- ▶ While attention can make HSCs uncomfortable, don't ignore them – quiet children in supportive environments can thrive as leaders.

OVERWHELM MANAGEMENT

- ▶ Recognize signs of overstimulation, such as withdrawal, irritability or hyperactivity. Address these by acknowledging the children's feelings, offering calming strategies and communicating before they become overwhelmed.
- ▶ Have a discrete system for HSCs to signal when they need help or feel overstimulated (e.g., specific words or signals agreed

upon beforehand, emergency cards).

- ▶ If HSC is overwhelmed, allow time to calm down (usually 20 minutes). Avoid forcing communication during this time. Develop a “crisis plan” to manage such situations and agree on steps to prevent them in the future. Agree with HSCs' parents on a workable procedure. You may need to give clear, yet gentle instructions sometimes (pick up individual items and put them in a bag, set the chair out on the table, get a sweater, etc.).
- ▶ Introduce a “quiet reading corner”; have a jug of water available for a drink; allow HSCs to leave the classroom (alone or with an assistant).

SOCIAL INTEGRATION

- ▶ Encourage friendships and close relationships, which are invaluable to HSCs. Help match them with kind peers for activities or seating arrangements.
- ▶ Actively address bullying and cultivate a respectful classroom culture. HSCs often react in ways that other children do not understand, and so can be easy victims of teasing or bullying. Within the classroom, therefore, children need to be constantly reminded that each child is different and does not need to be judged or criticised for this.
- ▶ Support social skills development, such as maintaining eye contact during communication, to avoid misunderstanding (submissiveness, fear).
- ▶ Don't overdo it with activities and pressure to be sociable – high sensitivity will always make HSCs a little different from others.

SENSITIVE COMMUNICATION

- ▶ Communicate openly, directly and with respect. Give HSCs choices rather than orders. If you ask what their opinion is or what could be improved, they will do much better. Prefer partnering to top-down authority.
- ▶ Often it is not what you say that matters most, but how you say it. A harsh tone or a loud voice will often make HSCs



crumple inside and the message will be lost. A soft, calm approach works better with such children.

- ▶ Avoid assumptions – verify with questions instead that give the other person a sense of importance, help mutual understanding and respect, don't create a block.
- ▶ Avoid asking “why...?” because this sounds like a rebuke. For example, rather than “Why did you do that?” which can sound accusatory, use “Can you help me understand what happened?”.
- ▶ Use empathetic language to validate the children's emotions: “I understand that this made you upset.” or “You're feeling frustrated because of the schedule change – is that right?”
- ▶ Offer guidance and look for solutions collaboratively: “What can we do together to make this better?”
- ▶ Often just a sensitive reminder between the two of you is enough because HSCs usually have a very good understanding of the rules and guidelines and are also very critical of their mistakes. Give them time to find their own solutions.
- ▶ Consider setting up anonymous mailboxes – physical or digital – where students can share what's on their minds, express concerns, or ask for help without fear of judgment. Not every student feels comfortable approaching a teacher directly, especially when dealing with sensitive issues. At the same time, strive to build a reputation as a trustworthy, approachable adult. When students see you as someone who listens without criticism and genuinely cares, they're more likely to open up in person, too.

EMOTION REGULATION AND WELL-BEING

- ▶ Teach students to name and express their emotions. HSCs are highly perceptive and can sense non-verbal cues and emotions.
- ▶ Set boundaries for empathy and emotion regulation to avoid burnout.
- ▶ Incorporate mindfulness techniques, such as body scanning or mindful breathing, to help manage emotions and reduce stress. Examples include:
 - ♥ Five-finger breathing: Tracing fingers while breathing slowly.

- ♥ Shaking Tension Out: Gently shaking different parts of the body to release built-up tension.
- ♥ Grounding 5-4-3-2-1: Using the senses to ground and calm anxiety or panic.
- ♥ Use the PERMA model (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments) as a framework for fostering well-being.

- ▶ Emphasize the importance of living a balanced life and embracing mistakes as part of growth. Teach perfectionists the 50:50 rule: you can't please everyone all the time, so focus on doing what you think is best.
- ▶ Help HSCs prioritize tasks and decision-making by offering manageable options (not too many to avoid decision paralysis).

COOPERATION

- ▶ Collaborate closely with parents to gain insights into the children's strengths that may not be visible at school. Open, empathetic communication is essential for planning effective strategies together.
- ▶ Consult with other or former teachers to identify successful approaches to and strengths of the children.
- ▶ Consider whether it would be appropriate for a specific HSC to encourage mentoring by adults – or older students for older HSCs – to boost confidence and growth.
- ▶ By applying these strategies, educators can transform the classroom into a more inclusive, emotionally safe and supportive space – benefiting both HSCs and the entire learning community.

See appendix for more information and tips.



What is overwhelm and underwhelm in HSCs and how can educators recognize and respond to these experiences?

As HSCs process sensory, emotional and social information more deeply than others, it can make them especially vulnerable to both overwhelm and underwhelm, particularly in the classroom. These two conditions often look very similar – commonly accompanied by irritability, inner restlessness, fatigue or a vague sense that something is wrong – making them easy to confuse. However, it is important for children, and HSCs in particular, to learn to recognize and distinguish between the two. Overwhelm occurs when HSCs are exposed to more sensory, emotional or cognitive input than they can comfortably process – such as loud noises, bright lights, crowded spaces or emotionally charged situations – leading to stress, irritability, fatigue and withdrawal. In contrast, underwhelm arises when there is insufficient stimulation or challenge; for HSCs, particularly those who are intellectually curious or gifted, repetitive tasks or environments lacking depth and novelty can feel unsatisfying or demotivating, resulting in disengagement, daydreaming or frustration.

Interestingly, HSCs may experience both states simultaneously – for instance, feeling overwhelmed by the noise and pace of a classroom while also underwhelmed by the simplicity of the material being taught. This combination can leave students feeling out of sync and may manifest as anxiety, withdrawal, boredom or restlessness.

This is where the concept of flow becomes especially relevant. Flow refers to a mental state in which a person is fully absorbed and engaged in an activity, typically when the challenge of the task is well matched to the individual's skills. It occurs in the delicate space between boredom (where a task is too easy) and anxiety (where a task is too hard). For HSCs, who are more attuned to both overstimulation and lack of stimulation,

maintaining this flow balance is particularly crucial. A learning environment that fosters flow can help prevent both overwhelm and underwhelm by offering the right degree of stimulation and challenge.

Educators can support these students by carefully observing signs of both extremes, engaging in open dialogue about students' needs, and providing a flexible classroom environment. This might include quiet breaks or alternative workspaces for those who feel overstimulated, as well as enrichment activities, independent projects or more complex tasks for those who feel understimulated. Striving for a balanced level of challenge – where students are engaged but not overloaded – along with nurturing a classroom culture that respects different processing styles, can help HSCs not only cope but thrive academically and emotionally.



How can teachers help the whole class – including HSCs – understand and manage their emotions?

Supporting students in understanding and managing their emotions is crucial for their academic success, social relationships, and personal development. This guide provides practical strategies and tips for teachers to foster emotional intelligence and create a positive learning environment.

1. FOSTER A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

- Build trusting relationships: Establish strong connections with students to enhance their sense of belonging and security. This openness encourages them to discuss their emotions.
- Create a safe space: Encourage open discussions about feelings without judgment, reinforcing the idea that all emotions are valid and natural.

- ▶ Encourage emotional openness: Set the tone by modelling openness – share appropriate emotions and simple coping strategies in everyday moments. For example, you might say, “I’m feeling a little stressed today, so I’m taking a few deep breaths to stay focused.” This shows students that emotions are normal and manageable.
- ▶ When teachers speak openly (but professionally) about feelings, it creates a safe space where students feel more comfortable expressing their own emotions. It also helps them learn healthy ways to cope and builds trust in the classroom.

2. TEACH EMOTIONAL LITERACY

- ▶ Expand emotional vocabulary: Introduce precise emotional terms (e.g. frustrated vs. angry) to help students articulate their feelings more accurately. Use tools like an emotion wheel – a visual chart that organizes emotions into categories, often starting with basic feelings (like happy, sad, angry) and branching into more specific terms. It’s a great way to help students go beyond vague words like “fine” or “upset.” You can find printable emotion wheels online by searching “emotion wheel for students” or “feelings wheel PDF.” Many are free and designed specifically for classroom use.
- ▶ Connect to real-life scenarios: Link vocabulary to students’ experiences, such as exams or group projects, to make lessons relatable.
- ▶ Incorporate activities: Engage students in exercises like journaling, group discussions.



3. IMPLEMENT STRUCTURED PROGRAMS

- ▶ Adopt evidence-based curricula: Use programs like The Zones of Regulation to teach self-regulation and emotional control. This framework uses four color-coded “zones” to help students recognize how they feel and choose strategies to manage their emotions. It’s widely used in schools and works across age groups. Resources and training are available at www.zonesofregulation.com.
- ▶ Daily check-ins: Start the day by asking students how they feel, using scales, visual aids or simple prompts to help them identify their emotional state. This could be a number scale (e.g. 1–5), a mood chart with faces or colors, or a quick question like “What’s one word for how you’re feeling today?” These tools make it easier for students to check in with themselves and share, even if they don’t yet have a wide emotional vocabulary.

4. MODEL AND TEACH COPING STRATEGIES

- ▶ Mindfulness and relaxation techniques: Teach strategies like deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or stretching to help students manage stress.
- ▶ Encourage positive self-talk: Guide students to use affirming language to navigate challenging situations and build resilience.
- ▶ Provide calm-down areas: Designate safe spaces where students can pause and process their emotions.

5. ENCOURAGE REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

- ▶ Emotion journals: Encourage students to maintain journals where they reflect on their feelings, triggers and responses. Consider introducing specific formats like an “anger diary.”
- ▶ Routine emotional check-ins: Regularly check in with students to help them identify and express their current emotional state and provide support when needed.
- ▶ Role-playing scenarios: Use role-play to practice conflict resolution and emotional expression in a controlled, supportive environment.

6. PROMOTE PRESPECTIVE-TAKING

- ▶ Explore other views: Ask students questions like, “How do you think your classmate felt when that happened?” to foster empathy.
- ▶ Use literature and media: Discuss the emotions of characters in books, movies or current events, making connections to students’ lives.

7. MODEL CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION

- ▶ Use “I” statements: Demonstrate how to express feelings constructively (e.g. “I feel frustrated when...”).
- ▶ Avoid blame: Teach students to focus on their emotions rather than accusing others.

8. PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

- ▶ Acknowledge and validate: Reflect back what students say to show understanding (e. g. “It sounds like you’re feeling...”).
- ▶ Avoid minimizing: Avoid phrases like “You’ll be fine” or “It’s not a big deal.” Instead, empathize with the students’ perspective.

9. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

- ▶ Group activities: Facilitate group work that requires collaboration and communication, helping students navigate social dynamics and emotional responses.
- ▶ Positive reinforcement: Praise students for expressing emotions clearly or empathizing with others. Celebrate their progress in managing and discussing emotions effectively.

10. COLLABORATE WITH FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS

- ▶ Engage parents: Communicate with parents about the importance of emotional regulation and provide resources to support their children at home.
- ▶ Work with school counselors: Partner with mental health professionals to address individual student needs and implement school-wide emotional support programs.

students academically but also equips them with essential life skills for future success.

See appendix for more information, tips and activities.



By integrating these strategies into your teaching practice, you can foster a classroom culture where emotional understanding and regulation thrive. This not only benefits

Closing remarks



As an educator, you are often the emotional anchor of your classroom. The way you respond, the atmosphere you create and even the energy you bring into the room each day – these all shape how students experience learning, especially those who are highly sensitive.

This Guide is not just about understanding HSCs. It's also an invitation to pause and check in with yourself. Supporting sensitive children begins with your own well-being. You can't create a calm, emotionally safe environment for others if you don't feel grounded and supported yourself.

High sensitivity reminds us that emotions are contagious – and so is calm. When you model self-awareness, boundaries and kindness

toward yourself, you give your students permission to do the same. Self-care isn't a luxury in teaching – it's a necessity.

We hope this Guide has offered you not just tools for your students but also gentle encouragement to care for your own emotional needs. Take what resonates. Try what fits. And return to this resource whenever you need a reminder that even small changes – like slowing down, listening deeply or creating a quiet moment – can have a lasting impact.

Thank you for showing up with intention, for staying curious and for making space for sensitivity in your classroom – and in yourself.



Appendix



In this appendix, you'll find a variety of ready-made classroom activities designed to support your highly sensitive students, including mindfulness practices, grounding techniques, self-reflection exercises and emotion regulation strategies. Alongside these activities, you will also find a summary of the key characteristics of HSCs and their corresponding challenges, a guide on behavioral responses to unmet needs and how to approach them, and a concise manual on employing sensitive communication in overwhelming moments.

While these resources are especially helpful for highly sensitive students, they can benefit the entire class by promoting social-emotional learning and fostering empathy, emotional regulation, self-awareness and inclusion. You might encounter some initial reluctance, discomfort, or even giggles from students when introducing these practices – that's perfectly normal – but over time and with consistent use, they typically become more comfortable and start to truly benefit. We encourage you to remain patient and model openness; when students see you embracing these activities with a calm, positive attitude, they'll gradually follow your lead.

These tools are not only practical but also instrumental in creating a classroom environment where sensitivity is seen as a strength and emotional well-being is prioritized for all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

- ♥ Characteristics of HSCs and the corresponding challenges
- ♥ Behavioral responses to unmet needs in HSCs and how to approach the situation
- ♥ *Pause & Name the Feeling* Activity
- ♥ *Five-finger Breathing* Activity
- ♥ *Anchor Breathing with a Positive Word* Activity
- ♥ *Grounding through 5-4-3-2-1* Activity
- ♥ *Lightning Rod Bodyscan* Activity
- ♥ *Discover Your Inner Treasure* Activity
- ♥ *My Strength Lies in my Depth* Activity
- ♥ *Light of Compassion* Activity: How to Help without being overwhelmed
- ♥ *Am I a Sponge or a Tree?* Activity
- ♥ Sensitive Communication in Overwhelming Situations
- ♥ High Sensitivity in Children: Parent-report questionnaire
- ♥ Highly Sensitive Child in School: Questionnaire for Educators



CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN AND THE CORRESPONDING CHALLENGES

This list summarizes the positive characteristics common for HSCs in a safe environment and the corresponding possible challenges and negative manifestations in overwhelming environments or when needs are not met.

CHARACTERISTICS

Highly empathetic and compassionate,
emotionally intuitive, sensing others' needs

Deep thinkers and highly reflective

Creative and imaginative

Strong emotional responses

Strong sense of fairness and justice

Highly observant and aware of their
surroundings, attuned to subtle details and
nuances

CHALLENGES

Easily distressed by others' emotions, which leads to emotional
exhaustion, overwhelmed by others' emotions, which leads to mood
swings or shutting down

Overthinking, self-doubt or obsessing over small mistakes

Withdrawn, lost in fantasy or using daydreaming as an escape

Cry easily or get frustrated quickly

Easily frustrated or angry when they perceive unfairness or hypocrisy

Hypervigilant or overwhelmed by busy or chaotic environments,
overstimulated by too much sensory input (e.g., noise, bright
lights)



CHARACTERISTICS

Often very conscientious and responsible



Highly loyal to friends and loved ones



Strong moral values and integrity



High capacity for focus and perseverance on tasks



Sensitive to beauty, art, nature and sensory experiences



High-level problem-solving skills



Strong ability to learn through observation



CHALLENGES

Perfectionism, fear of failure or burnout due to setting unrealistic standards for themselves

Social anxiety, fear of rejection or isolation when relationships feel too intense

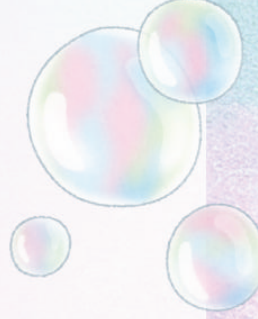
Rigid thinking or inflexibility when values are challenged

Difficulty switching tasks, becoming stuck or frustrated when unable to complete something perfectly

Overloaded by strong sensory experiences or bored or frustrated in environments lacking creativity or natural elements

Paralysis when facing complex decisions or feeling pressure to make the "right" choice

Fear of trying new things due to a deep awareness of potential risks or consequences





BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES TO UNMET NEEDS IN HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN AND HOW TO APPROACH THE SITUATION

This list summarizes how unmet needs can lead to challenging behaviors in highly sensitive children, providing insight into potential causes and strategies for support.

NEEDS

Emotional safety

Understanding and validation of feelings

Calm and quiet environments

Clear and predictable routines

Time to process and respond

Respect for personal boundaries

FORMS OF BEHAVIOUR WHEN NEEDS ARE NOT MET

Anxiety, withdrawal, irritability, emotional outbursts

Frustration, feeling misunderstood, shutting down emotionally

Overstimulation, hyperactivity, meltdowns, avoidance

Confusion, distress, difficulty transitioning between tasks

Overwhelm, hesitation to engage, withdrawal from participation

Resistance, defensiveness, aggressive or defiant behavior

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORT

Acknowledge their feelings without judgement
Set boundaries of empathy
Encourage self-acceptance

Apply reflective listening
Model calmness and patience
Name the emotion

Minimize sensory overload
Provide a quiet space

Provide consistent routines
Prepare for transitions
Break tasks into manageable steps

Provide necessary time and space
Encourage self-advocacy
Provide choices and flexibility





NEEDS

FORMS OF BEHAVIOUR WHEN NEEDS ARE NOT MET

Opportunities for deep, focused activities and being creative

Boredom, distraction, daydreaming, lack of focus

Positive and constructive feedback

Low self-esteem, fear of failure, becoming overly self-critical

Physical comfort (appropriate lighting, sound)

Restlessness, inability to concentrate, headaches, increased sensitivity

Opportunities for self-regulation

Heightened stress, emotional outbursts, difficulty calming down

Empathy and support from peers and adults

Feeling isolated, rejected or alienated, resulting in social withdrawal

Meaning and fairness

Confusion, disinterest, frustration, disillusionment, withdrawal, distrust in authorities, loss of motivation

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORT

Encourage expression through creativity

Use positive reinforcement

Praise efforts in emotional control

Encourage problem-solving

Implement movement or relaxation activities

Implement sensory breaks

Allow scheduled breaks

Teach emotional regulation techniques like mindfulness or breathing exercises

Help peers understand high sensitivity

Foster empathy in the classroom and teach emotional intelligence

Collaborate with parents on consistent strategies

Be consistent, transparent and fair with rules and expectations, make activities meaningful and impactful



"PAUSE & NAME THE FEELING" ACTIVITY

Purpose: Help students recognize and regulate emotions in a constructive way.

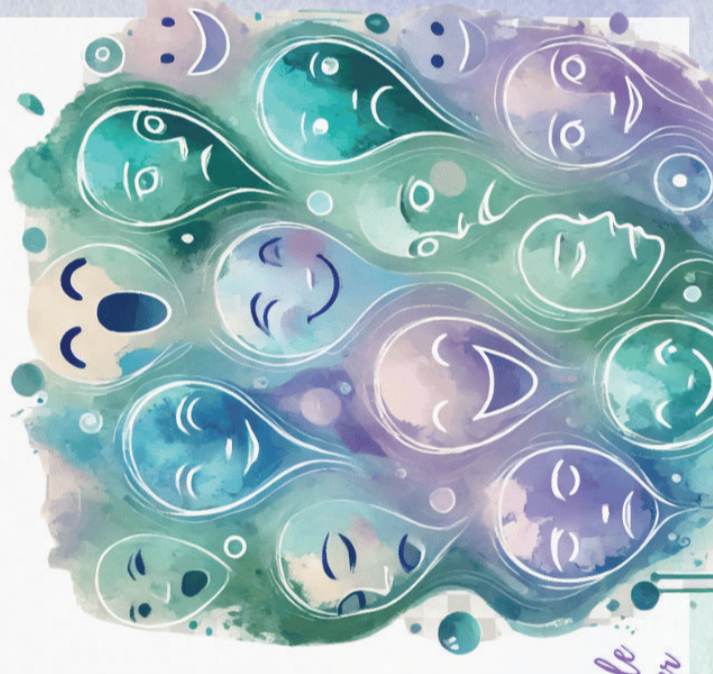
Duration: 3-5 minutes

How to Implement:

1. **Set the Tone: Begin with a brief explanation:** "Let's take a moment to check in with how we're feeling. Recognizing our emotions can help us feel calmer and more focused."
2. **Guide the Activity:**
 - o Invite students to close their eyes (optional) and take three deep breaths.
 - o Ask them to silently identify and "name" what they're feeling right now (e.g., happy, frustrated, anxious)
3. **Optional Sharing:** Create a space for volunteers to share their feelings using a sentence stem like, "Right now, I feel ___ because ___." You can also provide emotion cards (e.g. <https://www.nataliamydlova.com>) to help them express how they feel. Ensure sharing is really optional and respectful.
4. **Close the Activity:** End by asking everyone to take one more deep breath and set an intention for the rest of the class.

Tips for Teachers:

- Model emotional awareness by naming your own feelings during this exercise. Regular practice can help sensitive teens feel understood and develop self-awareness.
- Emotional weather version: You can also encourage expressing emotions metaphorically, promoting self-awareness in a non-intimidating way as weather that changes during the day. (Sunny = Happy or calm, Stormy = Angry or frustrated, Cloudy = Sad or unsure, Windy = Nervous or restless, Rainbow = Grateful or hopeful)
- Offer using sticky notes as a nonverbal check-in tool for sensitive students who may struggle to articulate their emotions directly.



KEEP IT LIGHT AND JUDGMENT-FREE!

"FIVE-FINGER BREATHING" ACTIVITY

Purpose: Use touch and breath to regulate emotions and bring focus to the present moment. Ideal for calming the nervous system.

Duration: 2-3 minutes

How to Implement:

1.Explain the Technique: Say, "We're going to use our hand and breath together to help us feel calm and focused. It's like drawing a map of your hand with your breath."

2.Guide the Tracing:

- Hold one hand out, fingers spread wide. Use the index finger of the other hand to start tracing from the base of the thumb.
- As you trace up the side of the thumb, breathe in slowly through your nose.
- As you trace down the other side, breathe out slowly through your mouth or nose.
- Continue this pattern for each finger: breathe in as you trace up, and breathe out as you trace down.

3.Complete the Activity: Once they finish tracing all five fingers, encourage students to notice how their body feels. Optionally, they can trace their hand again if they want more calming breaths.

4.Close the Exercise: End by saying, "This is something you can do anywhere, anytime you need to feel calm or focused—your hand is always with you!"

Tip for Teachers:

This activity is especially helpful for highly sensitive children because it combines tactile engagement, controlled breathing, and focused attention, creating a sense of safety and calm. Encourage students to practice it on their own, too!



"ANCHOR BREATHING WITH A POSITIVE WORD" ACTIVITY

Purpose: Teach students to calm their emotions and re-center themselves using focused breathing paired with positive affirmations.

Duration: 3-4 minutes

How to Implement:

1.Explain the Activity: Say, "When we're feeling overwhelmed, taking a moment to focus on our breathing and a positive thought can help us reset."

2.Guide the Breathing:

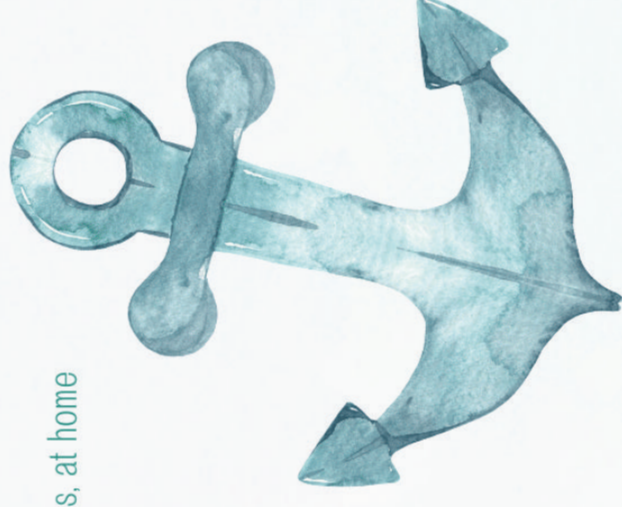
- Ask students to sit comfortably and close their eyes (if they're fine with it)
- Have them take a slow breath in through their nose for 4 counts, hold it for 2 counts, and exhale gently through their mouth for 6 counts. Repeat 3 times.

3.Add a Positive Word: After the third breath, ask them to silently think of a positive or calming word (e.g., peace, strength, calm) As they breathe in, they can say the word in their mind. As they breathe out, they can imagine releasing tension.

4.Wrap Up: End by saying, "You can use this anytime you need a quick moment of calm - whether in class, at home or anywhere else."

Tip for Teachers:

Practice this technique yourself to model it effectively. It's a quick, portable tool that's especially helpful for sensitive students managing stress or anxiety.



"GROUNDING THROUGH 5-4-3-2-1" ACTIVITY

Purpose: Help students reconnect with their bodies and the present moment by engaging their senses, a practical tool for reducing stress or emotional overwhelm.

Duration: 4-5 minutes

How to Implement:

1. Set the Context: Briefly explain, "When we feel overwhelmed, focusing on our senses can bring us back to the present moment. Let's try a quick grounding exercise together."

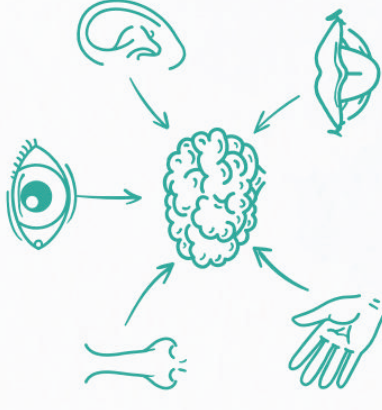
2. Guide the Steps:

- 5: Look around and name five things you can see.
- 4: Identify four things you can touch. For example, your desk, clothes or the floor.
- 3: Listen for three things you can hear. It could be the hum of a fan or distant chatter.
- 2: Notice two things you can smell. If you can't identify a smell, imagine one you like.
- 1: Pay attention to one thing you can taste, like the lingering taste of a snack or imagining a favorite flavor.

3. Reflect: Conclude with a few deep breaths and a brief discussion: "How did that feel? This is something you can do anytime you feel overwhelmed."

Tip for Teachers:

This technique is especially helpful for highly sensitive students, as it directs their heightened sensory awareness toward grounding and calming their emotions. You can adapt it by focusing on fewer senses if time is limited.



"LIGHTNING ROD" BODY-SCAN ACTIVITY

Purpose: Enhance students' awareness of their bodies and breathing, promoting relaxation and mindfulness. This practice can help reduce stress and improve concentration, making it particularly beneficial before exams or stressful situations.

Duration: Approx. 15-20 minutes.

How to implement:

1. **Guide the Steps slowly, letting students experience the moment in silence after each step.**

- **Get Comfortable:** Sit comfortably and close your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so. Focus on your breath. Inhale slowly through your nose into your diaphragm, then exhale even more slowly, as if inflating a large bubble. Observe your breath; if your mind wanders, gently bring it back to your breathing.
- **Focus on Left Leg:** Direct your attention solely to your left leg—focusing on the toes, heel, instep and foot. Notice the sensation of your foot touching the floor. How does it feel to wear shoes? Explore these sensations with patience, kindness and curiosity.
- **Left Ankle Awareness:** Shift focus to your left ankle. Are there any physical sensations present? If you feel nothing, that's perfectly fine.
- **Left Leg Awareness:** Now pay attention to your left leg from the foot to the knee, thigh, upper leg and hip. Note whether it feels tense or relaxed, light or heavy.
- **Focus on Right Leg:** Shift your attention to your right leg—focusing on the toes, heel, instep and foot. Observe the sensations.
- **Right Ankle Awareness:** Move to your right ankle. Do you notice any physical sensations? Is there pain or discomfort? It's okay if you don't feel anything.
- **Right Leg Awareness:** Now focus on your right leg from the foot to the knee, thigh, upper leg and hip. Notice if it feels tense or relaxed, light or heavy.



- **Both Legs Awareness:** Concentrate on both legs from the toes up to the hips. Anchor your awareness in the lower half of your body and listen attentively. Remain still, breathe deeply, and send kind thoughts to your feet. Express gratitude for all the work they do for you.
- **Breath Awareness:** Notice your breath again. Feel its presence in your consciousness. Allow yourself to be refreshed and nourished by each inhale and let go during each exhale.
- **Open Your Eyes:** Slowly open your eyes at your own pace and return your attention to the room.
- **Shake Off Tension:** Finally, stand up and shake off any accumulated tension from your body.

2. Reflect:

- What effects does this exercise have on the body and mind?
- This process can be useful in stressful situations (even while walking) such as before a challenging exam; it helps reduce stress levels and fosters a sense of calmness and confidence.
- This exercise teaches us to observe our internal state just as we observe our surroundings. Allow space for restless thoughts; respect them and show interest in them. To calm the mind, it is crucial not to suppress our experiences. Focusing on the lower body – especially the feet – helps in achieving tranquility.

Tips for Teachers:

- Remind students that it's normal for thoughts to wander; gently redirecting focus is part of the practice.
- Foster an environment of openness where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences afterward if they wish.
- Consider integrating this activity into regular classroom routines for ongoing benefits in mindfulness and stress management.



"DISCOVER YOUR INNER TREASURE" ACTIVITY

Purpose: Help students reflect on their unique qualities, abilities and experiences, and encourage them to value and share their strengths with others.

Duration: Approx. 20-30 minutes

How to implement:

1. Preparation:

- Print the activity instructions (see below) or project them in class.
- Ensure students have paper and drawing/writing materials (pens, markers, colored pencils)

2. Introduction

- Explain the goal: "We all have inner treasures – qualities that make us special. This activity will help you discover and appreciate your own."
- Briefly walk students through the steps of the activity.

3. Distribute Instructions:

- Choose printed handouts (recommended for quiet reflection) or digital projection (if using a projector or smartboard)

Student Instructions:

1. Draw a treasure chest on a piece of paper. It can be open or closed – it's up to you!
2. Inside the chest, write or draw 5 things that make you special. (What sets you apart from most other people) These can be qualities, abilities, experiences or anything you value about yourself. You can represent each one as a gem, gold coin, ancient scroll or any other treasure.



3. Next to the chest, answer these two questions:

- How does my inner treasure help me in life?
- How can I share my treasure with others to make the world a better place?

Bonus: Draw the key that unlocks the chest. What is the key? (e.g. courage, friendship, self-confidence, experience...)

4. Reflection & Sharing:

- Invite students to voluntarily share 1-2 treasures in pairs or with the group.
- Discuss how understanding one's strengths can build confidence and support others.
- Reflect on the "key" - what helps unlock or activate their strengths?

5. Summary: We all have a treasure inside - a set of qualities and abilities that make us unique. Learn to discover it and use it!

Tips for Teachers:

- Display the finished treasure chests in class (with permission)
- Link the discussion to themes like cultural adaptation, resilience and inclusion.



"MY STRENGTH LIES IN MY DEPTH" ACTIVITY

Purpose: Help students recognize, value and express their sensitivity as a personal strength, and to encourage thoughtful reflection on how sensitivity positively impacts their lives and relationships.

Duration: Approx. 20-30 minutes

How to Implement:

1. Preparation:

- Print activity instructions (below)or project them in class.
- Provide paper and drawing/writing materials (pens, markers, colored pencils)

2. Introduction

- Explain clearly and positively: "Sensitivity is a valuable and powerful trait. In this activity, you'll reflect on how your sensitivity enriches your life, helps you connect with others and guides your actions."
- Briefly outline the activity steps.

3. Distribute Instructions:

- Choose one printed handouts (recommended for personal reflection)or digital projection (projector or smartboard)

Student Instructions:

1. Draw a large body of water - it could be an ocean, lake, or river.



2. Below the water's surface, write what lies beneath your sensitivity:

- What abilities does your sensitivity give you?
- How does it help you in daily life?
- How does it connect you with others? (Examples: Empathy, perceptiveness, creativity, deep thinking, strong emotions...)

3. Above the water's surface, write how your sensitivity shows up in your behavior and actions. (Examples: I help others, notice details, sense the mood of people around me...)

4. On the shore, write what helps you accept and protect your sensitivity. (Examples: Alone time, journaling, music, nature walks, conversations with understanding people...)

5. In the sky, write how you celebrate your sensitivity. (Examples: Expressing myself through art, nurturing relationships, noticing beauty around me...)

Bonus: Add a boat or lighthouse to your drawing – a symbol that protects you and helps you navigate the world.

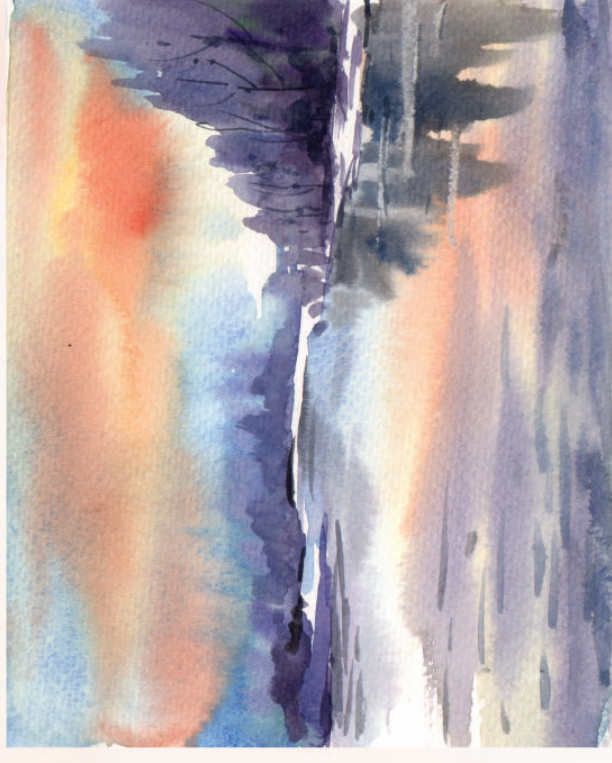
Summary: Sensitivity is like deep water – holding incredible richness and strength within. Learn to embrace, protect and celebrate it!

Reflection & Sharing:

- Invite students to voluntarily share insights about their sensitivity in pairs or as a group.
- Discuss why accepting and protecting our sensitive sides is essential and beneficial.

Tips for teachers:

- Exhibit students' artwork (with permission)
- Connect the activity with broader themes such as emotional intelligence, empathy, creativity, and interpersonal communication skills.



"LIGHT OF COMPASSION" ACTIVITY - HOW TO HELP WITHOUT BEING OVERWHELMED

Purpose: Guide students in exploring healthy, sustainable ways to express compassion and empathy without losing their own emotional balance. The activity encourages boundaries, self-awareness and reflective thinking.

Duration: Approx. 20-30 minutes

How to Implement:

1. **Preparation:**
 - Print the student instructions (see below)or project them in class.
 - Ensure students have paper and drawing/writing materials (pens, colored pencils, markers)

2. **Introduction:**

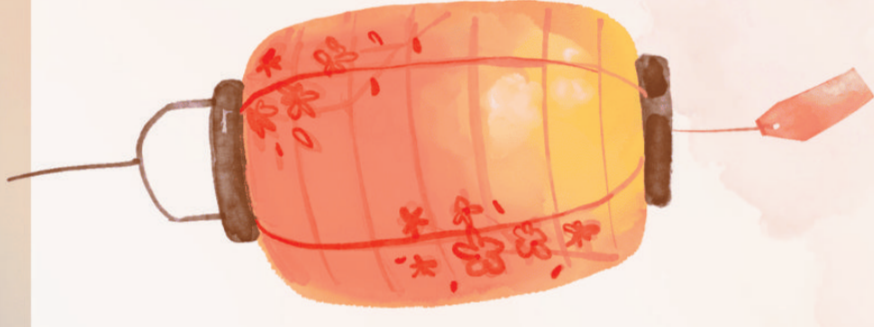
- Introduce the topic: "Compassion is powerful, but we can only help others well when we take care of ourselves too. Today, you will reflect on how to show empathy while maintaining healthy boundaries."
- Briefly go over the activity steps.

3. **Distribute Instructions:**

- Choose between printed handouts (recommended for personal reflection) or projected version (if using smartboard or projector)

Student Instructions:

1. **Draw a lantern or candle.**
 - The light symbolizes your compassion and empathy.



2. Next to the lantern, answer the following question:

- Do you think compassionate people have a duty to take away others' pain?
- Why or why not?
- Reflect on where the line is between helping and taking on someone else's problems.

3. Inside the flame, write three ways you naturally show compassion and empathy. (Examples: I listen to others, I offer encouragement, I support people hard times...)

4. On the glass of the lantern, write three ways you can show support without taking on others' pain. (Examples: I maintain healthy boundaries, I offer practical help instead of absorbing emotions, I motivate instead of rescuing...)

5. Finally, answer the question:

- What do I do to protect and preserve my own light while helping others?

Summary:

Compassion isn't about carrying others' pain but about being a light that helps them find their way. Learn how to shine without burning out.

Reflection & Sharing:

- Invite students to reflect or share one insight in pairs or small groups.
- Encourage discussion on how empathy and self-care can work together.

Tips for Teachers:

- Create a classroom "lantern wall" where students (anonymously or by name)display their drawings.
- Connect to broader themes such as emotional intelligence, boundaries, burnout prevention or peer support.



"AM I A SPONGE OR A TREE" ACTIVITY

Purpose: Help students recognize the tendency to absorb others' emotions and to introduce grounding strategies that support emotional boundaries and inner stability.

Duration: Approx. 25-30 minutes



How to Implement:

1. Preparation:

- Print the student instructions (below) or project them.
- Provide paper and drawing materials (pens, colored pencils, markers)

2. Introduction:

- Introduce the metaphor: "Highly sensitive people often absorb the emotions of others without realizing it—like sponges. But what if we could be more like trees—grounded, rooted and steady, even when others around us are stressed or emotional?"
- Explain that this activity helps students become aware of emotional boundaries and teaches practical steps to stay centered.

3. Distribute Instructions:

- Choose between printed handouts (recommended) and digital projection (smartboard/projector)

Student Instructions:

1. Draw a tree with deep roots and a wide crown.
 - The roots represent your inner stable self.
 - The crown represents outside influences - other people's emotions and energy.
2. Below the tree, write 5 examples of how you tend to absorb other people's emotions and stress. (Examples: When someone is sad, I feel down too, even if I have no reason. When someone is stressed, I get a headache...)

3. Write a new approach for staying balanced when others are stressed:

- I remind myself: I am a tree, not a sponge.
- I ask: Is this emotion mine, or someone else's?
- I imagine my roots going deep into the ground, drawing strength and calm.
- With every breath in, I absorb energy and stability. With every breath out, I release stress that isn't mine.
- I create a protective shield around me that lets in only what is healthy for me.
- I return to the situation feeling grounded and focused, like a tree in the wind.

Bonus: What other techniques help me protect myself from absorbing others' emotions? (Examples: Visualization, meditation, grounding exercises, physical activity, journaling...)

Summary: Be a tree, not a sponge. Absorb only what nourishes you and stay strong in your center.

Reflection & Sharing:

- Invite students to share personal insights or one helpful technique.
- Encourage discussion on emotional awareness and boundary-setting.


Tips for Teachers:

- Create a "forest of trees" classroom display showing student drawings.
- Link this activity to broader topics such as self-regulation, empathy vs. emotional enmeshment and stress management.



SENSITIVE COMMUNICATION IN OVERWHELMING MOMENTS

When a child is overwhelmed, how we communicate can either calm or escalate the situation. Instead of rushing to fix things, the key is to listen, validate and guide children toward their own solutions. These simple steps help create a safe space for big emotions—without adding to the storm.

- 
1. Let them calm down first. No wisdom comes from a stormy mind.
 2. Listen first, understand the situation. Don't judge, don't impose your own interpretation, don't rush in with solutions yet - just be there and empathize.
 3. Confirm that you understand. Try something like: "Am I getting this right that you're upset because of the schedule change?" (Clarification prevents unnecessary emotional detours.)
 4. Name their emotions. "I understand that you're feeling frustrated." Simple, but powerful because feeling seen is the first step to feeling better.
 5. Help them find a solution through open-ended questions. Encourage reflection and cooperation: "When you feel this way, I feel..., so what can we do about it together?" (No lectures, no dictating - just co-creating solutions.)



The art of sensitive communication isn't about having all the answers - it's about holding space for emotions and guiding towards resolution without force.



HIGH SENSITIVITY IN CHILDREN: PARENT-REPORT QUESTIONNAIRE



This questionnaire is intended for parents to complete at home. It captures a child's behaviour outside of school and can offer educators valuable additional information to better understand their student's needs.

Instructions:

Please answer each question as best as you can. Check the 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.

My child ...

1. Startles easily.
2. Complains about scratchy clothing, seams in socks, or labels against his/her skin.
3. Doesn't usually enjoy big surprises.
4. Learns better from a gentle correction than strong punishment.
5. Seems to read my mind.
6. Uses big words for his/her age.
7. Notices the slightest unusual odour.
8. Has a clever sense of humour.
9. Seems very intuitive.
10. Is hard to get to sleep after an exciting day.
11. Doesn't do well with big changes.
12. Wants to change clothes if wet or sandy.
13. Asks lots of questions.
14. Is a perfectionist.
15. Notices the distress of others.
16. Prefers quiet play.

17. Asks deep, thought-provoking questions.

18. Is very sensitive to pain.

19. Is bothered by noisy places.

20. Notices subtleties (something that's been moved, a change in a person's appearance, etc.)

21. Considers if it is safe before climbing high.

22. Performs best when strangers aren't present.

23. Feels things deeply.

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.

This self-test is not meant to diagnose or exclude the diagnosis of any condition.

The text was published in the book *The Highly Sensitive Child* by Elaine Aron.
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Highly Sensitive Child in School

Instructions: Please answer each question according to how much the statement applies to the student. If a question is not relevant, please leave it out and move on. The test is based on assessment of a student's typical behaviour in the classroom and does not involve the child's participation. Please maintain confidentiality by using a student code.

Student: _____

	Not at all			Moderately			Extreme
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Is thinking deeply about things When discussing big questions or important topics during class, or when listening to instructions for an activity, the child appears to think more deeply about them than other children. This sometimes means the child requires more time to provide an answer, as they are still thinking about the question and considering different angles and aspects. Another indication of this is that the child tends to ask thoughtful questions about the topic, even when the class discussion has moved on to a new subject.							
Appears to feel things deeply The child generally seems to experience emotions deeply, whether they are emotions of happiness or sadness. In some cases, the child may not express their emotions strongly, but subtle signs, such as their facial expressions, show that they are deeply moved. Regarding behaviour, the child may become quiet or withdraw when upset, or beam with pride and sit up straight when receiving praise. In addition, the child will remember and talk about a specific situation and experience that moved them emotionally even after some time has passed.							
Gets easily distressed when other children are arguing The child strongly dislikes it when other children are fighting, screaming or arguing with each other. In such situations, the child becomes easily upset, usually interrupts their activity in order to alert a teacher or other children or leaves the area where the conflict is taking place. Often, the child will mention the conflict even after it is over, which shows they have been thinking about it.							
Easily notices how others are feeling The child seems to be particularly good at recognizing when other people (e.g. a child or the teacher) are sad, happy or angry, even when they don't display overt emotions. For example, the child notices if another child is disappointed, even when they do not show the disappointment through crying or other obvious behaviours.							
Is very sensitive to injustice The child becomes easily upset when experiencing or witnessing injustice. If an injustice occurs in the classroom (e.g. a child is making fun of another, a child gets wrongly told off by the teacher) or during discussion of ethical issues, the child tends to show deep concern that justice will be restored (e.g. those that mistreated another will be punished, or a teacher apologises for wrongly telling a child off).							
Tries hard to avoid mistakes or forgetting things The child seems to try hard to avoid making errors or forgetting anything (e.g. a book or swimming costume). For example, the child puts a lot of effort into getting things right by re-reading something they have written to make sure there are no spelling mistakes. If the child makes an error or forgets something you can easily tell the child is upset by their emotional response such as disappointment or embarrassment.							
Add up the Total Score							
Now calculate an average score of the questions answered							
Total Score / ____ = ____							

Results: > 5 the student has a tendency towards high sensitivity.
 3.5 to 5 the student has a tendency towards medium sensitivity.
 < 3.5 the student has a tendency towards low sensitivity.

Please answer the additional questions over the page.

Sensitivity
research.com

Overwhelm questions

To identify if a student is experiencing challenges in the classroom.

	Not at all			Moderately			Extremely
Struggles to focus in loud and chaotic situations When the environment is chaotic or loud, the child seems to struggle to concentrate on a task, which may result in a performance that is worse than it would otherwise be. Although this is the case for most children, it is especially true for this child.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Needs some quiet time after an exciting activity The child seems to need some quiet time after engaging in an exciting activity, such as playing with others or participating in group work at school. They may prefer spending time alone reading a book, drawing, or quietly playing with a close friend.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Feels easily overwhelmed when under pressure The child appears distressed and tense when required to do many things in a short time or when being watched by someone else while performing a task.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

The additional questions identify whether your student is experiencing challenges in the school environment that are common among highly sensitive children. A higher-than-average score (5 or above) on any of the questions indicates that the student might benefit from further investigation and support in this area. Please go to the website sensitivityresearch.com for more guidance.

Notes/Actions:

Reference: Kähkönen, J. E., Lionetti, F., Castelli, L., & Pluess, M. (2024, December 9). Assessing Environmental Sensitivity in the Primary School Context: The Development and Validation of the Highly Sensitive Child in School Scale (HSC – School). <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/mhrvz>
NB. This is a preprint, the reference will be updated upon publication.

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