



FAMILY *Matters*

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Sensitive Kids: The Often-Unrecognized Parenting Dilemma

In my clinical work with children and families, I often encounter highly sensitive children who require strategic parenting that considers their sensitive nature. Many parents, however, don't recognize the high sensitivities within the child so don't account for this in their parenting strategies. 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 highly sensitive to what parents or others say to them often overreact. 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 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 themselves.

Highly sensitive children will often discount positives in their lives and obsess about what they perceive as negative comments or evaluations of themselves. They may become socially anxious and prefer to avoid social situations since they often incorrectly expect negative evaluation by others. They also absorb stress and tension around them. For example, if there is a family conflict that does not directly involve them, they often feel the stress of that conflict. 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 the sensitivity characteristic. Sensitive children need to be parented with these factors in mind.

Parenting strategies that can be helpful to sensitive children are:

- Accept the fact that your child is sensitive and adapt your parenting strategies accordingly.
 - Help your child accentuate their positive strengths.
 - 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 answers or solution to the issue rather than providing critical feedback.
 - Keep family tensions low when possible.
 - If there is a disagreement that does not involve the child, it is best to express the disagreement privately.
 - 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.
 - Provide opportunities for nonfamily members to give positive feedback since this will be viewed as valuable.
 - Help them see learning opportunities in everything they do and reframe a mistake or problem as a learning opportunity.
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