

A guide to the highly sensitive child

What is high sensitivity?

Highly sensitive children (HSC) are born with a natural tendency to notice more in their environment. They think carefully before acting and can easily become overwhelmed when there is too much going on around them. When they cannot avoid overstimulation, these children may appear “easily upset” or highly reactive to situations.

On the positive side, highly sensitive children are often deeply empathetic, intelligent, intuitive, creative, and conscientious. Being highly sensitive is not a disorder or a mental health problem that needs treatment, it is simply a personality trait, and it's more common than you might think. Around one in five children are born with this heightened awareness, responding more strongly to stimuli in their surroundings.

Highly sensitive children are remarkable, but their big emotions and intense reactions can sometimes be exhausting or confusing for parents. It can take time to understand and manage these responses.

Parents often recognise sensitivity early, perhaps in a fussy newborn who cries when there's too much activity or noise, or in a young child who reacts strongly to their parents' moods. Other signs might include sensitivity to sounds, tone of voice, textures, or temperature, for example, being uncomfortable with certain fabrics or reacting strongly to the warmth of bath water.

As they grow older, highly sensitive children may notice even more in their environment. Because they have not yet learned how to filter or limit what they take in, they can become easily overwhelmed.

Highly sensitive children are wired to process and respond to their experiences more deeply than others, and are often misunderstood. Their depth of feeling makes them incredibly insightful and empathetic, yet it can also make it harder for them to adapt to everyday limits and expectations.

When parents understand the root cause of these often confusing or triggering behaviours, they can respond with empathy and patience. With understanding and support, parents can help their highly sensitive child manage overstimulation, develop resilience, and nurture the many wonderful strengths that come with this unique trait.

Highly sensitive children



Approximately 1 in 5, or 20% of children fall into the category of highly sensitive children

Traits of HSC

All children are unique, and temperament is an innate part of who they are. Highly sensitive children tend to pause and reflect before acting, they often notice potential risks and think about consequences rather than rushing in.

- Awareness of subtleties: Notices small details others may miss, such as changes in tone, lighting, or facial expressions.
- Deep inner reactions: Thinks and feels deeply, reacting strongly to experiences, beauty, or emotions.
- Strong awareness of others' feelings: Highly empathetic and sensitive to others' moods or distress.
- Easily overstimulated or over-aroused: Can feel overwhelmed by noise, crowds, bright lights, or too many activities.
- Cautious before proceeding: Hesitates in new or uncertain situations; may prefer to observe before joining in.
- Being different can attract attention: May feel self-conscious or "different" because of their sensitivity.

Anxiety

It's normal for children to worry. Anxiety is part of our natural "fight or flight" response. But for highly sensitive children, sensory overload can fuel anxious thoughts, and anxiety can, in turn, heighten sensory sensitivity.

For example, a child might struggle with the feeling of seams in socks and need to try several pairs before finding a comfortable one. This delay could make them late for school, leading to worry about getting into trouble or feeling embarrassed, which might then make them want to avoid school altogether.

How to support in unit meetings

- Use a [visual timetable](#) and try and give notice of any changes
- Be mindful of triggers (lights, noise etc), and limit if possible
- Offer a quiet breakout space if they feel over whelmed
- Allow the use of aids (fidget toys, ear defenders) if they use these at home/school
- Allow them time to observe before joining in activities
- Use an [adjustment plan](#) after speaking with parents about helpful strategies
- Use a [wellbeing plan](#) to understand more about what worries and helps them
- Access [further support](#) if needed.

Remember you can get help with the costs for inclusive materials and resources. This may be available in your country and region, or with the [accessible guiding grant](#) from HQ.

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High attention to detail

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Intense emotional reactions

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Increased empathy

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Sensory processing differences

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Easily overstimulated

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Deep thinking

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Difficulty with changes and transitions