



# The model of support for highly sensitive children of preschool

(3-5,6) and early school age  $(6,7-10)^{1}$ 

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<sup>1 1</sup> Conclusions for the model are based on a Systematic review







#### Introduction

The MODEL of support for highly sensitive children was developed in accordance with the approach adopted in social sciences. By model it is understood an integration representing diverse findings in a common system from which hypotheses can be derived in regard to still unknown facts. Model make less claim to completeness than traditional theories and offer more precise rules for classifying statements (Tack, 1972).

According to the E-MOTION project assumptions the purpose of the developed model is to realize the assumption that highly sensitive students have the opportunity to fully use their potential, manifested in creativity, intuition, acumen, brilliance, life wisdom or empathy. To be perceived through all their potential, not only one-dimensional through the prism of highly sensitivity (often labeled as shyness, inhibition, fearfulness, capriciousness/grimaces) and possibilities. Some of the highly sensitive children are excluded due to preliminary diagnosis of disorders and deficits (diagnosed as disturbed children, with attention deficits), the part will begin to satisfy needs in a dysfunctional way.

According to theoretical assumptions, there is a set of information helpful in organizing the approach to work with a highly sensitive child. This provides a theoretical basis for the organization of the work of subsequent project outputs.







#### Characteristic

This model is based on a concientous review of the literature in the area of sensory processing sensitivity, the prevention of potential problems and individual differences. It is also based on a positive approach (holistic, individual from the point of view of humanistic psychology). The model is built upon the *approach to Sensory Processing Sensitivity in children* (Aron&Aron, 1997; Aron, 2002). The basis for its construction was also the *broader construct of Environmental Sensitivity* (Pluess, 2015). In the explication of the specificity of children's development in this period of life, the developmental (developmental psychology) regularities were taken into account as well as the risk factors and protective factors (Baryła-Matejczuk, 2019).

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS), in this particular context, may be understood as a feature describing interpersonal differences in sensitivity to the environment, both positive and negative.

1) From the analyses (see Systematic Review), it follows that high sensitivity can be both a risk factor for psychological difficulties later in life and a protective factor. Studies show that a lack of support for and understanding of highly sensitive individuals may lead to depression, anxiety, shyness and learned helplessness in adulthood. Highly sensitive people often demonstrate talents (resulting, i.a. from the depth of processing), which should be supported. This is referred to as **sensitivity being an advantage**. SPS is not a disorder, but in unfavourable conditions of the closest environment (home, preschool), highly sensitive children may change their behaviour in a way that deviates from the developmental standard. This is manifested by a decline in the sense of wellbeing, a higher risk of behavioural problems and psychopathology in childhood and adulthood (Aron, Aron and Davis, 2005). In addition, highly sensitive children who are raised in a stressful home and school environment are more prone to illnesses and suffer







from more injuries. However, in a relatively less stressful environment, they fall ill less often and suffer from fewer injuries than their peers (Boyce and Ellis, 2005).

- According to Aron (1997), the number of people with high sensitivity is too high to treat this trait as a disorder, but not large enough for them to be understood and supported by the environment in a manner adequate to the needs of HSP people.
- 3) The key role in the development of children, especially these who are highly sensitive, is played by their adult caregivers, people from the closest school and home environment, who should be concious of individual children's differences and the biological basis of temperamental traits.







Resulting from the above, an approach was developed to support highly sensitive children in their achievement of developmental tasks. The proposals are illustrated in the following scheme:



*Figure 1.* Support for highly sensitive children – model proposal (by M. Baryła-Matejczuk)

\*\*therefore, such a structure will have a platform developed under the E-MOTION project







# The identification of the child's potential

According to the idea of the project, first of all, we need to identify whether we are dealing with a highly sensitive child or not. The initial assessment of temperamental features is often based on the analysis of behaviours, which in the case of highly sensitive children (see Raport SR) may be confused, in their clinical assessment, with disorders such as hyperactivity or sensory integration disorder. The application of a reliable tool for the assessment of high sensitivity, which is specifically tailored to requirements (a questionnaire containing questions about the child) should be the first stage of the process of support for highly sensitive children and their families as well as their close environment. Therefore, the first move that is oriented towards supporting highly sensitive children is to develop a tool (questionnaire) that both **parents** and **teachers** may find useful.

In accordance with a positive diagnosis approach (Hornowska, Brzezińska, Appelt, Kaliszewska-Czeremska, 2014) tests, questionnaires, psychometric tools may not only be applied to diagnose difficulties (as is sometimes assumed when using the term 'diagnosis'), but also to learn about the strengths and potential of children, their talents, predispositions in order to find out how to develop them and how to support the child's development. In this case, the initial identification of the personality trait allows one to adjust the conditions, in which the child develops, to their individual needs related to having specific temperamental features. The purpose of the **assessment** is to support the child, their well-being, their quality of life in childhood, but also in subsequent stages of life, as well as in adulthood.

A reliable and accurate assessment of the child's potential provides the basis for planning support – a further intervention, focusing on: a) developing, modifying and reinforcing strengths and/or b) minimizing, limiting the impact of or even eliminating weaknesses and/or







c) the effective use of the close environment's resources and opportunities, created by the social context for child's current functioning and for their future development and/or d) counteracting threats, weakening their impact or eliminating them (Brzezińska, 2003; Gaś, 2006; Hornowska, Brzezińska, Appelt, Kaliszewska-Czeremska, 2014).

## Education and support for parents and caregivers

In studies regarding children's development (Hornowska, Brzezińska, Appelt, Kaliszewska-Czeremska, 2014, pp. 9) 'the role of the development space is being more frequently considered, focusing on the importance of stimulation, the source of which is the immediate surroundings of the child, especially the family home as the first physical and social environment with which the child is in contact with'. The younger the child, the more important to their development is environmental stimulation, and thus the quality of the environment (Pluess and Belsky, 2013; Pluess et al., 2017).

The adequate support of highly sensitive children is especially important in the light of research to date. E. N. Aron, A. Aron and K. M. Davies (2005) pointed out that, in the conditions of being raised in an inappropriate family environment, highly sensitive people are more likely to experience depression and anxiety. In turn, Miriam Liss and others (2005) proved that low and inadequate levels of parental care of highly sensitive children are directly linked to later incidences of depression (after: Liss, Mailloux, Erchull 2008). **First of all, attention should be paid to the provision of adequate conditions for the child's development.** 

According to the humanistic model, raising a child is the process of supporting development aimed at achieving full maturity in the physical, psychological, social and spiritual spheres (Gaś, 1999, 2006). Such parent-child relationships require the involvement of both, the parent and the child. According to the above, the parent and their skills create appropriate conditions that promote the development of the child. The achievement of multidimensional maturity by a child may be difficult not only because their personal limitations or difficulties







(which may include behaviour that may be quite challenging from the parent's perspective), but also because of deficits in parenting skills (Gaś, 2006). With respect to the research conducted, it should be noted that the attitude of the parent to the child, which is characterized by changeability, inconsistency, dependence on a momentary mood or sense of well-being, does not create the appropriate conditions for a child's development. Correction and compensation for parental actions fall into the category of prevention. With reference to the child, we may discuss prevention when parenting fails (Gaś, 2006). Zbigniew B. Gaś (2006) lists five leading approaches to prevention. The first approach - *cognitive* - is based on the assumption that if a person apprehends and understands facts, then they will make their own decision to cease a specific unconstructive activity. Therefore, the strategy of this approach is to <u>supply</u> <u>information</u>. It may then be assumed that the knowledge possessed by the parents and other significant persons (including a teacher, form teacher, school counsellor, guardian) about the child's temperamental characteristics, as well as knowledge concerning constructive educational influences – provide sufficient conditions for development – and will support the development of positive attitudes towards the child (Baryła-Matejczuk, Domańska, 2018).

Another approach - *affective* - assumes that adequately strong and stable self-esteem, problem-solving skills and - in relation to the research conducted - educational skills allow for the provision of sufficient support in order to avoid dysfunctional behaviours. The strategies undertaken as a part of this approach are aimed at improving life and educational skills and are carried out in the form of educational initiatives. Workshops and training aimed at supporting children are an important factor that aids their development. These measures may be translated into available and/or recommended prevention programs addressed to preschool children and young school children, e.g. in Poland programmes such as 'Zippy's Friends', 'The Guardians of the Smile', Social Skills Training (in Polish Trening Umiejętności Społecznych – TUS), designed originally in Spain programs like: "AULAS FELICES", "APRENDER A CONVIVIR", "INTEMO" and international programs for preschool and elementary school children: CASEL program. Among the programmes dedicated to meeting the needs of the







parents, one, which deserves attention, among others, is the 'School for parents and educators', developed on the basis of the theory proposed by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (2012, 2013).

The broadened knowledge concerning the sensitivity of sensory processing in children may be utilized to plan new and possibly restructure the ongoing prevention programmes. The effectiveness of providing dedicated support to highly sensitive individuals has been confirmed by, i.a. M. Pluess and I. Boniwell (2015).

Considering the potential difficulties experienced by HS children (knowledge from FGI of parents and teachers conducted in the E-MOTION project, as well as other research) mindfulness, yoga, meditation practices, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), as well as somatic education seem to match the needs of support and could be an approach to override the effects of negative environment or stress experiences (cf. Wyller, Wyller, Crane, & Gjelsvik, 2017; Bakker, & Moulding, 2012; Acevedo, Jagiellowicz, Aron, Marhenke, Aaron, 2017).

E. N. Aron, in the publication *The Highly Sensitive Child* (2002), mentions four main pillars of work with the highly sensitive child. It may be assumed that the **training of parents and teachers** in the following areas: work on the development of adequate self-esteem for the child (strengthening Self-esteem); reduce the child's feeling of shame (shame reduction); discipline the child wisely (wise Discipline); encourage the child to talk about their own sensitivity (Knowledge How to discuss Sensitivity), may provide support in the provision of adequate conditions for the child's development.

Another approach to prevention (Gaś 2006), known as the *cognitive-affective* approach overlaps both of the aforementioned strategies and assumes that people require both access to information as well as life skills. In practice, it may be implemented by running information campaigns and educational activities (Baryła-Matejczuk, Domańska, 2018; Baryła-Matejczuk, 2019).







A *cognitive-behavioural* approach combines the strategy of providing information with those that focus on identifying behaviours that are often the result of learning (social learning theory).

## A forum for exchanging experiences

The last of the prevention approaches mentioned is the *normative education* approach, which is based on the assumption that people overestimate the universality of dysfunctional behaviours and difficulties experienced. Taking into account the constructed model, support for the caregivers of highly emotional children (especially their parents) could be based on direct contact with other people who are raising a highly sensitive child/children (Baryła-Matejczuk, Domańska, 2018) and also know about the history of life of high-sensitive people, normalizing beliefs about the ability to cope with the lives of people who are highly sensitive (beliefs such as: cannot cope in the 'hard' world).

The exchange of parental experiences, as well as sharing successes and difficulties are a source of natural support. At present, direct contact is often replaced by a substitute - an online relationship, and people learn about social behaviour patterns and the universality of specific problems from the media. A compromise solution may be the organization of an online space/platform, where parents would be able to gain trusted knowledge about high sensitivity and share their own experiences. Knowledge and the ability to support highly sensitive people are also important for other adults (for teachers, form teachers, school counsellors), who are important in the lives of children. An understanding of children's temperamental sensitivity and the skills to support it could provide a substantial contribution to the school's preventive activities, especially in the field of universal prophylaxis/prevention.







#### Conscientious work with highly sensitive children

Accordingly, planning support for highly sensitive children is not about modifying their personality traits. The conscientious work does not involve interference with a trait, an assumption of high sensitivity being a disadvantage or a problem that needs to be dealt with, rather, it focuses on providing conditions in which highly sensitive children may have equal opportunities to develop their potential. When training adult carers in providing an adequate level of support for highly sensitive children, attention should be paid to the developmental tasks of preschool and early school age. We should provide support 'in something'. According to the assumptions of the project, developmental tasks that are appropriate for the child's age should be supported.

The basic developmental task of preschool children is to become prepared for commencing school education. Within the perspective of the child taking up new roles, it is necessary for them to be ready to function in the conditions outside the home environment and to deal with typical school situations. In order to accomplish this task, a certain level of physical, cognitive, emotional and social development is necessary (Smykowski, 2003). A child who is supposed to manage in an open environment outside the family should learn to modify the patterns of activity acquired at home and adapt them to new conditions. They are expected to replace a large part of their activity from spontaneous conduct, based on the principle of simple associations and internal impulses with a more reactive behaviour that is consistent with physical and social conditions. Adult caregivers use specific methods and techniques for this purpose. The main developmental processes of this stage concern the child's control over the internal and external determinants of activities in such a way that, while satisfying their own needs, they do not cause conflicts with others. They gradually learn to focus on a wider perspective than themselves. What is necessary to reach this stage of development, is an increase in self-control, which may be understood as directing the expression of emotional states and controlling their own behaviour (Marszał-Wiśniewska, 2001).







Seeking a compromise between their own desires and social expectations and the requirements set by the environment is one of the most important tasks of the preschool age. It is also a challenge for the parents and preschool teachers to **assist the child in this way, to support them, and at the same time to place demands upon the child in order for them to learn how to satisfy their own needs, to develop the willingness to take on challenges, set goals and aim for them, whilst understanding and respecting the needs and the rights of others (Matejczuk, 2014).** 

The adaptation of the child to changes resulting from the tasks related to the child entering the preschool and school environment depends on their effective preparation for this change by parents and the sensitivity and efficiency of the preschool and school in responding adequately to the changing needs of the child and supporting them in these changes (Brzezińska, 2008; Brzezińska, Rycielska, 2009).

Contemporary approaches to the analysis of a child's readiness for optimal - both from their and the institution's point of view – functioning in an educational institution (crèche, preschool, school) take into account four interrelated components: 1) the child's readiness in relation to the requirements and style of functioning of the institutions, 2) readiness of the institution in relation to the child's potential and their previous development path, 3) abilities and competencies of the family in relation to the requirements of the changes that awaits the child starting school, 4) opportunities to develop, including the broadening of resources that already exist and are being created at present for the child and their family by the local community and the wider social environment, including the resources offered by state institutions (Brzezińska, Czub, 2015, s.13).

Recent studies concerning the determinants of dysfunctions and difficulties in the adaptation of children and adolescents are not wholly focused on risk factors, but more on protective factors. Confrontation with these tasks can thus become an opportunity for the child







to adapt and acquire new skills or for the emergence of dysfunctions and non-adaptive behaviours. For a description of the above mechanisms, the term 'resilience', derived from the Latin *salire*, which means spring, spring up and *resilire*-bounce back, spring back, was adapted. In psychological literature resilience is defined in three ways: 1) as a set of personality features characterizing the individual, 2) the effect of adapting to difficult conditions that are challenging, 3) the process of adaptation itself (Ogińska-Bulik, Juczyński, 2011, pp. 8)

It is worth emphasizing that resilience is sometimes perceived to be the result of the interaction of forces in the ecosystem: the individual - the environment. It is characterized by significant dynamics and a dependence on the context of life, which allows for the introduction of modifications to shape and develop resilience (Heszen, & Sęk, 2007).

#### Application of the model

The practical implementation of the model is the E-MOTION platform, which contains helpful materials, tools and tips for working with a highly sensitive child. The platform includes 6 different modules containing different types of resources. Their order and scope correspond to the assumptions of the model. You can go through the next modules in accordance with the proposed direction.

Module 1 IDENTIFICATION consist of the tool which helps to identify the level of sensitivity of a child. By answering questions it is possible to get information about child sensitivity. No more than few minutes will be needed to answer all questions of this questionnaire.

The description of the tool itself (the questionnaire), its psychometric properties and possibilities of application can be found in the publication "QUESTIONNAIRE OF SENSORY PROCESSING SENSITIVITY IN CHILDREN: APPLICATION, CORRECTION AND INTERPRETATION MANUAL"

Module 2 WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT HIGH SENSITIVITY is a knowledge compedium about high sensitivity. Area includes supporting materials such as articles and







presentations. The aim of these materials is to explain the idea of high sensitivity and specifics of the functioning of a highly sensitive child.

Module 3 EXCHANGE FORUM is a virtual space where people (parents/teachers) can exchange experiences in supporting high sensitive children with project experts as well as other parents, teachers, practicioners.

Module 4 PODCASTS presents stories of "high sensitivity ambassadors" – well known people of art, science, business, music, representing six European countries, who shared theirs personal experiences of being highly sensitive. Theirs perspective, as adults, describing early childhood experiences brings a lot of valuable information about understanding the world, environment of the highly sensitive child.

Module 5 VIDEOS consists of short videos, which help to understand the most important dimensions of the functioning of a highly sensitive child and its needs. Videos illustrate substantial tips, which will help parents as well as teachers to support well being and education of high sensitive children.

Module 6 MATERIALS FOR WORK WITH CHILDREN AND PARENTS, is a collection of scenarios and materials for working with highly sensitive children. You can find there a proposal of specific exercises ready to use at home and at school. Scenarios for work in kindergartens and schools are a comprehensive program planned for 12 meetings. Moreover these scenarios can also inspire the preparation of own excercises and tools used in daily practice. The scenarios are material ready to be used in school lessons, in work with all children.

A description of educational materials can be found in the study "EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS for teachers and parents: introduction".







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