

Supporting “Sensitive”, Big-Feeling Children In the Classroom:

What They Wish You Knew

Rachel Bailey, M.A., CPDPE





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It's very likely that in your classroom, you'll have at least one student who is “sensitive” or feels things deeply.

According to Dr. Aron, author of “The Highly Sensitive Child,” about 15-20% of children are highly sensitive. There are even more children who may not qualify as “highly sensitive,” but they still feel things very strongly.

In fact, certain behaviors may seem like “misbehavior” but are actually signs that children are having big feelings.

Children with big feelings may

- ...seem more stubborn or inflexible
- ...struggle with transition and change
- ...be slow to warm
- ...get upset if things aren't “fair”
- ...be sensitive to criticism
- ...seem to worry frequently
- ...be very aware of others' feelings
- ...thrive in times of structure and struggle in a lack of structure

Children with big emotions are often misunderstood. But I also know, from my years of working with professionals in educational settings, that educators and other professionals *WANT to understand them better and WANT to know what they can do to help.*

I've created this handout to explain how “sensitive,” big-feeling kids respond to common issues in the school setting.

I'll show you what they may be thinking in these situations (often it's different than what we think!), and how you may be able to support them.



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BEFORE WE BEGIN, know that...

“Sensitive” and “big feeling” kids actually do *feel things more strongly* than kids who are not sensitive or big feelers.

Think about it this way: Imagine there's a 5-lb weight on the ground. Most students can pick it up and they can carry it for a little while. It's uncomfortable for them, but it's not too big of a deal.

For kids with big emotions, this 5-lb weight actually feels like a 20-lb weight. It's too heavy for them. They try to carry it around, but they struggle to hold it.

And then they look around and wonder why everyone else can hold the weight but they can't. *They start to feel like there's something wrong with them.*

And the messages they receive from others, “Why are you so upset?” “You’re making a big deal out of this...” only reinforces that something is different about them. Yet they don't know how to control their “sensitivity” or reactions. *So they feel helpless and out of control.*

It's important to recognize that even though their reactions may not make sense to us, they are real to them. It's also important that their feelings often confuse them too! For this reason, they are often *motivated to try to avoid discomfort*. They're also frequently *worried about what others will think*.

Of course these big feelings are also what help them love so much and eventually, if channeled properly, meet their full potential... and very likely, bring positive change to the world!

With that in mind, here's what they wish you knew.

Things that might seem small to others are big to them. They don't necessarily want someone to try to convince them otherwise.

We often assume that telling kids "it's not a big deal" *when something seems small to us* is enough to convince them that it's shouldn't be a big deal.

Even if it's over something small, **students who feel strongly feel shaken when things don't go the way they expected.**

What would help:
Notice and respect their upset. If they are upset in class, help them find privacy so they can calm themselves down without others noticing.



They struggle with (what they perceive as) harsh tones.

We often don't notice our tone, and we assume that they won't be (or shouldn't be) affected by it either.

When they sense a tone that makes them think we might be upset, big-feeling children often assume something bad about themselves. They wonder what's wrong with them. They also hate the feeling that they're experiencing.

What would help:
Make a lighthearted suggestion about what they CAN do to be successful.

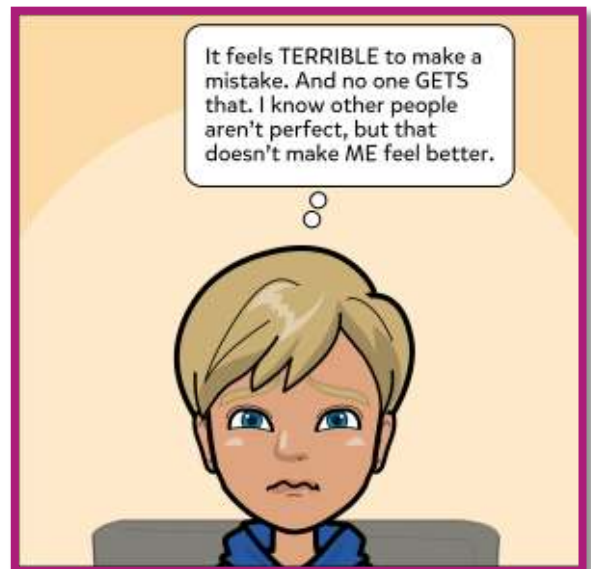


They hate making mistakes. But they don't need to be reminded that no one is perfect.

When kids are upset because they made a mistake, **we think they need reassurance that everyone makes mistakes and that they don't need to be perfect.**



What kids who feel strongly are actually thinking is that they're tired of hearing they don't have to be perfect. Making mistakes feels awful, and knowing that others are imperfect doesn't help that feeling.



What would help:

Acknowledge that they like everything to go a certain way and that it's hard when it doesn't. (We don't need to convince them of anything in that moment.)



What they learn in class may upset them.

We sometimes assume that because what we're teaching is age-appropriate and factual, **it won't (or shouldn't) affect them too much.**



What kids with big feelings are actually thinking about is how others are impacted by what they're learning... and they're especially upset if people or animals could have been affected in any way.



What would help:

Be aware that **lessons that may relate to others getting hurt** might upset them. Don't call them out, but be aware that they **might need someone to talk through their feelings with.**



Recess (or any unstructured free time) can be hard for them.

We assume that **all kids love recess / free time** and that it's a reward for them.

Kids with who feel strongly often believe that recess can be loud and chaotic, especially when they're with large groups of kids.

What would help:
Help them find a recess plan. If they don't have friends, ask them to do something with / for you.



They sense how others, including adults, are feeling.

We assume that if we ACT positive and cheerful, **kids won't be affected by our real moods.**

Kids with big emotions feel confused because **they sense one thing... but see something different.**



What would help:
Acknowledge that something is off and tell them how you're handling it (so they don't worry or feel like it's their job to make things better).



They may get overwhelmed easily, but they don't want anyone to know that.

When we see students feeling overwhelmed, adults may think they may **need help**.

What kids with big emotions actually need is to **feel as unnoticed as possible**.

What would help:
Encourage others to give them space, **but don't call it out**.



They feel compelled to follow rules and have a very hard time when others don't follow them too.

We may not notice **how difficult it is for them when others don't follow rules.**



What kids with big emotions are thinking is that rules are in place to be followed. They appreciate that structure. When others don't follow rules, it makes them feel like **things aren't predictable.** **They feel out of control and uncomfortable.**



What would help:

If you've mentioned specific rules, **try to enforce them as consistently as possible.**



It's hard for them when a few students are doing something wrong and the whole class is called out.

Usually this is done with good intention, so that one or two people aren't identified and embarrassed.

In these situations, kids who feel strongly are uncomfortable even when they know (intellectually) they haven't done anything wrong. They may feel bad about themselves and resentful of the adult who is calling everyone out.

What would help:
Recognize the students who are doing what they're supposed to, and focus on what the others can also do to be successful.



They often feel different from other kids.

We assume that telling kids **how thoughtful and great they are** (especially when we are being genuine!) **will make them feel better.**



Kids with big emotions really feel that **if an adult tells them how great they are, that adult just doesn't know the "real" them.**



What would help:
Just be present when they say they feel different, rather than trying to change their mind. This helps them feel more connected and understood rather than disconnected and misunderstood.



If they get upset, they usually want to be left alone. They don't want anyone to make a big deal.

We assume that if a child feels bad, **they want to be cheered up.**

Kids with big emotions don't want any extra attention put on them. **If anything, they often want to feel un-seen.**

What would help:

Not pointing out that they're upset. If their behavior is really worrisome, check in on them later... but don't make a huge deal about it.





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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Keep this in mind about “sensitive” kids and kids who feel strongly:

- They sense and feel things more strongly than others
- They don’t want to be called out (and often don’t want to be noticed!)
- They often feel different from other kids
- They don’t need to be reassured. They need to feel understood.



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To help parents support children at home, Rachel offers...

PRESENTATIONS AT SCHOOLS

Rachel has spoken both live and in-person to parents and educators at hundreds of schools (from pre-school to high-school level). She is also a sought-after speaker at community organizations, corporations, and conferences.

Her frequently-requested topics include:

- Addressing Big Emotions, Big Reactions, and Other “Drama”
- Supporting Anxious Children and Adolescents
- Raising Responsible Children Without Yelling or Nagging
- Raising Children With Healthy Self-Esteem in a High-Pressure Culture
- Tips to Stay Calm as a Parent, No Matter What is Happening Around You

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PRESENTATION AT YOUR SCHOOL](#)

FREE TRAINING FOR PARENTS

[This free training](#) helps parents understand why what they may have tried in the past hasn't helped when raising a child who feels strongly... and what to do instead.

ABOUT RACHEL

Rachel Bailey is a Human Behavior and Parenting Specialist who has been serving families for more than 15 years. Besides being a mother of two, she has a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology, has provided services as an ADHD Coach, in-home mentor, and therapist, and has spoken at over 200 schools and organizations. Through her workshops, podcast, and programs, Rachel teaches parents hands-on tools for raising resilient, confident children while reducing the stress and guilt in parents' lives.

