

E-MOTION - potential of hypersensitivity

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Creative use of methods of support with a highly sensitive child

Carmen Comsa,
Clinical psychologist,
Expert Psy Association, Romania

- Highly sensitive children develop and benefit from the positive effects of a supportive and empathetic environment, with much lower probabilities of developing anxiety and depression (Aron, 2010). In contrast, in aversive environments, where there is aggression, lack of acceptance and lack of support or neglect of emotional needs, these children are more prone to affective and behavioral disorders, compared to the majority who do not have the high sensitivity trait (Aron, 2010).

Some *specific behaviors and expressions of high sensitivity* in children:

- - Loves harmony
- - Does not like to stand out in the group
- - Does not like to argue and will do so much possibly try to prevent it
- - Worries easily
- - Likes to retire from time to time
- - Can play well alone
- - Sensitive to atmosphere
- - Sensitive to physical stimuli

- - Preferably avoids unpleasant stimuli, but also needs stimulation
- - Usually controlled and careful
- - Is a real thinker
- - Very present
- - Can't stand injustice
- - Strong-willed
- - Can't process too many stimuli and regularly go over their own boundaries
- - Some are real doers and love challenges

Things that can have a great emotional impact on HSCs



- **Injustice**

- The sense of justice of a highly sensitive child is great. When something is unfair, even when it concerns someone else, he takes action. But if he is dismissed, he feels unheard and understood, and flares up in anger.

- **Watching movies**

- They thoroughly enjoy the story, and can fully empathize with the characters. But that loud noise and the bright lights of the commercials are overwhelming. HSC prefers to sit at home on the couch close to mom or dad.

- **Tension inside the family**

- All HSC sense the emotional atmosphere. If there is tension between mom and dad or between grandpa and aunt, they feel it immediately. Sometimes they try to do their best to make it cozy, but they may also have different reactions because they don't know what to do with that heavy atmosphere.

- **Grief from others**

- A friend's grief hurts them. They worry about the classmate whose mother is ill. They experience it so intensely that it seems to be their own grief.

- **A school trip**

- Everything is different that day. Eating the fruit on the bus, the singing, children who are constantly pushing at you and nobody seems to hear the teacher when she calls out for us to come... Processing all these new stimuli takes a lot of time. Only towards the end of the day, when the return trip is almost starting, HSCs seem to relax and enjoy themselves a bit.

- **Other's attention**

- Do something while everyone is watching you? Rather not. They don't even like getting compliments in class. What will everyone think? Real attention from a parent is, of course, a different story. They never gets enough of that.

- **False people**

- What do you do when someone is very happy, but clearly is very sad? Or if someone is very nice, but you notice that he doesn't like you that much. These conflicting signals are confusing for a HSC. For them, the implicit signals come in just as clearly. And they don't know how to respond. It may even be a reason not to shake hands with someone.

- **Programs with (animal) violence**

- Knowingly hurting someone or neglecting an animal are deadly sins in the eyes of a highly sensitive child. He does not want to see programs in which that is 'normal'. The pain of those people or animals can enter him so intensely that if he has seen it, he is upset for days.

- **Take tests**

- In a test, the teacher will look at what you can do. That assessment moment leads to stress for many HSCs. In addition, the questions are often unclear. Sometimes the answer seems so easy that he doubts its correctness. With his creative mind, he can also come up with reasoning for a different answer. Based on the idea that a test is probably difficult, he opts for the answer with the complicated reasoning. If that then turns out to be wrong, self-confidence goes down and the fear of testing further increases.

- **Have to make a decision right away**

- “What do you want on your bread?” Is one of the most dreaded questions, because mom or dad expects an immediate answer. Making a choice is difficult, because there are so many consequences. *Chocolate sprinkles spill quickly, peanut butter sticks in your mouth, cheese has a nasty aftertaste and the jam has seeds. But if I now choose chocolate spread, I am no longer allowed to do that with lunch.* Before all these aspects have been weighed up, mom reminds us again of the question, which increases irritation and makes making a choice even more difficult.

- **Friends who act mean**

- When you are friends, you are sweet, honest and nice to each other. So if a friend does something mean, suddenly doesn't want to play, tells you something, or doesn't want to sit next to you, it's not a friend. No matter how social HSCs they are, if a line is crossed, the friendship will no longer work out.

Parenting styles of HSC

- The *authoritarian* parenting style is characterized by many rules. The parent decides what happens and the child must obey. The rules are not explained, they just have to be followed. If the child does not listen, punishment will follow. There is no room for discussion or compromise.
- In the *permissive* parenting style, the parents pay a lot of attention to the wishes and needs of their child. So much so that the child always gets his way, rules are not consistently enforced and misbehavior is ignored. There are few boundaries and rules in this parenting style.
- The third parenting style is called the *democratic*. In doing so, the parents set boundaries and they have an eye for the wishes and needs of their child. The rules are explained so that the child understands why to stick to them. In case of misconduct, the rules are enforced, but the parent also talks to the child about the situation. The parents pay attention to the emotions and experiences of the child.

Not optimal for highly sensitive children

- The authoritarian and indulgent styles are seen as non-optimal parenting styles. In the authoritarian style, children are more likely to develop low self-esteem and aggressive behavior, while children who grow up in a mainly permissive style are more likely to be impulsive and have poorer social skills.

- *Sensitivity is typical of creative artists, innovators and children who are talented in various ways. They have an exuberant and lavish inner life. They have inventive imaginations and they recall memories in great detail. Also, they notice more sensory detail. They are deeply moved by the arts and music. HSCs tend to be empathetic, intuitive, and highly aware of the needs of others.*

Advantages of using creativity in the development of HSC:

- Developing the abilities to express desires and feelings (verbal and nonverbal);
- Self-respect and self-confidence;
- Personal strategies for solving problems and intra- and inter-personal conflicts;
- Improving the capacity for self-knowledge and self-acceptance;
- Development of moral and spiritual values;
- Development of cognitive abilities (memory, attention, language, etc.) and creativity;
- Releasing tension, anxiety, stress, frustration and negative feelings.

Recommended activities for highly sensitive children

- **Drawing and painting:** drawing is one of the key methods to help the child express himself. Whether it's chalk drawing on the sidewalk, painting, coloring, charcoal or simply sketching, all of these help the child express his feelings, thoughts, moods and sensorial experiences even though, at times, it may not make much sense for us, adults (on a rational level).
- Any type of free drawing is a way to explore and connect with what is happening within the child, it is also a way to be more aware of one's identity as it develops itself. Connecting through art is also a way to build strong and authentic communication, as both parties (the parent and the child) could talk about their drawings and how they felt while engaging in this process, afterwards.

- The parent can also create a story with the child related to the drawing and, by this time, he may notice that the child processes emotions and feelings from everyday life by simply expressing them through their art. If they are not able to create a story, the parent must not insist on it: the drawing itself is a way for children to make sense of some of the things they may be experiencing, a symbolic language not restrained by usual semantics. Also, the parent must not over analyze the child's drawings at all time: they usually bring up his evolution in time as well as helping him express old and new sensations, feelings and thoughts.

- **Play-Doh or other clay activities:** the child can also tell a story through play-doh as well, verbal or non-verbal. The experience is tactile and kinesthetic and while children are engaged in it, they may find it easier to express their feelings or emotions.
- Usually, children who have a hard time exploring their emotions are also not very fond of exploring the world through all of their senses, even though it's a natural process. Some may fear or dislike getting dirty (making a quick association between clay and dirt) which is a sign of an emotional imbalance as children usually do not care as much if they are dirty unless parents insist often upon them staying clean.
- Therefore, clay and other molding activities can and should be used as a form of self-expression and exploring thoughts and feelings of the highly sensitive child.

- **Collage:** for this you will need old newspapers, magazines, scissors, glue, different types of fabric, any lightweight material will do, really. The purpose of collage is to create an image, a painting with all these “props” on a piece of paper or canvas.
- It is a way to stimulate creativity, manual dexterity, space orientation, attention and also communication. It is a fun way to build the relationship and keep you both invested in the game as the fabrics themselves are so diverse it’s impossible to not feel the curiosity of “what will become” of all these things put together?

- **Theatre play:** theatre play helps with confusion and emotional pain where they are present, as well as enjoying the happy parts of life, theatre play helps the child explore in a safe environment as it allows him to portray his own experience without the pressure of explaining rationally what is happening within.
- Verbal language should not be main focus when you do theatre play with your child, the symbolism of his word and actions should. What cannot be expressed in language may be transmitted through body or nonverbal language.

- **Fairy tales and therapy stories:** stories are a part of our lives on an everyday basis. Stories, the ones we read or the ones we make up, are usually a clash between good and evil especially when we are children. As we grow up, stories leap into that grey area where we may get confused about wrong or right.
- Knowing this about stories, writing, inventing, playing a story that your child narrates or introduces to you is a very powerful tool to help them. Fairy tales encompass a wide range of emotions: love, hate, loneliness, isolation, worthlessness, anger and so on, and are often used in child therapy as they are a way to help the child find meaning and dispel confusion.

- Every child will take something different from a story and they feel protected listening or making up a story as they are not the protagonist, therefore, nothing bad can happen to them. If you notice your child to be upset at the end of the day and he does not seem eager to tell you what happened, keep in mind that he may not be able (yet, from an emotional perspective) to verbalize it, but you can play it or make a story about both your days and let it unravel the way your child needs it: do not control the narrative, let him explore even if it may get negative, it is a way for children to express their fears, anger or anxiety through such stories. The child can also find solutions for what is bothering him as the story unravels and he could apply them in his real life, but without the pressure of the adult telling the child what to do.

- A short guideline for reading a fairy-tale to your child for healing purposes, as we need it to have impact: make sure the message within the story is appropriate; select the story that would best suit his difficulties; mold the title, some characters, age, gender of the protagonist to be closer to the child you are trying to help; if you are reading a therapy story make sure you check the message with a therapist first, as you may tend to overwrite the conclusions; take advantage when the child is paying attention to tell stories, check his reaction, which stories he liked best, check up over time the long lasting impact of the story told; re-read the stories he liked best over time; do not comment the plot storyline or the resemblances between your child and the hero.

- **Dance and creative movement:** "By movement and dancing the inner world of every other person becomes tangible... this technique creates a safe environment, where feelings can be expressed and communicated safely" (after Payne, H.,1988). Dance is a way of expressing feelings and it is a way of communicating that makes the child feel safe, reducing his anxiety. This technique can help the child regain his own body and can lead to a better knowledge of their body and how to feel comfortable in it. Dance and creative movement expresses emotions and can liberate unprocessed feelings. The feelings that the child has embodied and the way he rests and moves, they are all the expression of his inner world.

- **Puppet play:** "The puppet or the doll comes to life because of the life of the one who animates it. Projective identification object at origin, the doll or puppet can assimilate the value of the transactional object in order to create a relation with the other" (C. Duflot). Any object we invest with life can become a puppet or a doll. A piece of cloth, our own hand or a piece of clay: here's a character who can talk, react, live.
- Creating a puppet can be a real construction or reconstruction of the inner self. We could, by this mean, connect to the inner child - this is not valid only for children. Constantin Brâncuși said: "When you are no longer a child, you have died a long time ago". Therefore, we must always bear in mind that we need to connect with our own inner child, as well as the other's.

- In this way, through theatre play, the child is a spectator who perceives sensations, emotions and reflections or the child is a creator and an animator who expresses himself through the animation theatre.
- It helps the child to self-appreciate, refine his aesthetic tastes and it stimulates creativity. When the child is face to face with the puppet we can talk about a creative exercise, through creating and animating their own puppets and presenting this achievement not in a show, but as a form and expression of his inner world in a family or friends environment. It's not the show, it's the universe that opens up for the child.

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