



# Teaching Highly Sensitive Middle School and High School Students

feature

BY MAURA HARRIS

Classrooms are becoming more and more diverse, and teachers rise to the challenge of teaching students with a variety of learning differences, varying backgrounds, and even a variety of natural temperaments. Reaching all students continues to be an ongoing challenge and goal for teachers. Some students have the temperament of high sensitivity. In the classroom, I ask teachers, have you ever had a student that:

- Seemed dazed in class and not participating much, yet shows clear insight and deep thought in a consequent paper or exam?

- Did not want to do a presentation, no matter what the cost, when they clearly would present some very interesting material?
- Was quick to deflate from plain remarks about mistakes made on an assessment or paper?

If so, you may have likely had a “highly sensitive student,” a student who has by this nature the potential to be a very deep thinker and insightful student but may present very differently. This type of student tends to be reserved, quiet, intuitive, clever, perfectionistic and literal.

High sensitivity is an inherent nature or temperament. These children are not simply “shy,” but are often labeled as such. Also, some children without this trait may show highly sensitive behavior for periods of time, such as after experiencing humiliation, bullying or personal trauma. Here I offer some strategies for understanding, reaching, assisting and witnessing great things in this type of student.

Roughly 20 percent of the population is highly sensitive, and this trait is displayed equally among males and females, according to Dr. Elaine Aron, author of “The

Highly Sensitive Child.” Unfortunately, there is no formal assessment to determine the presence of this nature, and there are varying degrees of being highly sensitive.

According to Dr. Aron, children show their sensitivity more readily and clearly than adolescents. Children that are highly sensitive will tend to express their deep emotions readily (although not necessarily name the emotions they are feeling). In other words they get upset, overwhelmed, and it is clear that they need a break. They may have tantrums when they are overwhelmed. Their “winding down” time before bed is longer than that of other children. They prefer to play quietly alone or with one other friend.

As highly sensitive children grow into adolescents, they show this very same trait in different ways. They may have the desire to not be this way, citing the need to fit in as the reason. They may try to toughen up, unaware that this nature is the way they are and cannot be toughened up. They are very aware of social norms, so they are less likely to get involved in alcohol or drug abuse. They are also aware of rules and abide by them, so they are also less likely to be a discipline problem.

Having attention on them is even more uncomfortable for a highly sensitive teen than other students this age. Because they feel extremely vulnerable, and probably coupled with their perfectionist mindset, volunteering in class and presenting in front of a group will likely cause anxiety beyond the norm. For the highly sensitive student, the subject matter is not the issue, it is being in front of an audience that causes anxiety and distress.

Highly sensitive people of all ages feel things deeply, as if they have “no skin” to filter all the stimuli around them. They are highly intuitive and pick up on the feeling in a room as soon as they enter it.

Consequently, they instinctually pause and process the activity, feel every aspect of the new situation before entering into it.

They need time in each day to decompress from the over-stimulating experience of being out in the world at school and work. They also need an outlet, exercise to free up tensions and help their self-esteem. Such exercise should be individual sports, like equestrian sports, swimming or track. Activities with others that involve predictable activity include crew, tennis and theater, according to Aron.

During the middle and high school years, students are in a heightened state of awareness of themselves. The changes happen-

Teachers and others in the school community (adviser, school counselor, for example) who are aware that one or more of the students in their class(es) are highly sensitive can help guide these students to grow, be more accepting of themselves, and thrive in school. It does not require accommodations, different materials or more time. It takes awareness and compassion on the part of the teacher and others, to build an environment where the student feels safe. Feeling emotionally safe often leads to greater achievement from that student.

To create that safe environment:

- Do not see the student as weak or fragile — they are not necessarily so, they are

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ing physically, social interactions, dating and the need to feel a part of a group are taxing. Parents comment that they see their son or daughter as so child-like one moment, then so grown up another moment. For a highly sensitive person in this age group, these tumultuous times are felt more deeply and magnified in their experiences in school.

Highly sensitive students have greater challenges in achieving the resilience they must have in adulthood. As a result, they likely have a harder time in the transition from child to teen to adult that every student faces.

highly sensitive and that is different from strength.

- These students observe their environment before taking the risk of verbally engaging in the discussion. (They can follow the discussion closely and think deeply about the issues but will not share readily). They will observe how others are treated when they make a mistake or in any way are not providing the “perfect” or “right” answer or comment.
- They are asking themselves, “Is it safe to speak without ridicule?” “I need to ponder this longer before I can formulate my opinion,” “Can I count on backup if I make a fool of myself?”

Here are a few tips for giving these students feedback on their particular work:

- Of course, do not make it public.
- These students tend to be perfectionists, so a gentle corrective feedback will help enormously.
- Be honest. Intuitive students like these know when someone is not straightforward. They can take correction and gentle criticism. Remember, they are not necessarily fragile.
- These students want to improve and be successful. Give them challenges that you are confident they can reach, and tell them you are confident in their abilities, and they will likely achieve them.

When it is required to perform (i.e. presentations):

- Remember that in their world, they are completely exposed in this situation.
- For highly sensitive students, the subject matter is not the issue, it is being in front of a group that causes anxiety — they will be well-prepared with the material.
- Let students know that they can look at you during their presentation for reassurance.

- Invite the student to practice for you in the space where the presentation will take place.
- When time approaches, remind him/her that you know they can do it.
- Right before the student presents, discreetly walk up to them, hold their hands firmly and say, “I know you can do this” with a confident smile and encouraging tone.
- Keep your eyes on the student as he/she presents, so when the student looks to you, you can smile and nod slightly. They will feel huge support from this small, undetectable (to others) gesture.
- With a successful experience, the student can approach the future public speaking activities in your class with less and less support from you, but with continued faith in them and telling them so.

For parents and caretakers of school aged highly sensitive children/teens, I recommend that a conversation with your child’s teacher(s) about the fact that your child has this temperament. In this way, you are offering the teacher the opportunity to learn how to best teach and reach your child.

At home, it is helpful to teach your child about his or her high sensitivity, what that means, and what gifts they have naturally, such as compassion and empathy. The goal of the highly sensitive child is to learn, as they grow up how to manage their strong emotions and tendency to become overwhelmed in certain situations. In some cases, a psychologist trained in this area can be helpful.

Ultimately, these students have much to offer both as students and adults. The world needs more people who are naturally compassionate, caring and sensitive to others. 🌟

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Maura Harris is a learning strategist and educational therapist of 20 years. She earned a master’s degree in special education. Presently she owns her own educational therapy business, SEA Educational Support, LLC, in Connecticut. She also lectures on highly sensitive children, adults and students. She writes on a variety of topics. For more information, visit <http://sea-educational-support.com>.

## ( kids in waiting )

*Jhirosky, 12, and Avante, 10, are close-knit brothers who hope to be adopted together.*

Jhirosky loves to be outside. He is a hard worker who enjoys fishing, watching TV and loves to eat.

Avante is outgoing and funny once you get to know him. He enjoys playing with toy Army men and toy cars. Avante thinks he may want to be a wrestler when he grows up.

These boys want and deserve a forever family who will love them, care for them and help guide them to become the best young men they can be. For more information, visit <http://heartgalleryalabama.com/children/jhirosky-avante/> or call 205-445-1293. *Photo by Aubrie Moates*

