



For Parents of Big-Feelers

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It is an honor to be the caregivers and stewards of little bodies that house such big hearts! Sensitive children grow up to be empathizers with the world—and they remind us to press into the highs and lows of the moment and to make space for both deep joy and deep grief. It can be overwhelming, however, to guide and raise a highly sensitive child, especially for adults who may not so easily relate to such sensitivity. Here are six suggestions for nurturing kids with big feelings.

Celebrate Sensitivity. The world is overrun with far too many “get over it” responses which can lead to toxic repression of emotions. It is our responsibility to honor big feelings for their uniqueness. Consider telling your child: *“I love your heart”, “You have a really special way of seeing things”, “Your emotions make other people feel safe to share their emotions”,* or *“Your feelings teach me important things.”*

Rehearse Transitions. Broken routines can be hard on everyone. Transitions are jarring on some level no matter who you are. However, children with big emotions tend to feel the stress of these transitions more deeply than others. Rehearsing a change of rhythm or space ahead of time can do wonders for the sensitive child. Consider running step-by-step plays with your child before shifts occur so that they can mentally prepare for a change in schedule. For when that is not possible, consider teaching your child skills for regulating their emotions when they are unable to control their situation—such as breathing techniques, making space, and talking about their feelings with a safe adult.

Give Language. Many people grow into adulthood without the aptitude for identifying their feelings. It is important to guide children in understanding what they are experiencing and why. Consider offering suggestions for both positive and negative experiences: *“You seem upset, could it be because we have been at the store too long and you are hungry?”* Be sure to carve out space for asking *“Can you use words to tell me what you’re feeling right now?”*



Stay Steady. It is very important to remain a constant, predictable, emotionally-regulated presence for a child who is attempting to sort through the chaos of their big feelings—this communicates to your little one they are safe and loved as they navigate the highs and lows. Consider calmly sitting near them as they work out their feelings; and when you need space, ask another safe adult to take over while you make room to breathe as well.

Maintain Boundaries. Holding boundaries is two-fold here—it means protecting your sensitive child from becoming overwhelmed by too many people and activities and it means addressing them with the same natural, logical consequences for their actions as you would a less sensitive child. For the first, remember that exposure and socialization are loving acts, but so is being aware of a child’s limits and teaching them to honor them too. For the second, those of us who like to keep the peace and/or who are just exhausted might find it tempting to allow highly sensitive children more exceptions than we might make for a less sensitive child. However, this does not prepare them for the world to which they are heading. Consider helping them learn that they are strong enough to handle boundaries, expectations, and consequences by maintaining the ones you have set.

Discuss Your Feelings Too. Share with your child what you are feeling (in a manner that is responsible and not too overwhelming for them) while inviting them to do the same. You may be amazed by the conversation and connection that develops by demonstrating this type of vulnerability.

