

## CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON PARENTING HIGHLY SENSITIVE CHILDREN

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**Abstract:** *Cultural and Environmental Influences on Parenting Highly Sensitive Children* The parenting of highly sensitive children (HSCs) is profoundly affected by cultural and environmental influences, shaping both their emotional experiences and developmental outcomes. Highly sensitive children, estimated to represent 15% to 20% of the population, process sensory information more intensely, making them particularly vulnerable to their surroundings (Mak & Zhang, 2021, Learning Mole, n.d.).

Understanding how different cultural norms dictate parenting styles and emotional regulation strategies is essential, as these factors can significantly impact how HSCs navigate their emotional landscapes (Johnson & Smith, 2021, Moller, 2020).

Cultural contexts play a pivotal role in defining emotional expression and parenting approaches. For instance, individualistic cultures, such as the United States, often emphasize self-expression and cognitive strategies for managing emotions, while collectivist cultures, like those found in East Asia, prioritize emotional suppression and social harmony (Child Research Net, 2019, Wang & Liu, 2021).

These differences can complicate how parents perceive and respond to the unique emotional needs of HSCs, leading to diverse parenting strategies that can either support or hinder a child's development (Moller, 2020).

Furthermore, societal expectations may place additional stress on parents, especially in varying economic conditions, affecting their ability to provide nurturing environments conducive to emotional growth (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d.).

Environmental influences also significantly shape parenting dynamics, particularly through factors such as parenting stress and family routines. High levels of stress, often exacerbated by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, can detrimentally impact the quality of parent-child relationships, resulting in heightened internalizing behaviors among sensitive children (Danhoff & Vance, 2023, Connected Families, n.d.).

Establishing a supportive home environment—characterized by validation, calm spaces, and structured routines—has been shown to enhance emotional resilience in HSCs, promoting their overall well-being (Schoenfeld, 2021, Moller, 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of the unique challenges faced by parents of highly sensitive children, misconceptions and critiques persist regarding the classification and implications of high sensitivity. While some advocate for a deeper understanding of HSC traits, others argue for a more nuanced view that acknowledges the complexities of neurodiversity, including autism spectrum conditions (Moller, 2023, Equitable Growth, 2021).

Overall, effective parenting of HSCs requires a combination of cultural sensitivity, emotional attunement, and environmental awareness to foster resilience and adaptability in an increasingly complex world.

**Keywords:** *Environmental Influences, emotional experiences, Understanding High Sensitivity, Educational Implications*

## **Cultural Influences**

Cultural influences play a significant role in shaping parenting practices, particularly for highly sensitive children. These influences manifest in emotional expression, regulation strategies, and overall parenting styles that vary across different societies.

### **Emotional Expression and Regulation**

Cultural contexts dictate how emotions are expressed and regulated. In individualistic cultures, such as the United States, cognitive reappraisal is often utilized as an effective method for managing negative emotions. Conversely, collectivistic cultures, such as those found in East Asia, frequently rely on emotion suppression to maintain group harmony and mitigate negative emotional states that could disrupt social cohesion (Mak & Zhang, 2021).

This distinction underscores the importance of cultural frameworks in understanding how parents of highly sensitive children navigate emotional challenges.

### **Parenting Styles**

Diverse cultural backgrounds yield varying parenting styles that directly influence child development. For instance, Western cultures tend to favor authoritative parenting, which balances warmth with structure, while many Asian cultures may lean towards more authoritarian approaches that emphasize respect for elders and adherence to rules (Learning Mole, n.d.).

Such differences highlight the need for parents to align their methods with cultural expectations, especially when raising children who may be more emotionally reactive or sensitive.

### **Communication Styles**

Communication styles also differ significantly between cultures, impacting parental feedback and children's perceptions of criticism. U.S. Americans, who often employ low-context communication characterized by directness and assertiveness, are more likely to perceive criticism as destructive. In contrast, high-context cultures, such as those in Japan and China, typically utilize non-assertive communication, placing less value on direct verbal expression and more on contextual cues. This can lead to different experiences of criticism and support, shaping how sensitive children react and adapt in various social settings (Mak & Zhang, 2021).

## **Cultural Sensitivity in Parenting**

Understanding cultural sensitivity in parenting is vital for fostering an inclusive environment for highly sensitive children. Parents are encouraged to model acceptance and engage with diverse social networks, promoting intercultural dialogue and understanding. By appreciating and integrating various cultural norms into their parenting practices, caregivers can equip their children with the skills needed to navigate a multifaceted world, fostering empathy and resilience (Learning Mole, n.d.).

## **Environmental Influences**

### **Understanding Environmental Sensitivity**

Environmental sensitivity refers to individual differences in the ability to register, process, and respond to both internal and external stimuli. This trait encompasses genetic, neurophysiological, and behavioral components, with some individuals exhibiting heightened sensitivity to environmental influences, which can affect their psychological well-being and developmental outcomes (Johnson & Smith, 2021, Moller, 2020).

Research indicates that approximately 25%–30% of individuals possess high sensitivity to environmental stimuli, leading to a spectrum of reactions ranging from resilience to vulnerability in the face of adverse conditions (Child Research Net, 2019, Moller, 2020).

### **Parenting Stress and Child Outcomes**

The dynamics of the parent-child relationship are significantly influenced by environmental factors, particularly parenting stress. During stressful times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, parents may experience heightened levels of stress, which can adversely affect their closeness with their children. Increased parental stress is linked to negative impacts on the quality of the parent-child relationship, which can, in turn, affect children's emotional and behavioral outcomes (Wang & Liu, 2021, Moller, 2020). Specifically, highly sensitive children may show increased internalizing behaviors when exposed to low levels of parent-child closeness, whereas a supportive family environment can provide them with essential emotional regulation skills (Wang & Liu, 2021, Moller, 2020).

### **Creating a Supportive Environment**

To foster positive development in highly sensitive children, it is crucial to establish a nurturing home environment. Strategies such as creating calm spaces, maintaining predictable routines, and validating emotions can significantly help mitigate the challenges faced by these

children. For instance, quiet areas in the home allow sensitive children to retreat when feeling overwhelmed, while consistent daily routines provide them with a sense of security (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d, Danhoff & Vance, 2023).

Furthermore, validating a child's emotions and recognizing their sensitivity as a valid trait rather than a flaw can empower them to navigate their emotional experiences more effectively (Neurodivergent Insights, n.d, Danhoff & Vance, 2023).

### **Challenges in Parenting**

Parenting highly sensitive children (HSCs) presents unique challenges that require specific strategies and approaches. One significant challenge is the need for emotional attunement. Parents often find themselves in a delicate balance between supporting their child and avoiding overprotection, which can hinder the child's development of coping skills. Parents must learn to provide empathy and validation while also establishing clear boundaries to foster resilience and independence (Connected Families, n.d, Schoenfeld, 2021).

Another challenge lies in the parents' perception of their child's emotional reactions. Highly sensitive children often experience intense feelings and may become easily overwhelmed by their environments. This can lead to parental anxiety as caregivers struggle to manage their own emotional responses in high-stress situations. The constant need to anticipate and mitigate potential stressors can result in what is termed "helicopter parenting," where the parent becomes excessively involved in shielding the child from emotional distress, potentially stunting the child's ability to self-regulate emotions (Moller, 2023).

(Schoenfeld, 2021).

Cultural factors also influence parenting strategies for HSCs. In societies that emphasize individualism, parents may be more inclined to encourage self-expression, while collectivist cultures might prioritize group harmony, leading to different approaches to emotional socialization. These cultural differences can complicate how parents perceive their child's emotional needs and shape their responses to those needs (Danhoff & Vance, 2023, Moller, 2023). Moreover, economic factors significantly impact the ability of parents to provide enriching environments conducive to emotional and cognitive development. Families from low-income backgrounds may face limitations in resources that affect their parenting styles, making it essential for policymakers to recognize the need for targeted support programs to enhance parent-child interactions in such families (Equitable Growth, 2021).

This lack of resources can exacerbate the challenges faced by parents of highly sensitive children, creating a cycle of stress and limitation in emotional development.

## **Strategies for Supporting Highly Sensitive Children**

### **Understanding High Sensitivity**

Highly sensitive children (HSC) often process their environments deeply, making them uniquely empathetic and intuitive, yet vulnerable to overstimulation and strong emotions (Highly Sensitive Refuge, n.d, Parents Helping Parents, n.d.).

Approximately 15 to 20% of children are considered highly sensitive, indicating the need for tailored parenting strategies to support their emotional and developmental needs (Parents Helping Parents, n.d.).

Understanding that sensitivity is not a weakness, but rather a different way of experiencing the world, is crucial for effective parenting (Parenting for Brain, n.d.).

### **Advocacy and Communication**

One of the most important strategies for supporting HSC is advocacy. Parents must often act as a voice for their sensitive children, helping them communicate their feelings and needs, particularly in school settings where these needs may go unnoticed by teachers (Highly Sensitive Refuge, n.d.).

Building trust between the child and educators can take time, making parental advocacy vital for ensuring that the child's needs are acknowledged and addressed (Highly Sensitive Refuge, n.d.).

### **Creating a Supportive Environment**

A supportive home environment is foundational for HSC. Parents are encouraged to accept and believe their children's feelings, acknowledging their sensitivity without judgment. This acceptance helps create a "goodness of fit" between the child and their parenting style, fostering emotional resilience and self-acceptance (Parenting for Brain, n.d.).

It's essential for parents to recognize that their child's experiences are valid, even if they differ from their own perceptions (Parenting for Brain, n.d.).

### **Positive Childhood Experiences**

Research indicates that sensitive children thrive in environments where they have positive experiences. Conversely, negative experiences can lead to increased health risks and emotional challenges (Parenting for Brain, n.d.). Thus, prioritizing nurturing experiences—such as validating emotions, encouraging creative expression, and providing safe spaces for

emotional release—can significantly enhance the well-being of HSC (Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.).

### **Educator Training and Support**

Equipping educators with knowledge and tools to understand high sensitivity is also essential. Teachers should be informed about the characteristics of HSC and trained in methods that cater specifically to their needs, such as mindfulness practices and temperamental-based interventions (Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.).

Providing access to specialists who can support both educators and families fosters a comprehensive support system for sensitive children (Highly Sensitive Child, n.d.).

### **Community and Parental Support**

Joining community support groups can also be beneficial for parents of highly sensitive children. Such groups offer a space for sharing experiences, strategies, and emotional support, helping parents navigate the challenges of raising HSC (Parents Helping Parents, n.d.).\_ By connecting with other parents facing similar situations, individuals can reduce feelings of isolation and gain practical insights into effective parenting strategies (Parents Helping Parents, n.d.).

## **Case Studies and Examples**

### **Cultural Case Studies**

#### **German and Nso Cultural Communities**

A comparative study involving middle-class families from Münster, Germany, and the Nso community in rural Cameroon illustrates significant cultural influences on parenting styles and child development. This research focused on how the familiarity of visual stimuli affects attentional styles in children from different cultural backgrounds. Findings revealed that children from independent cultural orientations (e.g., German) exhibited analytic attention, while those from interdependent orientations (e.g., Nso) displayed holistic attention, especially in familiar settings. The results underscore how cross-cultural differences in context sensitivity can be influenced by the nature of the stimuli presented to children (Danhoff, 2020, Wang & Liu, 2021).

### **Educational Implications**

In educational settings, findings highlight that the physical environment significantly impacts highly sensitive children (HSC). For instance, HSC children often thrive in structured

and repetitive learning environments. Teachers' misunderstandings of HSC behaviors—interpreting overstimulation as lack of motivation—can hinder effective teaching and exacerbate the children's anxiety

(Wang & Liu, 2021, *Highly Sensitive Child*, n.d.).

Moreover, creating supportive educational environments through tailored approaches can foster better developmental outcomes for HSC, such as reducing conflicts and enhancing attention in classrooms (Danhoff, 2021).

### **Parenting Strategies**

#### **Encouragement of Meaningful Connections**

Highly sensitive children (HSC) often prefer deeper, more meaningful friendships rather than numerous superficial interactions. Case studies suggest that gently encouraging HSC to engage in activities that foster these connections—while allowing sufficient downtime for recharging—can lead to improved social interactions and emotional health. Parents are advised to navigate their own sensitivities to prevent burnout and better support their HSC's unique needs (Schoenfeld, 2021, *Neurodivergent Insights*, n.d.).

#### **Cross-Cultural Parenting Adaptations**

Globalization has necessitated a more nuanced approach to parenting in diverse cultural contexts. A case example highlighted by Michelle Connolly emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity when parenting across different backgrounds. By recognizing and integrating various cultural practices, parents can create nurturing environments that respect both individual cultural identities and broader global awareness. This approach has proven beneficial for children's social and emotional development (Learning Mole, n.d.).

### **Critiques and Considerations**

While the concept of Highly Sensitive People (HSP) has gained traction, it has faced criticism, particularly from within the neurodivergent community. Some advocates argue that framing HSP traits as distinct may overlook the complexities of conditions like autism. They stress the importance of acknowledging autism as a separate identity, ensuring that the nuances of both HSP and autistic experiences are recognized and validated

(*Neurodivergent Insights*, n.d.).

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