

# Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

## Recognizing and Meeting the Needs of Highly Sensitive Children

by Dani Kinsley, M.S., OTR/L

### What Makes a Person "Highly Sensitive?"



- It is estimated that up to 20% of the population can be considered "highly sensitive people," or HSPs. These individuals are often very empathetic and aware of the needs of others, but they also may get easily overwhelmed or overstimulated by both environmental factors (bright lights, loud sounds, excessive activity, unfamiliar textures or foods, etc.) and social factors (new social situations, crowds of people, being around others who are upset, stressed, or suffering, etc.).



- When HSPs become overstimulated, they may become either highly emotionally reactive or may appear withdrawn and shy as they try to avoid additional stress.



- Many people on the autism spectrum are considered highly sensitive. There is naturally also a good deal of overlap between high sensitivity and sensory processing disorder or sensory integration issues. However, many HSPs do not have any developmental or neurological diagnoses, and high sensitivity is considered a natural skill or variation that allows many humans the ability to process information more deeply.



### How Can I Tell if My Child, Student, or Client is Highly Sensitive?



- Dr. Elaine Aron is an expert in high sensitivity and was the first to coin the term "highly sensitive person." She and her colleagues have established quick online checklist tests to help people identify high sensitivity in themselves or their children.



- Visit <https://hsperson.com/test/> to view the checklists and learn more about the specific characteristics of HSPs.



### How Can I Provide Support for the HSP In My Life?



- Provide a calming presence and co-regulation. Young children who are highly sensitive need additional support, understanding, and patience. They often rely on trusted adults for co-regulation. Co-regulation is the process of providing calm and reassuring care which helps children relax, process their emotions, and eventually learn how to model their own behavior after the caregiver's reactions.

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(cont.)



- **Help others understand their needs.** Provide information for your child's other family members, teachers, therapists, etc. to help them learn more about the needs of HSPs and how to identify when an environment or situation is becoming overly stressful. See the *References* list below to read the article "[25 Things Your Highly Sensitive Child's Teacher Needs to Know](#)" for more helpful pointers.



- **Identify triggers:** a harsh tone of voice/critical speech from others, loud noises, scratchy clothing or tags, busy/crowded places, unexpected changes to routines or plans, or being around others who are upset or suffering can all lead to an HSP feeling overstimulated. See the *References* list below to read the article "[6 Signs Your Highly Sensitive Child is Overwhelmed \(aka Their Bucket is Full\)](#)."



- **Understand that a large percentage of individuals are HSPs** (up to a fifth of the population), but many people may be misunderstood, unfairly judged, or even misdiagnosed.



- **Promote positive self-identity** by helping HSPs understand that they have unique abilities and needs. They may be particularly empathetic and aware of details that others tend to overlook, but that does not mean that they are "overly sensitive." And just because they may become overwhelmed and may need to take breaks from overstimulating environments or situations, that does not make them "needy." It may be helpful to assist HSPs in finding community and friendships with other HSPs, to point out their particular strengths, and to help them reframe any negative self-talk or labels they experience.



- **Work together to come up with and practice calming strategies.** Strategies that may help include deep breathing, learning how to identify and advocate for their own needs, and asking for a break in overstimulating situations.



- **Learn more about high sensitivity** by studying the work of Dr. Elaine Aron. The undisputed expert on high sensitivity, Dr. Aron has written many informative books about HSPs as children, as adults, as parents, in the workplace, and in relationships. You can learn more about her work by visiting <https://hsperson.com/>.

Resources:

- Aron, Elaine N. "Self-Tests." *The Highly Sensitive Person*. Accessed February 2, 2023. <https://hsperson.com/test/>.
- Aron, Elaine N. "The Highly Sensitive Child." *The Highly Sensitive Person*. Accessed February 2, 2023. <https://hsperson.com/books/the-highly-sensitive-child/>.
- van Mulligen, Amanda. "6 Signs Your Highly Sensitive Child is Overwhelmed (aka Their Bucket is Full)." *Happy Sensitive Kids*. Accessed February 2, 2023. <https://happysensitivekids.com/2016/09/6-signs-your-highly-sensitive-child-is-overwhelmed-aka-their-bucket-is-full/>.
- van Mulligen, Amanda. "25 Things Your Highly Sensitive Child's Teacher Needs to Know." *Happy Sensitive Kids*. Accessed February 2, 2023. <https://happysensitivekids.com/2017/11/25-things-to-share-with-your-highly-sensitive-childs-teacher/>.

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