

The Oversensitive Child

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The world is a harsh place for many children today. Their skin hurts where the world bumps them, their ears ache, because the sounds of the world are so harsh and relentless, they recoil from the tastes and smells which assail these senses, reacting to chemicals and excesses which our systems have become too coarse to register. Even the light, and the relentlessness of the visual world, causes distress. Like an egg, whose shell is not properly formed, they cannot escape the impact of the intensity of life in the 21st century.

Parents notice how their child is hurt by the smallest touch, hair dressing and nail cutting are nightmares, clothes scratch and food is limited to a narrow and unvarying range.

How do children protect themselves from the impact of the world? They cling to routine. They may become obsessive in their need to finish things, tidy, straighten or do things in a certain order, wearing the same clothes, going the same way, eating the same food – collapsing into tears and distress if these needs are not met. They may also ‘disappear’ into an imaginary world or only confide in an imaginary friend. They may become a dog, a fairy, a mermaid, for hours, days or weeks, hiding within the persona of something else.

The oversensitive child has many gifts. They are usually intuitive and know what you are thinking before you do, they are creative and imaginative. They respond to the mood or the tone of the environment and will quickly reflect your mood of happiness or of sadness.

To understand the oversensitive child we need to understand something about our sensory systems and how they develop. We need to know about anxiety and how this impacts on our central nervous system and our ability to attend and learn.

Our senses are our windows to the world. Body senses – movement, touch and balance are already functional before birth. Hearing is also responsive before the child is born. At birth, vision, taste and smell are also born. Responsiveness to language and to another person, must unfold as part of the developmental process.

Rudolf Steiner, early in the 20th century, described 12 senses and this is a useful paradigm for building a picture of the interdependence of the

developing sensory systems. Steiner speaks of four body senses with which we know ourselves and through which we come to understand our separateness from the world – the senses of touch, life, movement and balance. Next are four senses for the perception of the outer world – smell, taste, vision and warmth. With a secure sense of self the child is then ready to reach out, embrace and understand the environmental space. Finally there are four more cognitive senses with which we perceive, understand and communicate with other people – hearing, the sense of word, the sense of thought and the sense of the individuality of the other.

We receive sensations from our sensory systems, but we must learn to perceive and understand the importance of these sensations to react appropriately to the world around us. This learning begins before birth as the baby lives within the life processes and the rhythms of the mother and continues after birth in the nurturing, interactive space between mother and infant.

The infant’s awakening to the world begins in the intimate caring space, shared with the mother, through warmth, vision, taste and smell. Initially completely dependent, the little one is called into activity through this nurturing process and gradually begins to take hold of, and own, its body and limbs. The sense of touch is vital in the nurturing process. It is soothing, calming and defining. Security in relationship, and nurture which accompanies it, brings about the awakening of the will to move, to strive to the upright.

The sense of life, or the sense of well being, is also vital to the integrity of the early development. Karl Konig suggests that the organ or system which is responsible for the sense of life is the autonomic nervous system. This part of the central nervous system is made up of two parts. The sympathetic nervous system is our alerting awakening system which speeds up the breathing and the heart rate to ready us for action. The digestion is slowed, blood being diverted from less essential functions. When we attend to something we need this sympathetic response to wake up and focus, this is a normal response. In a situation of stress or fear, a full ‘fight or flight’ reaction diverts energy to only the most vital functions and even the brain’s thinking reasoning capacity is closed down. We

react and respond with the lowest part of our brain whose function is survival.

The second part of the autonomic nervous system is called the parasympathetic nervous system. This opens up the peripheral circulation, slows us down, and brings us into a resting rhythm. Digestion is facilitated and breathing slows; if it slows too much we go to sleep. Between the extremes of these two systems we find the balance which allows us to function optimally.

The oversensitive child, for whom the world is a threatening too big place, lives with the sympathetic nervous system predominating so that a state of low grade anxiety prevails. Living with order and routine and being in control makes this manageable. When the order is lost, when the unpredictable happens, when parents become anxious, then the delicately held balance is upset and anxiety may cause withdrawal, tantrums, obsessiveness, or other behaviours, which signal this distress. Children who have suffered early separation, trauma or abuse, show the extreme of these problems. Children on the Autism Spectrum and those with Developmental Dyspraxia may also demonstrate difficulties in processing sensory information with accompanying anxiety.

The child with heightened anxiety is more aware of the world, being visually hyper-vigilant, noticing everything, is more easily overwhelmed by sound and is over-reactive to taste and smell. Without inner calmness the digestive processes function less effectively and eating patterns are disturbed. In this situation the child lives, like the infant, more strongly in the environment and less strongly in the body. Body awareness through touch, movement and balance are decreased.

To support the child who is oversensitive we need first to develop our understanding. If we acknowledge that the world is overwhelming for the child, through observation we can begin to see when they are supported and at peace and when this changes. What are the triggers that precipitate tantrums, withdrawal, or controlling behaviour. What are the most effective ways to support, redirect and nurture them.

The trusting caring relationship which you develop, as the parent or the teacher, of the oversensitive child, is vital to their well being. They will show you their best behaviour and often also their worst when the world is too much for them. They trust you to understand and to hold

the centre or focus for them which the enormity of life has caused them to lose. Holding the calm place, knowing what helps is the task.

From a more therapeutic stand point we can talk about working with the lower senses. Through touch we affirm the boundaries of our body. Therapeutic touch, such as massage, as well as play based approaches, can be helpful. The life sense is nurtured through rhythm and meaningful routines. Problems related to the digestive process need to be recognized. Improving these by good eating patterns, such as regular mealtimes and sitting together in a calm and unhurried environment. The quality of food, and diagnosis of particular food allergies and intolerances can also be hugely beneficial for the oversensitive child.

Movement is also important. When anxious we move without freedom. Children move with the greatest ease when their imagination is engaged and they are drawn into activity by this. Rhythmical movement such as swinging, rocking, bouncing and skipping, especially when accompanied by the rhythm of singing, can help to free the body of the tension caused by anxiety. Out of movement we hope to find equilibrium and stillness. In stillness we can be centered and at peace. Inner stillness is the starting point for receptivity and for real listening.

The oversensitive child is like an orchid. Like the orchid, the child needs more nurturing and more care than most of the flowers we grow. They ask us to be more observant and conscious in all that we do in tending them. The dandelions in our families and in our classes will thrive, be resilient and flower in spite of us. When the environment is right and we are able to provide the right structure and care, then we see the exquisite flower that is the orchid. ♦

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