

## PARENTING STYLES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN

**Bar Shimron**

Ph.D. student

Department of Psychology

Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar”

**Abstract:** *Parenting Styles and Their Influence on Highly Sensitive Children*  
*Parenting styles significantly shape the emotional and behavioral development of children, particularly those identified as Highly Sensitive Children (HSCs), who constitute approximately 15 to 20 percent of the population (Parents,2024).*

*These children are characterized by heightened sensitivity to sensory input and emotional cues, which makes their parenting needs distinct and crucial for their well-being. Understanding the nuances of various parenting styles—such as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved—allows parents and caregivers to adapt their approaches to support the unique emotional landscapes of HSCs effectively. (Schoenfeld, A. 2021, Parenting for Brain)*

*Research highlights that authoritative parenting, marked by a balance of high demands and responsiveness, tends to yield positive outcomes for HSCs, fostering resilience, self-advocacy, and emotional regulation. (Mak, Y. W., & Zhang, Z. 2018, Womack, L. 2023)*

*In contrast, authoritarian and uninvolved parenting styles can exacerbate the challenges faced by sensitive children, potentially leading to increased anxiety, emotional distress, and difficulties in social interactions. (Parenting for Brain, Schoenfeld, A. 2021).*

*As HSCs often interpret experiences through a lens of vulnerability, it is essential for parents to adopt strategies that validate their emotions and create nurturing environments conducive to growth and self-expression. (Allen, R. 2021, Moller, J. 2011)*

*Controversies surrounding parenting styles often arise from societal pressures to conform to traditional disciplinary methods that may not align with the needs of highly sensitive children. Such approaches can trigger anxiety and emotional breakdowns, underscoring the necessity for a gentler, more empathetic parenting approach tailored to HSCs. (Allen, R. 2021, Little Otter, Kumar, R.2020)*

*By prioritizing emotional validation and creating calm, structured environments, parents can significantly enhance the emotional and psychological well-being of their highly sensitive children, enabling them to thrive academically and socially. (Highly Sensitive Child. n.d., Neurodivergent Insights. (n.d.)*

*Ultimately, recognizing the intricate interplay between parenting styles and the unique characteristics of HSCs is vital for fostering optimal development, mitigating potential challenges, and embracing the strengths these children possess. (Highly Sensitive Child. n.d., Neurodivergent Insights. (n.d.)*

*Understanding these dynamics empowers parents to make informed choices that nurture their children's individuality and emotional health.*

**Keywords:** *Parenting Styles, Highly Sensitive Children, Emotional Development, Sensitive Parenting, Parent-Child Relationship*

## **Parenting Styles**

### **Authoritative Parenting**

Authoritative parenting is often regarded as the "gold standard" due to its balanced approach that combines high demands with high responsiveness. (Mak, Y. W., & Zhang, Z, 2018, Womack, L, 2023)

Parents using this style set clear expectations and boundaries while nurturing their children's independence. They explain the reasons behind rules and encourage open communication, which fosters an environment where children feel valued and guided. This style has been linked to positive outcomes, such as developing confident and responsible adults who can self-advocate. (Mak, Y. W., & Zhang, Z, 2018, Womack, L, 2023)

### **Authoritarian Parenting**

In contrast, authoritarian parenting is characterized by strict rules, high demands, and low responsiveness. (Parenting for Brain. n.d, Neurodivergent Insights. n.d.)

This style emphasizes obedience and discipline, often employing punitive measures without explaining the reasoning behind them. Authoritarian parents typically do not consider their child's feelings or perspectives, leading to a controlled environment that may stifle independence and self-expression. While this approach can result in well-behaved children in the short term, it may have negative long-term effects on their emotional well-being and decision-making abilities (Parenting for Brain. n.d)

### **Permissive Parenting**

Permissive parenting is marked by leniency and a non-demanding attitude, where parents act more like friends than authoritative figures. (Mak, Y. W., & Zhang, Z. 2018)

These parents cater to their children's desires and avoid strict discipline, which can lead to children developing behavioral problems due to a lack of respect for authority and rules. The permissive style may result in children who struggle with self-regulation and accountability (Mak, Y. W., & Zhang, Z. 2018, Womack, L. 2023) ..

### **Overview of Parenting Styles**

Understanding various parenting styles is crucial as they significantly influence a child's emotional and behavioral development. There are four widely recognized parenting styles identified by mental health professionals: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved. (Schoenfeld, A. 2021, Parenting for Brain. n.d.)

Each style has unique characteristics and implications for child-rearing and development.

### **Uninvolved Parenting**

Uninvolved parenting, sometimes referred to as neglectful parenting, is characterized by low demands and low responsiveness (Schoenfeld, A. 2021).

Parents adopting this style may be emotionally detached or preoccupied with their own issues, resulting in minimal involvement in their child's life. This can have detrimental effects on a child's emotional development, as they may feel unloved and unsupported (Schoenfeld, A. 2021).

### **Emerging Parenting Styles**

In addition to the traditional styles, newer approaches such as gentle parenting, attachment parenting, and free-range parenting have gained popularity (Holland, J. 2023).

Gentle parenting emphasizes empathy and emotional management, while attachment parenting focuses on fostering strong emotional bonds from birth. Free-range parenting advocates for granting older children more independence. While these styles may appeal to some parents, others, such as helicopter parenting, which involves over-involvement and excessive supervision, are often discouraged due to their potentially negative impacts (Holland, J. 2023, Womack, L. 2023 ).

Understanding these various parenting styles is essential for parents to adapt their approaches based on their child's unique needs and developmental goals. Each style's influence on a child's behavior and emotional health highlights the importance of conscious and informed parenting choices.

### **Highly Sensitive Children**

Highly Sensitive Children (HSCs) represent a distinct group, estimated to comprise 15 to 20 percent of the population. These children possess a nervous system that is exceptionally attuned to their surroundings, allowing them to respond deeply to sensory input and emotional cues from others.(Parents. n.d.)

This heightened sensitivity often manifests in various characteristics, making HSCs unique yet vulnerable in diverse social and educational settings.

### **Traits of Highly Sensitive Children**

Highly Sensitive Children exhibit a range of identifiable traits that set them apart from their peers.

- **Intense Reactions:** HSCs often display strong emotional responses, even to minor events or stimuli, leading them to appear more reactive than other children (Fretwell, C. 2023).
- **Perfectionism:** Many HSCs have a tendency toward perfectionism, leading to self-imposed pressures that can exacerbate stress levels.(Fretwell, C. 2023).
- **Sensitivity to Environment:** These children are acutely aware of sensory input such as noise, light, and the emotional state of those around them, which can lead to feelings of overwhelm in busy or chaotic environments. (Little Otter. (n.d)).
- **Empathy:** HSCs often show a deep capacity for empathy, experiencing the emotions of others intensely and sometimes finding themselves emotionally drained as a result (Little Otter. (n.d)).

### **Strengths and Challenges**

While high sensitivity can be perceived as a disadvantage, especially in environments that do not accommodate it, HSCs often demonstrate notable strengths. Research suggests that in supportive settings, HSCs can excel academically, demonstrate higher moral reasoning, and exhibit greater social competencies compared to their less sensitive peers.( Highly Sensitive Child. n.d.)

However, the same sensitivity that enhances their strengths can also make them susceptible to anxiety, stress, and emotional distress, particularly if they face negative or unsupportive conditions (Baby Whys and Hows, n.d.)

### **The Role of Environment**

The environment plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of Highly Sensitive Children. Supportive environments that validate their feelings and provide a nurturing atmosphere can significantly enhance their self-esteem and emotional well-being. Little Otter, n.d, Baby Whys and Hows, n.d.)

Conversely, negative or overwhelming settings can lead to increased stress and emotional difficulties, which can manifest as internalization issues or even psychopathology in some cases (Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.).

### **Parenting Strategies**

To effectively support Highly Sensitive Children, parents and caregivers can implement various strategies:

- **Validation of Feelings:** Recognizing and validating the feelings of HSCs helps them understand that their emotions are normal and acceptable (Little Otter, n.d.) .

- **Advocacy:** Parents should advocate for their child's needs in educational settings, ensuring teachers and staff understand the child's sensitivity and can provide appropriate accommodations (Briefly Counseling, n.d.) .
- **Flexibility in Teaching:** Educators are encouraged to embrace flexible teaching methods that cater to the diverse learning needs of sensitive children, thereby creating a more inclusive environment (Safe Solutions, n.d.)

### **Influence of Parenting Styles on Highly Sensitive Children**

Highly sensitive children (HSCs) require unique parenting strategies due to their heightened emotional responses and sensitivity to their environment. Parenting styles significantly influence their emotional development and overall well-being, as these children often interpret experiences through a lens of vulnerability and emotional intensity ( Fretwell, 2023, Allen, 2021).

#### **Understanding Sensitivity in Parenting**

Sensitivity in children is not uniform; it varies across a spectrum where some may respond more acutely to sensory stimuli, while others exhibit profound emotional depth (Begin Learning, n.d.)

Consequently, understanding the specific sensitivities of each child is essential for effective parenting. Misinterpretations or dismissals of their feelings can exacerbate their emotional distress and lead to further behavioral challenges (Moller, 2011, Allen, 2021 ) .

#### **Key Parenting Strategies**

- **Creating a Calm Environment:** HSCs thrive in predictable and serene settings that minimize overwhelming stimuli, such as loud noises or chaotic environments. A structured routine can provide a sense of security, crucial for their emotional regulation (Begin Learning, n.d.).
- **Emotional Validation:** Acknowledging and validating the feelings of HSCs is vital, even when their emotional reactions seem disproportionate. This affirmation fosters a strong emotional connection and helps them feel understood and supported (Begin Learning, n.d, Allen, 2021 ) .
- **Encouraging Expression:** Providing creative outlets—such as art, music, or storytelling—enables HSCs to express and process their emotions in a safe manner. This approach promotes emotional growth and helps them articulate their feelings effectively (Begin Learning, n.d, Allen, 2021 ) .

- **Teaching Coping Skills:** Equipping HSCs with strategies to manage overwhelming emotions is crucial. Techniques such as deep-breathing exercises, creating a 'safe space' at home, or utilizing sensory tools can empower them to handle their sensitivities more effectively (Little Otter, n.d.) .

- **Fostering Social Connections:** Encouraging friendships with peers who share similar sensitivities can provide HSCs with emotional support and understanding, which is essential for reducing feelings of isolation (Little Otter, n.d, Begin Learning, n.d.).

### **Challenges in Parenting Highly Sensitive Children**

Parenting a highly sensitive child can be particularly challenging due to societal misconceptions surrounding emotional sensitivity. Parents may feel pressure to conform to traditional disciplinary methods, which can be counterproductive. For instance, punitive measures or forcing participation in social events may trigger anxiety or emotional breakdowns in HSCs, reinforcing their need for a gentler approach (Allen, 2021, Allen, 2021, Kumar, 2020)

Additionally, parents must navigate their own emotional responses to their child's sensitivity. It is essential to recognize that these children are not "bad kids" for their emotional reactions, but rather individuals who require a distinct approach to thrive (Allen, 2021, Moller, 2011)

. Patience and empathy are vital in embracing their emotionality as an opportunity for growth rather than a problem to be fixed (Moller, 2011, Psychology Today, n.d.)

### **Research and Studies**

#### **The Highly Sensitive Person Scale**

The Highly Sensitive Person Scale-Shortened Version (HSPS-SV) is a self-report measure designed to assess sensory sensitivity in adults. It consists of 11 items derived from the original 27 items of the Highly Sensitive Person Scale, rated on an 8-point Likert scale (0 = 'not at all' to 7 = 'extremely'). Higher scores indicate greater sensory sensitivity, while lower scores suggest a higher neurological threshold (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d.).

This scale has been instrumental in understanding sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) and its impact on individuals, particularly in educational contexts.

#### **Impact of Parenting Styles**

Research indicates that parenting styles significantly affect the emotional well-being of children, especially those who are highly sensitive. For instance, children raised under strict psychological control may be more susceptible to emotional abuse in later relationships.

However, experiencing emotional warmth from another parent can mitigate these effects (Psychology Today, n.d, Quenza, n.d.)

It highlights the importance of balanced parenting in fostering resilience in highly sensitive children.

### **Academic Performance and Social Competence**

Studies suggest that highly sensitive children tend to perform better academically and exhibit higher levels of social competence when raised in supportive environments. They often demonstrate improved self-regulation and moral attitudes compared to their peers (Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.). Conversely, negative environments can exacerbate their vulnerabilities, leading to increased stress and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d, Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.).

Thus, understanding the dynamics of parenting styles can aid in promoting optimal development for highly sensitive children.

### **Benefits of Mindful Parenting**

Effective parenting styles, characterized by emotional warmth and authoritative approaches, contribute to healthier emotional development in children. This nurturing environment fosters strong self-esteem and meaningful connections, helping highly sensitive children navigate their unique challenges (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d, MacMillan, 2021)

Understanding and adapting parenting styles can empower parents to create supportive atmospheres conducive to their children's well-being.

### **Practical Implications**

Understanding the implications of parenting styles on highly sensitive children (HSC) is essential for fostering optimal development and mitigating potential difficulties. Parental sensory sensitivity and the associated parenting style can significantly influence a child's emotional and psychological wellbeing. It is crucial for parents to recognize that their own sensitivity may affect their interactions and expectations of their sensitive children (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d.).

### **Educational Environment Considerations**

Creating an inclusive educational environment that caters to the unique needs of HSC is paramount. Research indicates that environmental factors, such as classroom layout and sensory stimuli, play a significant role in the emotional experiences of HSC. Overstimulating environments, characterized by bright colors or excessive noise, may lead to

misinterpretations of HSC behavior, such as being perceived as unmotivated or inattentive (Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.).

Therefore, educators and parents must advocate for structured, predictable learning environments that prioritize calmness and routine to enhance HSC comfort and engagement (Safe Solutions, n.d.).

### **Supporting Emotional Development**

Parental approaches that emphasize emotional validation and understanding can significantly benefit HSC. High sensitivity is not merely a risk factor for emotional difficulties; it can also be an advantage when nurtured in supportive settings. Parents are encouraged to adopt practices that foster resilience, recognizing that high sensitivity can coexist with exceptional development under the right circumstances (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d.).

Developing empathy and providing emotional support can enable HSC to thrive academically and socially, helping them build positive peer relationships in smaller, supportive groups rather than larger, chaotic environments( Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.).

### **Transitioning and Coping Strategies**

Supporting HSC during transitions—such as moving to a new school or changing classrooms—requires careful preparation and understanding. Parents and educators should collaborate to provide information about what to expect and introduce coping strategies to alleviate anxiety associated with change (Safe Solutions, n.d.).

Implementing buddy systems or assigning mentors can offer additional reassurance and promote smoother adjustments to new settings.

### **Professional Development for Educators**

To effectively support HSC, ongoing professional development for educators is essential. Training that focuses on understanding sensitivity, conflict resolution, and effective communication can empower teachers to create more inclusive classrooms. By equipping educators with the skills to handle sensitive situations empathetically, schools can foster a nurturing environment that respects and uplifts the needs of all students (Safe Solutions, n.d.).

By prioritizing these practical implications, parents and educators can create an environment that not only recognizes the challenges faced by highly sensitive children but also harnesses their unique strengths, leading to a more balanced and fulfilling educational experience.



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