

The Sensitive Child: Need for Sympathy and Patience

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One of the profound discoveries of modern life is the dependence of temperament upon bodily structure. For long it has been accepted that certain bodily builds are liable to be accompanied by certain types of mental outlook. Thus the solidly built, blonde, and blue-eyed person who runs easily to adiposity, tends to react to life with placidity and cheerfulness, where the small limbed, dark skinned, wiry type of individual will respond with energy and quickness. But modern medical science has shown that the connection between temperament and physical structure goes far deeper than this.

There is a certain type of bodily constitution to which the name allergy has been given, which expresses itself as an immensely increased sensitivity of the child to all stimuli. Allergy is a family phenomenon and manifests itself in such conditions as migraine, asthma, hay fever, etc., and usually can be detected very early in the individual's life. Such a child is liable to skin irritations, to eczema, and to responding with exaggerated reactions to almost any skin stimulus.

Children of this nature react with extreme quickness to any stimulus or idea. They react almost before they themselves are aware of the fact that they are about to take any action at all. They will be half down the garden, or up the stairs to the sound of a voice, an idea, or the call of the ice-cream man, before they have fully realised even that they have heard the sound. They can be wise only after the event, and the larger part of the trouble they get into in life, arises from their attempts to argue out a possible reason for action, after the action has been taken.

Intensity of Feelings.

As a corollary to this question of speed of action, the degree of sensation of the super-sensitive child is far keener than that of the child of another build. Lights are brighter to them, sounds louder, pleasures keener. If responsibility for them is taken by persons of a different build of body, the child's reactions will seem to their elders to be perpetually exaggerated. To the grown-up the fears, loves, hates, wishes, and tears of the child of this

kind, seem of an intensity out of all proportion to the occasion by which they have been called forth. To the child the grown-up is terrifying in his lack of understanding.

The super-sensitive child is sensitive not only to the world around him, but also to the world of his own ideas. Where a child of another build will think slowly, remember hazily and associate his thoughts mistily, the super-sensitive child will think with great rapidity, remember vividly as if the scene were still before his eyes, and associate event with event in a system of ideas of great complexity.

In this way, the inner world of the super-sensitive child becomes peopled by phantasies and images of such vividness and interest, that the working out of them captures and holds his attention far more easily than do the problems of the outside world. Shrinking from contact with his fellows as the super-sensitive child does, because of the acuteness of his sensations and the comparative loudness and boorishness of his companion', he experiences feelings of terror and inadequacy, hating his own failure to compete with his playmates on their own ground, and yet being unwilling to admit his' inferiority.

A child in this situation is in a very difficult position- on the one hand his warmth of feeling and lively affections arouse in him an intense longing to be loved by and to share in the life of his family or his friends. and on the other he shrinks from the roughness of each attempted contact.

Failing miserably, therefore, in the enterprise of sharing the love, and joining in the common life of the family, he retires into a world of his' own dreams. Here he is King; here he is in charge of the nature of the whole of his world ; here he can ruminate, invent. elaborate, twist others to his phantasy, and perform all the roles that his shrinking sensitive-nest deny him fulfilment of in real life.

Accused and criticised by the outside world, called dreamy, exaggerated, molly-coddled by his contemporaries, and alternately spoiled and stormed at by his irritated and bewildered adults, the child soon loses foothold in his world, and despairing of succeeding in even a minimum adjustment to life, slips into a terrified and blankly stupid reaction to the whole of life. With remarkably sure intuition and intimate perception, Mr. Ronald Mackenzie has sketched such a boy in *The Maitlands*, and his final disaster is almost too acute to be easily borne in a theatre.

To such a child the world seems a place of humiliation and torture. Samuel Butler has given us a study of a boy of this kind in *The Way of All Flesh*, and the books of

Geraldine Waif are full of studies of such temperaments in women. These are children “with a skin too few,” and every pin-prick touches upon the centre of their nerves.

How to Help Such Children?

To help such a child, the first thing to do is to recognise that he exists. The great difficulty for those who deal with children like this, is the failure of ordinary parents and guardians to recognise the differences in temperament of their children. “How could this or that come to be?” often complains a parent when describing a bewildering characteristic in one or other of her children, “I have five (or seven) children and I have brought each one of them up exactly alike. I do not see why this has happened to this one.”

That is exactly the difficulty. It is the evenness of treatment which has involved the failure to understand the nature of the sensitive child. No gardener would ever attempt to treat bush roses, clematis, arum lilies and rhododendrons in the same way, nor would he be accused of favouritism if he varied his treatment of each of them. Children are as different as plants and need as varied and delicate understanding.

The practical, puppy-like, cheerful, rollicking child notices punishment little, forgets a difficulty as soon as it is over, and will take a smack or a prohibition in good part and with little resentment.

Help him to find an outlet for his energies with electrical or constructive toys.

A popular, intelligent, successful child will balance his deprivations by success in other quarters. A physically healthy, domesticated girl will even out her humiliations by successful emulation of grown-ups. But to the super-sensitive child, punishment emphasises his own already too low estimate of his interior worth; a smack or a sarcasm will add a heavy burden of guilt to his already troubled spirit, and a prohibition which cuts him off from society shuts him into an outer darkness.



Companionship Will Help

Once recognised for what he is, this child can be brought help in a myriad of ways. Punishment of such a child should always be light, and warm encouragement readily and frequently dispensed. This child needs drawing out from himself, and needs to be helped to make contact with the outside world. A special time should always be set aside in the time-table when the child can be alone with the parent. The thoughts of children of this kind lie deeper and are richer than the thoughts of their robusiter comrades, and they need time to come to the surface and to find a medium for expression. This time must be a quiet time with an atmosphere of appreciation, and the child must feel that the parent is prepared to wait for it. and to be patient with its shynesses and hesitations.

Imaginative Fancies.

Children of this sort often draw well, or tell stories with great concentration. Their stories are usually vivid and full of incident, and in many cases run on from day to day. Parents are often puzzled as to the proper method of handling these stories, the contrast between the child's interior and exterior life becomes so disastrously revealed, and the presence of the child's imaginary characters are so real to him, that the parent becomes worried and feels that something must be done to bring the child back to contact with real life.

This alarm that is felt has its basis in reality; if such a child's contacts with life become too uniformly unsuccessful, and if at the same time the child is gifted with imaginative capacity, there is a real danger of him drifting so deeply into interior life that no faculties become available for his outside activities. Such a boy becomes the butt of every class in which he appears, and sinks to the bottom of it the moment he reaches it. to retrain there until he is moved to the next in a stupor of hopelessness.

After the recognition of the existence of these children, the next step to be taken is an endeavour to understand their nature. The demand for uniformity of reaction ("All my children have enjoyed going to Aunt Kitty's, why should Mabel object?" complained a parent) having been relinquished, the next step is." to try to get to know the child. Super-sensitive children are as shy as trout and need as careful handling, but their conquest is as fascinating, and as rewarding.

The cure for children of this kind is the finding of suitable outlets for their energies; outlets which will not only be expressive and satisfying to the child, but which are also of value to his social community.

A super-sensitive child is at the same time in the larger number of cases a gifted child, and also a child with a strong inner urge to self expression. Sympathy with such a child and patience with his difficulties will give the child confidence enough to display his own inner nature. Wise guidance and a knowledge of what can be done at such a stage of development in the sphere in which the child's interests lie, the provision of a simple microscope, of primitive electrical apparatus, of steam engines, and dolls' cutting out patterns, will give a vent to energies which would otherwise be occupied in phantasy.

The coaxing out of this phantasy by interest in its features, and a sharing of its development, will give the child confidence to attempt expression in tangible form. The difficulty that a parent is faced with immediately the child's conceptions begin to appear in visible shape and expression, is the fantastic nature of the phantasies that he then creates. In a book recently published, *I have gathered together a number of phantasies of this kind, drawn from a large experience of children, in order to help parents to understand the nature of their children's thoughts and ideas. These phantasies are fantastic in nature because they have grown up in the mind unchecked by contrast with reality, and they can only become unsatisfying to the child when his own experience of reality becomes more satisfying.

The aim of every parent with a super-sensitive child should be to increase at every point its contact with reality. This can be done by almost wholly suspending punishment and putting the emphasis upon encouragement and appreciation. It is impossible successfully to treat a child of this kind as one treats children of another sort; their every need is different.

Criticism must come from within not without ; from a demonstration of the nature of the child's misdeed rather than from objective punishment for it. A super-sensitive child will in most cases apply the punishment himself, and the difficulty is that he will often appear to have an exaggerated desire for it. Punishment, a child feels, redresses the balance, and once punished his sheet is clear and he has confidence to go on again.

Encouragement will bring out the qualities in the child, and it is the pleasant task of the parent to exercise ingenuity and skill in blending these qualities into expressions which can increase the child's sense of value, by being of service to his surroundings. A super-sensitive child has all the qualities necessary for an unusually resourceful and creative adult, and the time spent upon his study and coaxing is time well repaid in after life.

*Play in Childhood, By Dr. Margaret Lowenfeld (Gollancz 1935, 8/6)