



When it not just ‘being shy’

Does it seem like your child takes a bit longer to adjust to change? Are they very aware of their surroundings, picking up on the smallest nuances? Are they often in a flood of tears, extremely fussy or overly reactive to things such as smell, temperature, hunger, noise or light? Does it feel like other children are just able to dive straight into situations whereas your child needs more coaxing and often prefers to play alone or on the sidelines? Does your child notice and become upset when seeing others in distress? Does it feel like people often judge your child as shy or high maintenance and that supposed tried-and-tested techniques do not work with your child?

Many parents find themselves dealing with these concerns and are often at a loss how to proceed. If you find yourself agreeing with some of these statements, it is really important to be aware of the term ‘The Highly Sensitive Children (HSC)’ A more in-depth questionnaire developed by Dr Elaine Aron, is useful in determining if your child is a HSC (http://www.hsperson.com/pages/test_child.htm)

HSC make up approximately 20% of children that are born with a nervous system that is highly aware and quick to react to everything. It is not dysfunctional or abnormal and not what is typically described as ‘shy’. While the majority of HSC can be considered introverted, many are extroverted. HSC are highly intuitive, perceptive, and deep-thinking children- they seem to grasp subtle changes, from minor details such as rearrangement of ornaments, to more emotional changes such as other peoples’ moods or distress. They not only notice more but will think about what they have noticed, often surprising you with their memory and level of insight for their age. HSC will usually need time to think and process before taking action and can often be cautious in their play or interactions, especially in new situations. With a sharpened sense of awareness these children are often gifted intellectually, creatively and emotionally demonstrating genuine compassion at early ages.

While some may wonder why parents find those traits challenging, it is because of their ability to feel things intensely that HSC are easily overwhelmed by high levels of stimulation in their physical and emotional environment. When HSC are overwhelmed they often display traits such as:

- having a meltdown with lots of tears
- throwing tantrums and rages
- complaining a great deal—especially about “small” things
- choosing to play alone; refusing to speak up, talk to adults, talk in class, etc
- avoiding typical “fun” activities (parties, play dates, outings)
- trying to be compliant and obedient
- getting a stomach ache, becoming fearful or withdrawing.

Parenting a HSC is extremely rewarding but also can be challenging. You may feel like it is one thing after another that is upsetting your child. People may tell you that your child is being difficult or manipulative; that you need to ‘toughen them up’ but rather, what you need to do is understand and accept your HSC’s temperament. Some useful tips/strategies for parents are:



- Acknowledge it - it is a trait since birth, it is not as a result of something you did or didn't do, and often parents of HSC are highly sensitive themselves and thus react more intensely. Do not apologise for their 'sensitivity' – it is not something the child should feel shame about. By acknowledging and accepting their temperament, you help your child start to understand their experience and gain self acceptance.
- Allow HSC to integrate at their own pace -let them take their time if they are not wanting to join in. Do not give them too much attention and do not label this behaviour as shy or fear. It is useful to warn a HSC in advance about changes in their routine or special events/trips. Sometimes it may take a few attempts in small chunks for a HSC to engage in something new.
- Be aware of their arousal levels and whether they appear more sensitive to hunger, pain, feeling tired, noise etc. That which you can control, do so, until their capacity expands to tolerate more. If the situation is beyond your control and you notice particularly high arousal levels, encourage soothing activities such as going for a walk, reading a book, quiet play, sitting on your lap/cuddles or even going for a sip of water.
- Recognise when certain undesirable behaviours may be due to over arousal rather than disobedience. When attempting to stop a behaviour, acknowledge the possible cause of it and suggest ways to handle the over arousal, Also, suggest what to do in the future if they start to feel that way, once the child has calmed down. By teaching and encouraging the use of 'feeling' words, this allows the HSC to use their words to express when they are starting to feel overwhelmed.
- Avoid harsh discipline on HSC – if reprimanded, punished or embarrassed, they are likely to be so overwhelmed by the emotions that they will not be able to absorb the information you wanted them to learn. But that does not mean anything goes. It is ok, and necessary, to set limits in a gentle, caring but firm manner.

As a parent of a HSC, it is important to stick to your standards of expected behaviours but remember that emotions are sometimes irrational and overwhelming. Sometimes with a HSC there is nothing you can do to make things better. Sometimes all you can do is hold the child, let them scream/cry or just stay with them while you empathise.

Being a parent to a HSC is all-encompassing experience. You will be blown away by your child's insight, moved by their compassion, exhausted by their intensity but mostly enriched as a person, a parent and a family.