



FAMILY *Matters*

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Why does my child always think I'm yelling when I'm not?

This is a common complaint I hear from parents. Children who perceive a firm or slightly raised voice as yelling and react emotionally, are often sensitive children. Unfortunately, sensitivity is not always easy for parents to recognize. Children can be sensitive to the needs of others, which is a positive trait. However, those that are extremely sensitive to what parents say to them often over react. Characteristics of sensitive kids may include some of the following: adverse emotional reaction to perceived criticism, dislike of yelling (real or perceived), negatively skewed perceptions of themselves and the intention of others, low self-esteem due to discounting of their own accomplishments, giving more credibility to negative social comments compared to positive comments, feeling responsible for negative events (i.e., a parental argument) when they have no responsibility, misinterpreting friends comments as harsh and hurtful when they are not, and living in fear of negative comments about them. Children who are sensitive often

find it difficult to discuss feelings or anything that they think reflects negatively upon them.

Sensitive kids need to be parented with this in mind. They will often discount positives in their lives and obsess about what they perceive as negative. They may become socially anxious and prefer to avoid social situations. They also absorb stress and tension around them. If there is a family conflict that does not directly involve them, they feel the stress of that tense relationship. I often describe these children to be “like a tension absorbing sponge” and they experience parallel stress as a result. Often, one or both parents share this sensitivity characteristic.

Parenting strategies that can be helpful to sensitive children are:

- Accept (don't debate) the fact that the child is sensitive and adapt your parenting strategies accordingly.
- Focus on the positive aspects of your child.

- Point out when they have done something well rather than correcting their mistakes.
- Provide feedback by using facilitative questioning, where you ask the questions in a way that guides them to the answer or solution to the issue.
- Keep family tension low when possible.
- If parents or family members have a disagreement that does not involve the child, it is best to express the disagreement away from the sensitive child.
- To build self-esteem, engage them in an activity or sport they perceive themselves to be good at.
- Engage them in social activities even if they resist.
- Have non-family members give positive feedback since it will be viewed as valuable.
- Help them see the learning opportunities in everything they do.
- Encourage regular outdoor and physical exercise activity.

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