

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS for teachers and parents INTRODUCTION

Developed by M. Baryła-Matejczuk



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Theoretical Background

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is a trait that describes interpersonal differences in sensitivity to the environment, both positive and negative. Sensory processing sensitivity is an inherited trait of temperament. The trait is associated with the risk of psychopathology and the occurrence of stress-related problems when a person grows up and is raised in an inappropriate, negative environment or conditions. In addition, the trait is associated with particular benefits (including positive mood, greater awareness, responses to interventions) when the individual grows up, is raised in positive conditions/environment (Pluess, 2015). Individuals who have high levels of the trait are referred to as highly sensitive.

Variations on a continuum from low to high environmental sensitivity are observed in the population. Sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) started to be discussed just over 20 years ago (Aron & Aron, 1997). This trait is not a new discovery, but over the years it has often been understood and interpreted within other theoretical approaches. Issues of sensory processing sensitivity were brought to the attention of and popularised by the American psychologist Elaine N. Aron. She confirmed the assumption that sensory processing sensitivity co-occurs with emotional reactivity (Aron, Aron, & Jagiellowicz, 2012). According to the author, due to the fact that highly sensitive individuals prefer to observe first before entering new situations, they are often referred to as 'shy'. However, according to Aron, shyness is learned, while sensitivity is innate. In fact, it is estimated that about 30% of highly sensitive people are extroverts, although this trait is often misidentified as introversion (Aron & Aron, 1997). High sensitivity has also been referred to as inhibition, fearfulness or neuroticism. Some highly sensitive people may behave in such a manner, but it is not a primary characteristic indicative of or equivalent to high sensitivity (Aron, 2002). The characteristics of highly sensitive people indicate that the surrounding environment can be for them both a place of particular growth and development of potential, as well as a threat, i.e. an overwhelming area that induces withdrawal. In addition, the way in which sensitivity is valued in a given culture (values/ ridicules) is reflected in the

self-esteem of highly sensitive persons, in their confidence in their own abilities or in their planning for the future (Evers, Rasche, & Schabracq, 2008). High sensitivity is not a disorder, but under adverse conditions in the immediate environment (home, kindergarten, school), highly sensitive children may change their behaviour in ways which deviate from the developmental norm. This is manifested, among others, by irritability, tearfulness, explosiveness, but also by withdrawal, shyness, timidity, "hanging up". Highly sensitive children brought up in difficult, unfavourable conditions may experience problems in adult life, more frequent crises or sometimes also psychological disorders (Aron, Aron, & Davies, 2005). In addition, highly sensitive children raised in stressful home and school environments are more likely to become ill and experience more injuries. In contrast, in relatively less stressful environments, they become ill and suffer injuries less frequently than their peers (Boyce & Ellis, 2005).

Based on the above considerations and knowledge from research conducted in the area of sensory processing sensitivity and environmental sensitivity, a model for supporting highly sensitive children was developed (Baryła-Matejczuk, 2019). According to the model, one of the elements of supporting a highly sensitive child is education and support for his/her parents and caregivers.

Basis for developing educational materials

Proper support for highly sensitive children is particularly important from the perspective of the findings of research conducted to date. Aron, Aron and Davies (2005) indicated that in an inefficient child-rearing environment, highly sensitive individuals are more likely to experience anxiety and depression. In contrast, Liss and colleagues (Liss, Timmel, Baxley, & Killingsworth, 2005) noted that low and inadequate parental care for highly sensitive children was significantly associated with their later depression (cf. Liss, Mailloux, & Erchull, 2008). In the first instance, therefore, special attention should be paid to creating conditions for the child's development. According to the humanistic model, upbringing is a process of supporting development aimed at reaching full maturity in the physical, mental, social and spiritual sphere (Gaś, 1999, 2006). Such an educational contact requires the involvement of both the parent and the child. Prevention corrects and compensates educational activities. In regard to the child, prevention is mentioned when upbringing fails (cf. Gaś 2006). Zbigniew B. Gaś (2006) lists five leading approaches to prevention: cognitive, affective, cognitive-affective, cognitive-behavioural, normative education.

The first approach - the cognitive approach - is based on the assumption that if a person learns and understands the facts, then he or she will make the decision to stop a particular non-constructive action. The strategy of this approach is therefore information. A key role in the development of children, especially highly sensitive children, is played by their adult carers, the immediate school and home environment, which must be characterised by an awareness of the individual differences of children, the biological background of temperamental characteristics. Therefore, it can be assumed that the knowledge of the parent and other important persons (e.g. teachers, educators, school pedagogues, caregivers) about the child's temperament traits, as well as knowledge about constructive educational interactions - creating conditions for development - will foster the development of positive attitudes towards the child (Baryła-Matejczuk, Domańska, 2018). In turn, the last mentioned approach to prevention is the normative education approach, which is based on the assumption that people overestimate the prevalence of dysfunctional behaviour, experienced difficulties. Taking into account the model

mentioned above, support for caregivers of highly emotional children (especially their parents) will be the exchange of experiences with other caregivers raising a highly sensitive child/children, as well as knowledge about the life history of highly sensitive people, normalizing beliefs about the ability of highly sensitive people to cope with life (beliefs like: they cannot cope with the 'hard' world).

The developed educational materials complement the prevention programme devised by M. Baryła-Matejczuk to support the development of highly sensitive children of early school age and preschool age.

The educational materials are the result of an international cooperation of researchers and practitioners¹, who have set themselves the common goal of developing support-oriented approaches for highly sensitive children in their immediate environment



Figure 1 Types of educational material for parents and teachers of highly sensitive children.

¹ Poland: M. Baryła-Matejczuk, M. Artymiak; Spain: R. Ferrer-Cascales, N. Albaladejo-Blázquez, N. Ruiz-Robledillo, M. Sánchez-SanSegundo, M. Fernández-Alcántara, M. Rubio-Aparicio, M. Betancort; Italy: M. Fabiani; Romania: A. Veleanovici, G. Dumitriu, A. Dudu, C. Goşa, C. Comşa; North Macedonia: Marija Vasilevska

Types of educational materials

The first group of materials developed are presentations whose common title is: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT HIGH SENSITIVITY? The presentations provide an accessible introduction to the topic of sensory processing and environmental sensitivity: research reports, concepts developed. In turn, they explain the issues of high sensitivity, describe the characteristics of a highly sensitive child, explain the differences between sensory processing sensitivity and other characteristics of the temperament and personality. The presentation "Biology, genes and mind" also includes research findings from the field of neuropsychology, it explains reaction strategies which characterise people, related to the structure of their nervous system. Successively, therapeutic approaches effective in working with a highly sensitive child are described: the rationale for using support methods is explained and those that are most effective in helping highly sensitive children are characterised.

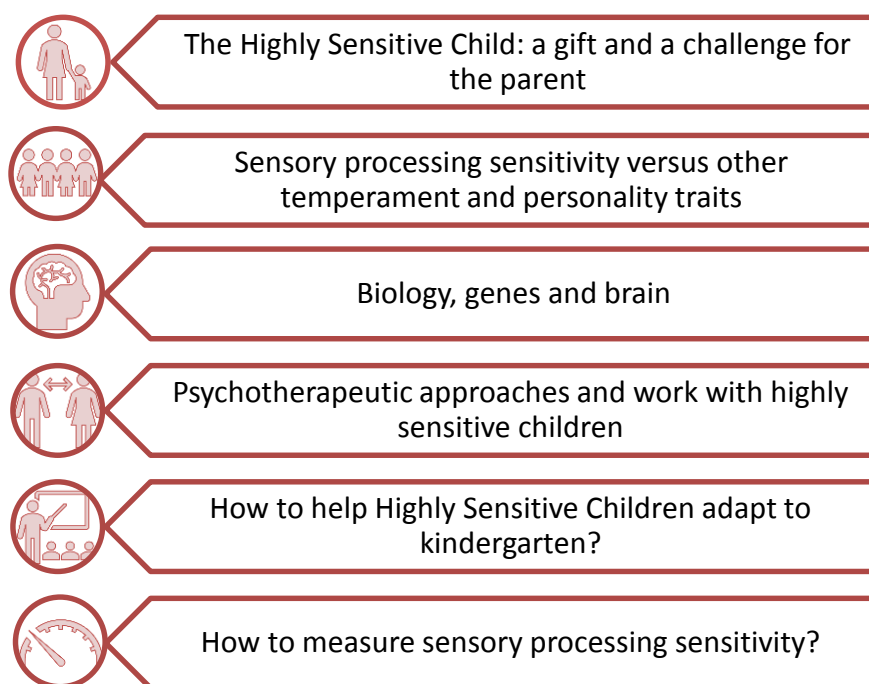


Figure 2 Educational material: subject areas developed as multimedia presentations

For a better understanding of the specificity of highly sensitive children functioning, their adaptation to kindergarten is also addressed. The presentations also include information

on the measurement of the trait itself, which processing sensitivity constitutes. The methods of measurement used so far (questionnaires) are described and the factors that explain high sensitivity are indicated. The metaphors used in research on sensitivity - analogy to flowers: orchids, tulips and dandelions - have also been explained.

The second group of materials are videos, prepared in the form of video edugraphs. They last between five and fifteen minutes and have been developed in thematic groups. Two videos have been prepared for each of the topics listed below. The first introduces the specificity of a given issue in the context of highly sensitive children. It describes, for example, the specifics of a highly sensitive child's self-esteem, how they experience stress, how they cope with new and unfamiliar situations. The second video presents tips and advice on supporting children. They can be helpful to both parents and teachers. The common title for this group of materials is: HOW TO SUPPORT A HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILD?

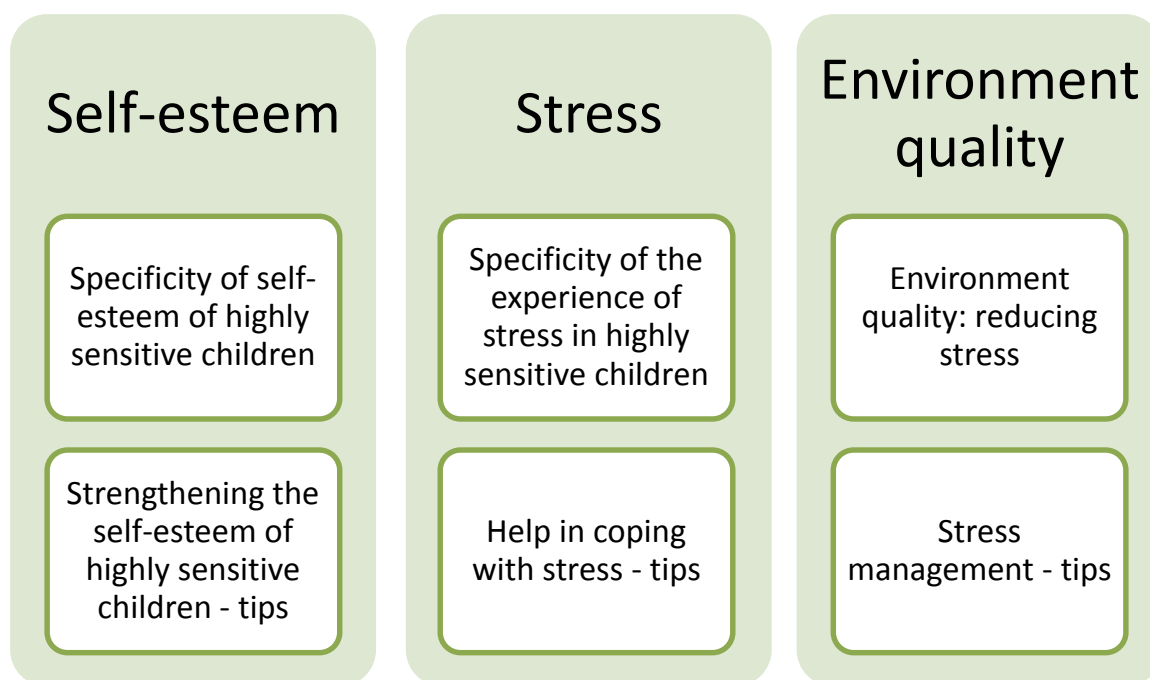


Figure 3 Educational material: support areas for highly sensitive children developed by video - part 1

These addressed areas were identified based on the results of focus group research among parents and teachers of highly sensitive children. The biggest difficulty children face in their everyday functioning is the stress they experience and how to cope with it. In connection with

the unstable self-esteem observed in highly sensitive children, an explanation of this construct was also undertaken. The specifics of the child's functioning in the preschool group and the school classroom, as well as in new situations, are described. For each of the areas parents and teachers are given hints, tips for working with the child.

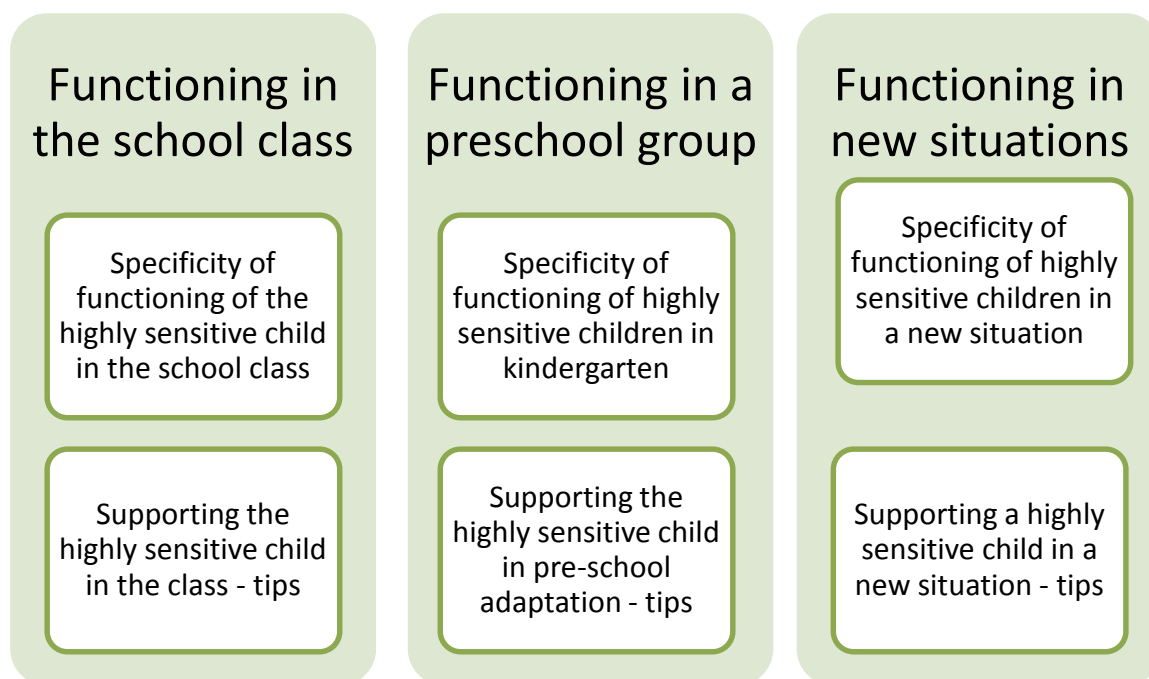


Figure 4 Educational material: support areas for highly sensitive children developed by video - part 2

The video materials are available on the educational platform of the E-MOTION project (<https://highlysensitive.eu/>) and on the YouTube channel of the project: Wysoka Wrażliwość- High sensitivity) (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT1pU_P45SqO3TQ833CQwgQ).

The third group of materials consists of biographies of highly sensitive people whereas the fourth group features podcasts recorded with so-called ambassadors of high sensitivity. The assumptions of normative education were used as a basis for both groups of materials. The results of the survey of the already mentioned focus groups show that one of the difficulties parents of highly sensitive children experience is their belief that their children cannot cope in the "difficult, real" world. The temptation to help children in their daily

activities, the unwillingness to experience difficult emotions, the comparison to peers and the difficulty to deal with the child's strong emotions create in parents the fear that the child will not be able to cope with the challenges of life.

LIFE STORY

Chapter 1 – Fleeing in thoughts

Psychologist/Counsellor, aged 43, Bucharest, Romania

"With my knowledge and inner development, as I look at it now, I can say that I grew up in a family often surrounded by clouds of anxiety and worry. I had this perception since childhood, but I could not translate it into words. It was simply a feeling of emotional burden that tended to overwhelm me..."

In this context, it is particularly important to form in parents (and teachers) of highly sensitive children the conviction that every child has the capacity to develop, to gradually take control of his or her own life, to take responsibility for his or her own development and, above all, wants to develop (cf. Brammer, 1984). This attitude is followed by the conviction that the child will "make it in life" even under difficult circumstances. Based on this assumption, biographies of people who are highly sensitive have been prepared to show that in their lives the trait was treated as a potential, an area that could be developed, an important part of their self-image. The protagonists of the stories share their experiences, the difficulties they experienced in childhood, the challenges they faced. Each story is told as if the stages of their lives were chapters in a book. It was **assumed that knowledge about the life stories of highly sensitive**

people would normalise beliefs about the ability of highly sensitive people to cope with life.

The assumptions of McAdams' theory (2018) were used in the interviews conducted. His theory, (commented on in many psychological works, e.g. Ciecuch, 2011), primarily emphasises the fact that the deepest knowledge of the other person is provided by a personal narrative. This narrative integrates the life story, thus giving coherence, purpose and meaning (Teusz, 2016).

The Polish adaptation of *The Life Story Interview* by Dan McAdams (Budziszewska, 2013) was used in the development of the educational materials. Interviews were conducted with men and women from Poland, Italy, Spain, Romania and Macedonia. The protagonists of the stories were at different stages of development, and interviews were conducted with people in adolescence as well as early, middle and later adulthood. Each interview is preceded by brief information about the protagonist of the story (age, country/place of origin), followed by 'chapters' of her/his life. Below, the quotes from transcriptions of selected interviews can be found.

LIFE STORY

Memoir #4 My close ones: family -friendships-loves

Teacher, aged 67, Lublin, Poland

"What I value most in relationships is loyalty. I was lucky to always have someone I could call a friend. Not all relationships from my childhood or teenage years survived into later years. But somehow it happened that there was always someone close to me at school or university. I have contact with some of them to this day..."

The fourth group of materials features podcasts – the interviews conducted with the so-called "Ambassadors of High Sensitivity". To record them, people from the world of art, science and business who consciously use their sensitivity in their lives and work, and are willing to share their creativity and the results of their work were invited. The podcasts were prepared in sets: a short version (about 5 minutes) collecting the most important contents of the interview and a longer version (about 30-40 minutes) being a full, professionally edited interview. In each of the countries (Poland, Spain, Italy, Macedonia and Romania) a minimum of two people were interviewed.

Fragments of a podcast with Tomasz Korpanty – a vocalist, author of music and lyrics, music producer, publisher, vocalist of De Mono band:



My sensitivity seems to change over time. I was gaining awareness, I was growing up. (...) I think I've learned to live with sensitivity.



How was my sensitivity manifested? I made up some very strange things to keep myself busy as a kid. I was able to go through the entire geography atlas from beginning to end and, for example, remember all the capitals of countries in the world. At nine years old. Just pure fantasy. But I wasn't an isolated kid either.

The podcast is a form of online audio publication, which in the case of the E-MOTION project is also accompanied by beautiful photographs. Below, you will find examples of quotations from transcriptions of podcasts made in Poland - which took the form of professional radio programmes. Their protagonists, well-known and recognised people, artists and musicians, tell stories of their lives. In their conversations, they share their childhood experiences, their adult lives and their paths of development. Each of these stories is an extraordinary inspiration and an excellent source of knowledge about how highly sensitive people function - both the challenges and the pleasures of having this feature.

Excerpts from a podcast with Natalia Niemen – an artist, performer, painter, wife, mother:

The sensitive person feels good when he sees that the other sensitive person understands him. And sensitive artist can convey this sensitivity within sounds, words, song and even instrumental music.



There were many things which made me sad. I remember situations at school, there were a few of them. I wanted to learn math, to play a violin something, which I was not good at. The teachers were patient – those I'm thinking about now, reminding these two stories. However I've burst out crying, those teachers were wondering: „Why are you crying? I'm going to explain it to you." But I was not able to explain them that I'm dissapointed with myself, frustrated that I'm not able to do these things, even though I know how it should be done, but I don't have skills, tools to do that properly.

Fragments of a podcast with Mietek Szczęśniak – an artist, musician, "story teller":

It is good when next to a sensitive, talented child is someone who will expand the world and not narrow it down.



I wanted and still like to watch, listen, experience the world of someone else's imagination. This is something that has always inspired me to experience. This is more interesting to me than physical meaning.

Each of the described groups of materials constitutes valuable input for supporting adult carers of highly sensitive children: parents, teachers as well as pedagogues or psychologists. They can be used complementarily in the implemented prevention programme. They can be

recommended to parents and carers of highly sensitive children as a source of knowledge and practical advice on supporting children.

Podcasts prepared as part of the project are available on the educational platform of the E-MOTION project (<https://highlysensitive.eu/>) and on the YouTube channel of the project: Wysoka Wrażliwość – High sensitivity) (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCT1pU_P45SqO3TQ833CQwgQ).

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