

# Highly Sensitive Kids Need Sensitive Parents

by Paula Prober

**Maria** is highly sensitive. She immediately notices tension in a room along with subtle smells, sounds, and colors. Loving to read, Maria can get lost for hours in a story. In describing herself she says, “Books are my life.” She is 9 years old.

When there’s a conflict between a student and teacher in school, Maria’s stomach gets upset. Not only is she concerned when her peers are unhappy but she also has a deep need for fairness. She feels too shy to confront her teacher but bombards her parents with questions when she arrives home. Maria worries about the future of the planet and wants her family to get rid of the car.

Bobby, age 6, cries easily. Scary movies, parents arguing, lost games, and spilled milk can all be occasions for tears. In school, he observes classmates at a distance before participating. His parents and teacher suspect he is immature but, in fact, he feels empathy beyond his years and his reasoning ability is advanced. Bobby feels deeply and shows it. He loves insects and is passionate about the solar system.

When his body can’t keep up with his mind, though, Bobby acts out in anger. This often occurs in school during handwriting instruction and on the playground. Peers tease Bobby and he is often alone. Not understanding his sensitivity, Bobby declares that he’s “stupid.”

At 15, Annie has difficulty finding peers who understand human nature as well as she. Her friends look to her for counsel and yet she has no one to turn to who can reciprocate. Annie can read her teachers’ moods and attitudes and is able to manipulate her instructors when it meets her needs, although she rarely does because of the ethical dilemma it creates.

When Annie draws, she explores her world. Colors, textures, and shapes all have particular meaning. A beautiful environment can soothe her. But it’s not enough.

A year ago, Annie considered suicide. She felt she was a disappointment to her parents and a failure in school. She spoke sadly of the “lack of meaning” in her life. Annie was acutely aware of societal definitions of beauty and belonging and felt she would never measure up. Not wanting to inflict the burden of her death on her family, she turned to alcohol to dull her senses.

Maria, Bobby, and Annie are typical examples of highly sensitive youngsters. These children are often bright, creative, and intuitive. They see, hear, and feel more than other children so they may be overwhelmed by certain environments and activities. If you live with a sensitive child, you may feel frustrated, guilty, angry, and confused. The following suggestions are designed to help you increase your understanding of your child and to build your child’s self-esteem:

- Watch for signs of anxiety. Keep track of when and where the tension increases and look for patterns. This will tell you where some of your child’s sensitivities lie: Too many people? Noises? New situations? Change? Chaotic, messy environments? Anger? Pressure to perform? Certain people? Competition? Chemical odors? If you notice a pattern, try reducing the tension by adjusting the environment or leaving the situation early.

- Give your child time to observe a situation before getting more involved.
- Brainstorm a list of activities that soothe your child. Keep the list handy for stressful times.
- Provide more time alone for your child if he needs it. It will be a time to relax, re-energize, create, and dream.
- Make a worry list with your child. Write down everything she worries about. Let your child add to the list when another worry comes up. Divide the list into “Things I can control” and “Things I can’t control.” Talk about ways to act on the controllable things and make a plan. For “Things I can’t control,” have your child decorate a small box. On separate slips of paper, write each “thing” and put it in the box as a way to “let go” or give it to a higher power or God depending on your beliefs.
- Find an adult mentor, one with similar interests, intellect, and sensitivities. Look among friends, neighbors, relatives, and colleagues.
- Engage in family stress reduction activities that are fun and noncompetitive.
- Get each family member a journal. Good journaling ideas are available in many books including “A Book of Your Own” by C. Stevens and “The New Diary” by T. Rainer.
- Be honest with your child about your feelings and tell your child you have ways to get support for yourself. Then get support for you! Your child is likely to feel responsible for family conflicts or even for the tension you feel that you try and hide.
- Find stories about sensitive children to read to your child. A good source of titles is “Some of My Best Friends are Books” by J. W. Halsted.
- Remember that these youngsters need structure, consistency, good boundaries, and appropriate guidelines just like other children.
- Be sure your child eats nutritious meals, gets enough sleep, and spends time in nature. Basic healthy routines are important.
- Help your child find a few good friends with similar interests. Friends don’t have to be the same age as your child.
- Read the book “The Highly Sensitive Person” by Elaine Aron.
- Check to see if your child’s sensitivity is particularly annoying or painful for you. Explore the source of your own feelings. Does your child remind you of someone else? Parent? Sibling? Yourself? Write an unsent letter to that person expressing your feelings. Notice how you feel: Angry? Sad? Lonely? You can reduce your frustration with your child if you address any unfinished business from your own childhood.
- Remember that there is no perfect parent. You will make mistakes. Admitting your mistakes allows your child to see that he doesn’t need to be perfect either.

Paula Prober, M.S., a licensed counselor and consultant in private practice in Eugene, specializes in work with gifted individuals, and also counsels adults healing from childhood trauma. She's the author of "Ten Tips for Women Who Want to Change the World Without Losing Their Friends, Shirts, or Minds." Her website is [www.psychevolution.com](http://www.psychevolution.com).

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