



# What Sensitive Kids Would like You to Know About Them

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

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*“She is so dramatic and everything seems like a big deal,” said a baffled father of a 6-year old girl named Samantha. The mother tells me ‘Sam’ hates the tags on her clothes and loud noises, and hangs back to watch her peers before engaging with them. Sam complains when things are too windy, sunny, cold or hot, or noisy, like when the toilets flush. Her parents are struggling with what to do with Sam as she seems more difficult and intense in comparison to other kids.*

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Kids like Sam may appear to be unique, but they make up 15 to 20% of the population of kids according to [Thomas Boyce](#), a researcher at the University of Southern California.(1) She is part



of a group of kids deemed to be ‘sensitive’ in nature. These kids have an enhanced receptivity to environmental stimuli and as a result, are more affected by it. Activation of the senses can be more provocative with touch, taste, smell, or hearing for example, being heightened in reaction. There is also research suggesting they [need more anesthetic](#) because of their increased pain sensation. (2)

The reasons for the sensitivity are unclear, with biological, genetic, prenatal stress, birth trauma or c-section theories put forth as contributing factors.(3) Despite the origin or reason for a child’s sensitivity, parents and teachers long to make sense of them and be better equipped to handle their intensity. If sensitive kids could give us perspective on what their world is like, I believe they would want us to understand the following five things to start.

- 1. Their head can be very busy processing their world** – The role of the thinking brain is to make sense of what is happening in the body which has been stirred up by one’s environment. Given that sensitive kids have an [enhanced receptivity](#), they are likely ‘ingesting’ a lot of sensory stimuli that needs to be ‘digested.’ What this means is they will need time to process what is happening in their immediate environment. Some of them will naturally do this by standing and watching what is occurring, taking note of details, and trying to make sense of how it all fits together. This is why they are often the ‘observer’ despite adults wanting to push them to participate. Adults need to consider how sensitive kids learn vicariously through watching others and how busy their mental processing can be despite their lack of physical engagement.
- 2. They are more prone to feeling stronger emotions when stirred up by their world** – Sensitive kids can feel emotions in a heightened way giving rise to feelings of overwhelm and alarm. They are more likely to experience anxiety given their awareness and enhanced sensory intake. Sensitive kids often have intense reactions to both joy and despair. When they are frustrated it can lead to tantrums that explode and are intense. Their softer tears can be harder to come by but with patience, caring, and a firm hand, they can be lead to become resilient to the things that seem too much for them. The challenge with sensitive kids, especially when younger, is that they can be more readily overwhelmed by stimuli which leads to emotional outbursts. The goal is to [lead them into vulnerable territory](#) by providing room for expression, helping them use their words to describe their inner world, and supporting their tears in flowing. When we provide healthy environments, with strong adult relationships to support them through their emotional experiences, it will help wire their brain to handle the intensity of their emotional world.
- 3. Relationships with others can take additional time to create** – Sensitive kids don’t suffer fools gladly and [adults must work to build a relationship with them](#). They often don’t warm up to people who don’t take the time to collect and engage with them. They can have a harder

time following the directions and rules of people they are not attached to because of strong shyness instincts. Forming relationships involves vulnerability and dependency on others and this is what is at stake for the sensitive child. They can sometimes be perceived as more prickly in their responses but this can be part of their natural coping mechanisms when they are feeling overwhelmed.

4. **They are prone to feeling coerced and are more likely to resist other people's agenda's** – Many sensitive kids are perceptive when it comes to other people's plans and agendas in relation to them. When they feel coerced and controlled, they can become full of [counterwill](#) – the instinct behind resistance and opposition. They can dig in with refusal and lash out in frustration when attempts are made to move them in a particular direction. The goal is to engage their attention and collect them before making commands and demands so that they will be more inclined to follow along.
5. **Structure and routine provide safety and security** – For a sensitive child the predictable rhythms of daily life provide boundaries and help them orient to what will happen next. Routines take the unexpected surprises and unknowns out of their day, helping them feel more at ease and less likely to be concerned with what will happen next or who they will be with. It is helpful for an adult to take the lead in orienting and informing a sensitive child to the daily routines, and which results in feeling more at rest and cared for.

Sensitive kids make up a significant proportion of children and need some thoughtful care and handling. While their intensity can take adults by surprise, they need to feel and hear the resounding message that their adults know how to take care of them. When adults take the lead, they can rest and play, allowing nature to grow their brains to adapt to a world that is often feels too much for their senses.

## **REFERENCES**

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(2) Melnik, M. (2010). Why surgeons dread red heads, (Time online, December 10, 2010.) <http://healthland.time.com/2010/12/10/why-surgeons-dread-red-heads/>

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