10 Ways to Get Your Highly Sensitive Child to Thrive

By Deborah Song

High sensitivity is not always convenient, but it is a gift. Or at least it can be. As Dr. Elaine Aron, the author of The Highly Sensitive Child says, “It is primarily parenting that decides whether the expression of sensitivity will be an advantage or a source of anxiety.” So how do you get your HSC to thrive? Here are ten places to start.

1. **Accept your child.** Acknowledge all the things you like about a highly sensitive temperament, whether its creativity, empathy, curiosity or thoughtfulness. Then, you must grieve all the qualities you find disappointing. Your child may never become captain of a football team, or be flooded with party invitations (some may, others never). Only then can you start to look forward to other joys and come up with enriching ways to raise your HSC.

2. **Respect the reality of your HSC.** You might not like that your child gets frazzled over his favorite pair of black pants when they all look and feel the same to you. But you can respect that one person’s clean is another person’s dirty. Try to understand what your child is going through by asking him what he sees and feels.

3. **Label properly.** It matters whether you describe your child as observant or shy, overly stimulated or difficult. How you label shapes your own attitude as a parent, the attitude of people in your child’s life and the attitude of your child himself. Properly labeling high sensitivity is also the first step to eliminating misconceptions.

4. **Stick up for your child.** Your child will have to learn to assert himself eventually. Until then, there will be moments when it’s necessary to assert yourself on his behalf. Your HSC may not want to play musical chairs at a birthday party, or like to be hugged by anyone outside his own family. In these cases, it’s important for someone to make his preference known and clear up any misconceptions. Sticking up for your child will help him feel supported. It’s also a good way for him to learn to be assertive by watching you.

5. **Tailor Discipline.** HSCs are perfectionists by nature so they’re already hard on themselves. Too much criticism, and they could become fearful of making any kind of error at all. In general, gentle correction works best for HSCs. Give yourself a chance to calm down before speaking to your HSC.
6. **Follow the lead of your HSC.** Pay attention to what your HSC needs, whether it’s less stimulation, more one-on-one time, or more time to process something. Forcing him to engage in an activity when he isn’t ready, for instance, will only make him suffer. Being attentive to what your child needs is not the same thing as spoiling him and giving into his every whim. It simply means listening to the cues of his high sensitivity, which all HSCs need help managing.

7. **Find an outlet.** Intense awareness is the reason why many artists, musicians, actors and scientists are highly sensitive. Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, Steven Spielberg and Elton John have all been linked to high sensitivity. Help your HSC find his own form of expression that will help him see his sensitivity as a gift and not a burden.

8. **Create an environment of calm and order.** Maintaining an orderly home is beneficial to an HSC. But the application of order needs to extend to the demeanor of a parent. Your child needs a parent who can stay calm under duress. Otherwise, he will always have two things to worry about: his anxiety and yours.

9. **Encourage your HSC to try new things.** If your HSC shows an interest in something new (within reason, of course), see that he tries it. This will get him more comfortable stepping outside the box.

10. **Make sure your HSC gets enough rest.** Because HSCs have heightened nervous systems, they need more rest and downtime to decompress and recuperate.