



Difficult Personality Traits, part 1 of 5—

Sassy or Sensitive?

by Sandy Friesen, Managing Editor, Christian School Services

Haley whined about the Bible story being too long. She hated the snack and said her T-shirt scratched her neck. She informed me that Megan was being mean to her and that Rachel was making funny faces. Her prayer requests seemed endless. Not only did she boss the others around; she had me wondering who was guiding the class—her or me?

Haley is a classic *highly sensitive* child. Traditionally, she may have been called any number of names, including “whiny,” “bratty,” “clingy,” “tattletale,” or “oversensitive.” All of these descriptors label some negative characteristics that haunt the highly sensitive child.

Dr. Greenspan, author of *The Challenging Child*, has researched and grouped personality traits that have historically been labeled “difficult” into the following five categories:

- *Highly sensitive*
- *Self-absorbed*
- *Defiant*
- *Active-aggressive*
- *Inattentive*

As parents and teachers, we know how important it is NOT to pigeonhole a child with a label. At the same time, recognizing behavior characteristics that a child exhibits can lead to life changing strategies which can positively redirect that child. This series of articles will look at different personality tendencies that make us want to throw up our

hands and scream, “I quit!” Do not quit—there is hope.

The Highly Sensitive Child

The first such personality type is the highly sensitive child. While they can be described as bright, articulate, creative, and insightful, they can just as easily be described as clingy, bossy, demanding, and temperamental. When they are pleased, we are amazed at their level of understanding. When they are displeased, we cannot imagine how they will ever function as adults.



So what can be done with children who irritate themselves and others, who make us feel like failures, and who are generally shunned socially? First, let's look at what is usually done. The “swing pattern,” a common approach, includes an attitude of general understanding with soothing touches and encouraging

words, then shifts to a harsh “cut it out” or “stop that” approach.

Some use the “escape pattern” to deal with these children. When they see Haley coming, they run the other way. Still others try the “split-pattern,” where two adults are involved. One is the nurturer, soothing and encouraging, while the other acts as the commander or enforcer. Unfortunately, none of these strategies work well.

The highly sensitive child is not being highly sensitive on purpose. She really does perceive the world more intensely than many of us. “Normal” sights, sounds, and textures that are appealing and pleasant to us may be overwhelming and over-stimulating to the highly sensitive child.

So what can we do? We can learn about the student and teach her about herself.

Step 1: Find what levels of stimuli are acceptable.

This is usually accomplished by trial and error. How much noise can the child handle before she begins to whine, act out, or withdraw? How much is too much?

Step 2: Help the child understand her tendencies.

Statements like, “I have noticed that you become frustrated when everyone sings loud,” and “Did you notice that you prefer that others sit far away from you?” will help her begin to recognize her tendencies.

Step 3: Help the child gather strategies, solutions, and options that will help her contend with difficulties.

If a student has trouble with loud noises, let her put her hands over her ears, use earplugs, or head phones to muffle the sound. Highly sensitive children can adapt to “normal” stimuli, but the adaptation generally comes through gradual exposure to the stimuli in a non-threatening environment.

Step 4: Emphasize the positive.

Look for gifts and talents that accompany a person who is tuned to her environment. Express appreciation for the positive aspects of being highly sensitive.

Step 5: Help her see the big picture so that she can deal with the small irritations.

This child takes lots of time and energy. You have to teach her self-talk that lets her remem-

ber that God loves her and has a plan for her sensitivities, but that those sensitivities have to be monitored and directed to constructively build the kingdom of God.

Remember, it is the small steps toward the mastery of emotions that bring about lasting adaptation skills. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom. God can and will use this personality to bring about His plans.

Questions For Further Study—

1. What child (or children) in your class fit the profile of the highly sensitive child?
2. What methods have you or your children’s workers used to address this child’s needs? Have they been successful?
3. What steps can you take to minister more effectively to a highly sensitive child?