

## Is my child too sensitive?

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Some children are very sensitive and, in some cases, can experience Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) or, as it is more commonly known, rejection sensitivity. This can be particularly challenging when they become teenagers. Adolescence can be a difficult time for some young people. They have more responsibilities and expectations to live up to. If you are concerned that your child's sensitivity is causing difficulties in their life or that they are struggling to manage their response to criticism or rejection, then this article aims to provide you with some suggestions as to how you might support your child in this.

**There can be many signs to watch out for to suggest that a child or young person is highly sensitive. Here are six questions to consider:**

- 1.** Does your child show very strong emotions when they feel they have been criticised, for example, showing anger, sadness or self-doubt?
- 2.** Is your child very self-critical and becomes upset when they feel they have disappointed someone else, for example, a teacher or had a disagreement with someone else?
- 3.** Does your child feel a lot of anxiety in social situations and worry that they will embarrass themselves in company?

4. Does your child show an excessive concern about the feelings of others that then causes your child anxiety?
5. Does your child like to spend time alone and generally feel calmer alone than with others?
6. Does your child have high levels of anxiety and/ or persistent low mood generally? Have they been treated for this by a clinician?

If you have answered yes to one or more of these questions, then you might now be concerned about your child's wellbeing. It is important to place these questions in perspective. Anxiety is a natural part of child development. We all went through these stages as a child of feeling nervous, for example, in new situations. Also, it is a feature of the process of adolescence that your child will become more self-conscious of themselves and be concerned about how they might be perceived by others. However, if your child's levels of sensitivity start to negatively impact upon their life, for example, they stop doing activities that they formerly enjoyed, become withdrawn or display behaviours which are problematic, for example, angry or aggressive outbursts, then maybe it is time to consider the issue of rejection sensitivity.

People who experience high levels of rejection sensitivity can become so fearful and aversive to rejection that it impacts their daily lives. They can become fearful that others are judging them, expect to be rejected all the time, anxiously look for signs that someone doesn't want to be with them and display persistent negative thinking about this. This is sometimes called "worst case scenario thinking." If your child is expecting a call from a friend which doesn't come, does your child then think that their friend has been

in an accident or that they no longer want to be their friend, instead of thinking that they may have just forgotten to call? These feelings can develop to the point where some individuals may begin to act upon their rejection sensitivities and behave in ways that actually push other people away.

**So how can we provide support for children and teenagers? Here are five suggestions:**

- 1.** Talk to your child about their feelings, in particular, address worst case scenario thinking. To continue with the earlier example, ask your child how likely it is that their friend has not returned a call because they have been in a serious accident or no longer want to socialise with them. Has this happened before and what was the reason then?
- 2.** Support your child to relax generally. Encourage them to use relaxation techniques, for example, deep breathing, meditation, yoga or progressive muscle relaxation and do it with them if they are reluctant. If your child responds to this then find time each day to repeat the technique that works and talk to your child about ways that they can use the techniques when they are outside the home if possible.
- 3.** Consider your child's mental health overall. High levels of sensitivity and rejection sensitivity can lead to depression. Possible signs of depression include changes to appetite and eating habits, sleep disturbance or oversleep, social withdrawal and change in school performance. In some cases, depression can present in young people as physical difficulties, for example, frequent headaches, fatigue and stomach aches. If you are concerned that your child may be showing signs of depression, don't hesitate, contact your GP.

4. Support your child with planning and organisation, help them to prioritise positive relationships and their education. Work with your child to schedule time for these as well as time to develop their own unique interests or hobbies. Scheduling will help to reduce over commitment which can cause stress and anxiety.
5. Consider talking therapies. Cognitive behavioural therapy can help teenagers particularly to overcome social anxiety and talk to your child about the reality that most teenagers think that others are thinking about them when, in fact, they are not.

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## About ADHD Foundation

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