

Valuing and making the most of acute sensitivity

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As part of training courses on children's social development and communication, I ask participants to reflect on their experiences at school and pre-school. Most comments about pre-school and primary school are positive, including 'fun and exciting', and 'interesting and a great place to make friends'. Reflections on secondary school are more mixed, with phrases such as 'boring' and 'some scary teachers' featuring among the negative comments. However, only one adult so far has described herself as feeling, "horror, terror and being constantly scared, upset and anxious".

This was Hannah, now a successful arts officer working with children, but who at school and pre-school lived every day with an intense dread of being watched by others, for fear that she would be judged unfavourably. She also described how she felt unable to talk in school, yet at home she felt relaxed and at ease about talking. This revelation came during a short discussion after a training course, when she told me in detail about her school experiences and how these have shaped her adult life.

I should at this point mention that I have an interest in *selective mutism (SM)*: a condition where children, who are generally very confident speakers at home with close family, find themselves unable to talk out loud in front of unfamiliar people, in public, and particularly at school. Many adults see the children's reactions as a total enigma, and may even view their silence as a form of challenging behaviour. An important way forward for children with SM, their parents and the adults who work with them, is to try and come to a shared understanding of what life is like for the children, and why they react with silence. This can be a complex but ultimately vital process, and the first step in helping children with SM develop confidence as speakers.

I had been aware for some time that the parents of children with SM often describe them as 'highly sensitive'. "Being thin-skinned as opposed to thick skinned", is how one parent sums it up. It was this parent who directed me to the work of Elaine Aaron, and her books '*The Highly Sensitive Child*' and '*The Highly Sensitive Person*'. Aaron suggests that there are many children and adults who are 'born with a tendency to notice more in their environment and deeply reflect on everything before acting.' She argues that these children are also 'more likely to be overwhelmed by 'high volume' or large quantities of input arriving at once.' They typically try to avoid this by withdrawing into themselves, and thus seem to be shy or timid. When they can't avoid overstimulation they may seem 'easily upset', and are often described as 'too sensitive'.

While the children may notice more about their environment, this does not mean that they have better eyes, ears, and sense of smell or taste buds - although some do report having at least one sense that is very keen. Aaron suggests that their brains process information *more thoroughly*. They also have faster reflexes, are more affected by pain, medication and stimulants, and possibly having more reactive immune systems and allergies. In a sense, Aaron maintains, their entire body is designed to detect and understand more precisely whatever comes in. However this can lead to being overwhelmed, and feelings of panic, as they may be unable to *process* all this information.

As one can imagine, being temperamentally disposed to high sensitivity can lead to extreme difficulties in the fast, noisy and busy worlds of pre-school, primary school and secondary school. Here, being orally proficient and making quick responses are not only vital for making friends, but also essential for achievement. Being highly sensitive could be interpreted as being a curse, but it can also be seen, in some circumstances, as a distinct advantage. Aaron observes that highly sensitive children and adults tend to be empathic, intuitive, creative, careful and conscientious. In many professions 'high sensitivity' is essential. Where would we be, after all, without highly sensitive doctors, therapists, animal welfare professionals and artists?

Might this definition of high sensitivity help children and adults understand themselves more, and consequently help them as communicators? Hannah feels that in many ways she was, and continues to be, 'highly sensitive.' I remained in contact with her, as she was keen to explore the possibility that what she had regarded all her life as an unexplained 'personality defect' could be something that she has in common with many other people: the temperamental trait of high sensitivity. Both Hannah and I were keen to share her feelings about her experiences in school, for the benefit of children with similar reactions, and for the adults who work with them.

In pre-school Hannah was always wary of new people and situations. She was worried about being left by her parents, about doing something wrong, or not knowing what to do. "I was very unlikely to ask for help, or say if I didn't like something. I would often get 'stuck' in situations, when I couldn't say I didn't want to do something, or that I wanted to do something else. I probably appeared very quiet, or boring and uninterested. I would have been described as rude at times, I'm sure"

While Hannah felt uncomfortable about going to nursery, she hated school. Yet she liked learning. She loved to read and write, and did a lot at home with her parents and grandparents. "I was always very good at school and always tried to do what was asked of me. I panicked at new activities and about getting them right. I used to find any excuse to avoid going to school. My parents got cross with me about this, but I couldn't really find the words to describe how school often made me feel. If I was reprimanded or told off about anything at school I usually felt as if my life had just ended. I would get a huge sinking feeling inside and would often feel physically sick."

Hannah could cope with being asked to do something differently, but being told off ruined the day for her. All she wanted to do was get home and out of that situation- and preferably never ever see the offending adults again, as she was convinced that they must have seen her as a total failure. Sometimes being mildly reprimanded would cause Hannah to be unable to sleep, or she would look worried for days on end. Throughout her school career, Hannah wanted adults to understand how she felt. "I think teachers would have been shocked at just how anxious and frightened I was about things. And I wished they'd taken a moment to think about why this child, who did quite well with her work, and didn't really misbehave, was so unhappy going to school, looked so anxious and often panicked in certain situations."

Secondary school was even more of an ordeal. All teachers judged her as 'shy', and repeatedly reported that she 'didn't speak up enough', despite the fact that she did well in most subjects. Hannah is quite bitter that it was never explained to her why 'speaking up' was so important, and that no one ever offered any help, advice or suggestions for ways to improve her ability to speak and her confidence to do so. "I felt that it was all my fault: that there was something internally wrong with me, and it was something that only I could change – no one else could help. I felt that adults were giving me the message that all I needed to do was to speak more and then I would be more confident. Yet no one expects the dyslexic child to improve just by trying harder to spell, or tells a person with a stammer that if they talk more then they will be OK. It never occurred to me that adults or other children could or should be helping me. "

Yet Hannah was not completely isolated, and she had some very close friends. "My friends all knew I was very quiet, very shy and took a while to get used to new people. They also knew I was very clever, kind to my friends, funny, loyal and creative and, once they got to know me, a great person. I was well liked amongst my friends, and was often the person they came to for advice." Hannah moved to Sixth Form College, but still had difficulty speaking in class or approaching her teachers for help. She found it difficult to grasp practical lessons quickly, and when questioned directly often stuttered or blushed, and found it hard to make eye contact.

Hannah feels that because she was quiet, teachers underestimated her true ability." I honestly think they thought I was stupid. I sat in the back row in Chemistry with two other girls – both of whom were also very quiet and didn't do well under direct questioning. We all got much higher grades than predicted and our teacher was stunned. In my music A Level I didn't need to speak to pass anything, and the teacher always appreciated my talent and ability. I never panicked about a music lesson."

By the time Hannah got to University she was convinced that she had a 'defective personality'. "I believed that any type of relationship would go badly, and that the tutors wouldn't like me. I wouldn't have many friends, and I wouldn't fit in. People would not be interested in me. I would be forgotten or ignored, or tutors would assume I wasn't clever or talented, and I would miss out on opportunities. Looking back on it, I realise that I was wrong. I made a few really close friends and I was on a really interesting course, which I enjoyed and got a lot from. I worked hard and got a good degree. It didn't matter that not everyone knew my name, or that I felt uncomfortable at parties or large events (or that I wasn't invited to them). And upon graduating it became apparent that the tutors knew my name, knew my strengths and really respected my clarinet playing abilities! "

Hannah finds the concept of 'high sensitivity' very useful. She recognises that what she grew to perceive in herself as a social deficiency can be interpreted more positively: as having an acute sensitivity to the world around her. She is more aware that she has difficulty with loud noise: especially at large gatherings, and having to respond quickly to what she perceives as a lot of information all at once. And her need to reflect carefully before making decisions is often seen as a distinct advantage.

Does she have any advice for adults dealing with shy or extremely sensitive children? “I think the key thing is to understand just how anxious, nervous and actually scared some sensitive children can be. This is the first step adults need to take. We shouldn’t think about curing, fixing or changing children, but about finding a way for their talents and skills to come out.”

And what about highly sensitive children; does Hannah have a message for them? “YOU ARE NORMAL. You really, really are. It can feel rubbish, and it can be scary – but it will get better. You will get more confident and you will be capable. And you don’t have to become a different person to achieve this. It’s not your fault – you can’t control how you feel or react to a situation – but you can develop skills and methods to help you deal with things better, and eventually you might feel better or react differently.

I work with children all the time, but (don’t tell the loud children!) I usually prefer the quieter ones – you’ve usually got more interesting things to say. And I don’t mind if you don’t want to talk to me. I like it if you do, and I might worry if you’re ok sometimes, but it’s up to me to find that out and make sure that you have the space to tell me, or show me things if you need to. And anyway just because a child is loud and tells me things all the time, doesn’t mean that they’re always happy.”

I have explored these ideas with Maggie Johnson, co-author of ‘The Selective Mutism Resource Manual’ She regards Hannah’s experience as mirroring the experience of many of the adults she has met through the Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA) and ‘Smirataalk’, an online space for sharing ideas about SM and related conditions. “I think that all the children and teenagers with SM that I have worked with are highly sensitive. Though they do not have heightened sensitivity in all areas, they are all super self-conscious, and afraid of making mistakes. Like shy students, they find it painfully difficult to initiate conversation. This includes asking for help, seeking clarification or permission, reporting bullying and false assumptions, and using social greetings and making friends.

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For more information on the subject of selective mutism and high sensitivity in children visit

www.talk4meaning.co.uk

‘The Highly Sensitive Child’ and *‘The Highly Sensitive Person,’* by Elaine N Aaron, are both published by Thorsons.

‘The Selective Mutism Resource Manual’, by Maggie Johnson and Alison Wintgens, is published by Speechmark.

For the Selective Mutism Information and Research Association (SMIRA) visit

www.selectivemutism.co.uk