

The Highly Sensitive Family



By Liz Pilley

Liz Pilley hides from the world as much as possible, in Surrey, while also venturing out to selected destinations with her two home-educated, highly sensitive children, who are now six and four. She also works part-time (from home of course), and writes. Read her blog at <http://honourandinspiration.blogspot.com>.

Even if you've never heard the term *Highly Sensitive* before, the chances are that you know a child who fits the profile: they have a very sensitive nervous system, are aware of the subtleties in an environment, and are easily overwhelmed in stimulating surroundings. They're often labelled fussy, shy, spirited, spoilt, ADHD, inflexible, explosive, or even Autism Spectrum; but none of these labels quite fits. They take things very much to heart, they're fussy about food, temperature, texture and many other things. They often hate group settings, and have many fears, but they are also creative, curious, loving and empathetic.

Bringing up a Highly Sensitive Child can be a challenge; but that's just half the story, because the Highly Sensitive Trait is genetic. So, if you have a Highly Sensitive Child, the chances are high that at least one parent will be so, too.

I'm a Highly Sensitive Mother, and this has heavily coloured my parenting style in every possible way. Before I had any children, I had fantasies of a big, happy, noisy family living in loving chaos. It was only after the arrival of my first child that I realised this wouldn't be possible. My baby daughter was a huge challenge, but what was the problem exactly? I wasn't

sure. She didn't have colic, but she also didn't sleep ~ the slightest thing woke her, and it took literally hours to lull her off. Gradually I realised how sensitive she was to noise, temperature, texture, colour and the number of people around her. Shopping trips were hell, and any kind of playgroup was completely out of the question.

In desperation, I started researching what might be 'wrong' with her, came across Elaine Aron's ground-breaking work on Highly Sensitive Trait, and had a major epiphany. Not only was this what was 'wrong' with my daughter, it was also what was wrong with me. I'd thought I was going crazy ~ other people seemed to manage perfectly well, why did I find the demands of early motherhood so tricky? The health visitor kept testing me for post natal depression, but I wasn't depressed, I was just way too stimulated. The intensity of the connection with my baby freaked me out, and when she cried, I cried ~ for months. I felt like my skin had been ripped off, and my nerves were in shreds. Other mothers only seemed to understand up to a point; they didn't seem to feel the soul-ripping agony that I did every time my daughter cried. They didn't seem able to feel their baby's anguish at being abandoned every time they left the room, as I did. It took me months to get my feelings ~ or rather, my reaction to them ~ under control.

By this time, I'd read and absorbed a lot of information about the trait, and realised that I could never have this huge family I dreamt of. Just having one or two children was going to be a challenge for me. I grieved, and still grieve, over this loss; and also felt inadequate that I

couldn't cope with perfectly normal things that other people could. It took me a long time to realise that there were also positive points, such as my increased empathy to my children's feelings, and my heightened instincts about their welfare.

While my daughter and son were small I soon realised that the world of modern parenting is not set up for Highly Sensitive children and parents. The noisy, crowded playgroups and sing-a-long groups made the children cry, and I wasn't far off either. Children's attractions and events were always crowded, full of music, singing, bright colours, flashing lights ~ and were a total nightmare. Children's food in cafes and attractions was often unacceptable to my children ~ mixed flavours and textures. We'd dash out first thing in the morning to go to a Children's Farm before anyone else got there, and then scuttle off as soon as any other children arrived.

In the library, my daughter would announce loudly that she hated songs in Storytime ~ it was Storytime, and there shouldn't be songs in it. A well-meaning friend prompted a huge tantrum by offering us a lift home in the car when we'd told my daughter we'd be going back on the train. Any slight change to the expected programme of events would cause huge problems and upset. Guiltily, I realised that I tend to be somewhat lacking in spontaneity myself.

Once, my daughter fell over in the playground, and there was blood on her knees, and she was so distraught ~ more at the thought that she was hurt than at the actual pain itself ~ that she screamed for a good 30 minutes. Several well-meaning



strangers came running to help ~ did we need an ambulance, a first-aider? I knew we just needed to get home so that she'd feel safe after her shock, but I could feel the eyes on me, and hear the comments about what a fuss my daughter was making over a relatively minor trip. They should see her when she has a paper cut. By the time we

struggled home, I was absolutely spent with nervous exhaustion, and burst into tears myself. My husband had to put me to bed with a cup of tea and a book, to calm down.

My son's sensitivity takes a different form. He's very funny about colours and textures, and he's so imaginative that he actually enters the pretend world of play that he creates, and terrifies himself on occasion with baddies that he has made up himself. He has dreams and nightmares, and won't wear corduroy, and thinks he owns the colour blue. I find him easier to deal with, as we don't find the same things stressful, so I can stay calm when he's over-stimulated.

I soon learned that the best way to deal with problems was to remain utterly calm and soothing at all times. If only I could have done that. Sadly, my daughter and I are too similar for our own good. The things which over-stimulate her have the same effect on me. So, I'd be completely rattled by a certain environment, and not at my best when she would throw a major wobbly, and I'd be unable to keep calm and deal with her, as I was already at breaking point myself.

You're probably reading this and thinking I'm exaggerating. After all, no-one likes children throwing tantrums, and everyone thinks soft-play centres are actually the seventh ring of hell. But this is more than just a normal reaction ~ this is fingernails-down-a-blackboard style lack of tolerance, for both me and the children.

Over the years, we've worked out how to adjust the environment for both me and my daughter so that we can cope, on the whole, without major meltdowns, but it has often entailed detailed explanations to friends and acquaintances ~ why we can't stay for lunch, why the children can only cope with one outing a day, why they need a quiet day to recover from some minor excitement ~ why quite routine events, such as visits to the doctor, dentist or even a party, have been awful challenges.

The first party my daughter went to, she took one look inside when the door was opened to her, and then shut her eyes and went rigid. We had to lead her inside into a quiet room ~ eyes still closed ~ and let her acclimatise. It took about an hour before she opened her eyes. And even then, she refused to join the actual party, and just sat in a room, mainly by herself, as it was all too much. To get her to the dentist was a major feat of planning that I can't even think about without a shudder of horror. And, as for the time she was supposed to be a bridesmaid, words fail to describe the sheer awfulness. It took me about a week to recover from that experience myself. Seriously.

But it isn't all doom and gloom. My Highly Sensitive Children are also amazing. They're intuitive and highly imaginative. They're nurturing towards each other, animals, and other children. They cuddle easily, and are hugely affected by the Natural world. They notice tiny details which other people miss, and they are full of love. As much as I feel drained by their constant chatter, by the stress of taking them on a day out, I also feel re-charged by their sleepy, cuddly bodies next to me in bed, their sticky kisses, and curiously wise insights.

So they get car-sick and loathe busy theme parks ~ so do I. We can just be one big Highly Sensitive Family together.

Common HSP Dislikes

Big groups of people.

Noisy places or things, such as washing machines, aeroplanes.

Rough textures, such as towelling, corduroy, clothing labels.

Strongly flavoured food, or foods mixed together.

Being put on the spot and having to think quickly.

Plans being changed.

Strong odours.

Even the slightest amount of pain.

Surprises.

Dealing with stressful situations in public.

They get very upset if someone else is upset or in pain.

They get very distressed if they're told off or feel they've done something wrong.

Ways To Help A HSP

Let them know what to expect, and don't change plans once they've been made.

Don't plan too many activities on one day, balance stimulation with calm time.

Make sure they get enough sleep ~ give them plenty of time to wind down before bedtime.

Don't try and force them to join in, they need plenty of solitary time.

Listen very carefully to them ~ even if it seems to be said quite casually, it might be incredibly important to them.

Deal very quickly with emotional upset or physical pain.

Don't let people 'test' them.

Go with preferences about food, clothing textures and colours, and smells.

Soothing physical therapies such as massage, reflexology and reiki can be very helpful.

Positive HSP Attributes

Very intuitive, and they notice every subtle undercurrent.

Deep thinkers, very curious, and tend to remember lots of odd facts.

Wide vocabulary, and very articulate.

Very empathetic and nurturing, especially good with younger children and animals.

Very open to plants, animals and Nature.

Feel everything deeply, and tend to be tactile and loving with those they know well, but reserved and apparently shy with those they don't.

Very creative ~ often artistic, and good with language.



Photographs: Page 20, Grace, New Zealand.
Page 21, Blanka, Honey and Angelina.
Grandad Bob and Oscar preparing vegetables.