



## Heightened Sensitivity in the Gifted

It is widely accepted that children who possess an adult-like intelligence should be praised and rewarded for their academic achievements, but how many children receive accolades for having adult-like emotions? On the contrary, these children are often misunderstood and adults around them may worry there is something wrong with these children.

Do you know a highly-sensitive child? Do they:

- Cry, get angry, and/or get excited easily?
- Quickly notice, and/or respond to emotions of people around them?
- Notice problems that other people around them don't often notice?
- Ask numerous questions about life, death, pain, suffering, and/or violence?
- Worry about world problems, other people, or the environment?

*(Adapted from Galbraith, 2000.)*

Don't worry, there are good things that come from being a highly sensitive child. They place a high value on the importance of helping others and the environment and often have a high sense of moral development. They are quick to understand right from wrong and are passionate about social injustice and fairness. Since they feel a great amount of pain when they are hurt, they usually show great empathy and are careful with other people's feelings. Highly sensitive children can form deep relationships and can become loyal lifelong friends.

### What do the experts say?

"Professionals... recognize that the brighter the child, the more sensitive he may be. A gifted child... is often acutely aware of his feelings and may be very emotional. He may be distraught because a classmate was teased or bullied, or he may cry when he sees a handicapped person who is begging" *(Webb, Gore, Amend & DeVries, 2007).*

"Gifted children have surprisingly powerful emotions, they often push their feelings down... they can feel as if they're holding the ocean in a bottle; they may be afraid that if they take out the stopper, they'll be overwhelmed by the waves - that once they begin to vent their emotions, they won't be able to stop" *(Whitney & Hirsch, 2001).*

## **How Do Global Issues Impact the Sensitive Child?**

Gifted kids have a tendency to worry about world problems, or global issues. They struggle with their feelings when they see hungry people begging for money. They don't understand why poachers are killing endangered animals or why local governments aren't stopping them. They struggle because they feel it is their responsibility to solve the issues that will adversely affect the quality of life for future generations.

Why do they worry so much? Many studies have shown that highly gifted youth have a heightened emotional sensitivity that affects the way they view the world. You might imagine it as though they have a set of emotional antenna that picks up emotional vibes from every direction at any given moment; basically they feel everything all the time.

It's important to understand how this sensitivity can affect them in other aspects of their life. Many sensitive children take matters personally and have trouble handling criticism that isn't presented positively. Other people's strong emotions can upset them more deeply than expected. For example, they may lose sleep worrying when parents or friends argue in front of them. They may become withdrawn or depressed when they worry about things they are ready to handle intellectually, but are not emotionally prepared to handle. Young gifted children may understand intellectually what ozone depletion will do to the future of the environment, but are they emotionally ready to tackle a problem of this size?

## **Helping the Sensitive Child with Global Issues** *(Adapted from Galbraith, 2000 & Lovecky, 1992)*

- Always acknowledge and respect their feelings by talking about them in an open and honest manner. When appropriate, share your own thoughts and feelings on the same subject to help the child see an alternate approach and attitude.
- Allow your child to express feelings comfortably with the family. Don't stop them (even boys) from crying. Crying is an appropriate way for a child to release feelings.
- Find ways to help the child express his deep feelings about pain or suffering in a positive way by doing a family service project. Try volunteering at a food bank, animal shelter, or orphanage.
- Help the child understand that she is not expected to solve all the world problems. It is okay to think about one problem or issue at a time and reflect on what she can do to help improve this problem in her community; versus on a global scale.
- Encourage the child to separate his feelings from others who might be greatly affected by an issue or dilemma. This will help him to develop appropriate interpersonal distance with the big issue.
- These children need to understand there are times when direct action is not always possible; a child or adult cannot speak up or prevent every instance of injustice.

As parents and educators of highly sensitive gifted children, let's teach the world to embrace these children and accept their unique perspective of the world. After all, highly-sensitive people are the ones who actually see what the world has to offer without a clouded view of the future. With proper guidance and nurturing, they will continue to make the world a beautiful place for generations to come.