



Episode: 9 Parenting the Highly Sensitive Child

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Podcast:

SUSAN: I'm Susan Cain and this is *Quiet: The Power of Introverts*.

Apologies. I have a little bit of a cold today, so you're probably going to hear that in my voice, but welcome.

PRISCILLA GILMAN: James, my younger son, from babyhood was very very anxious when any new person would come to the house.

SUSAN: That's Priscilla Gilman. She's the mother of two introverted boys, Benjamin, 17 and James, who is 13.

PRISCILLA: And he was a very clingy baby and he always wanted to be held and he didn't want to be away from me, but he was made very very anxious by any new people coming to the house.

SUSAN: Priscilla is the author of the book "The Anti-Romantic Child: a Memoir of Unexpected Joy," and a frequent writer and speaker on parenting issues. When her son, James, started preschool, Priscilla realized they were dealing with more than just first-day-of-school nerves.

PRISCILLA: He was hysterical the first day. And school had a policy that if your child cried a lot, you were not allowed to leave the building in case they needed you. So my ex-husband and I were the last parents left in the building at the end of November.

SUSAN: It's an experience any parent of a socially anxious child can relate to. Not all introverted kids are shy or have social anxiety, of course, but if your child does, you know that it can affect far more than school — in our very social world, it touches just about everything.

But there's more to this kind of sensitivity than meets the eye. It turns out that the most sensitive kids, yes, are prone to all the anxieties and vulnerabilities that you would expect, but when they're raised in supportive, nurturing environments, they also have some of the best outcomes of all kids. There's fascinating new data on this — when it comes to health, peer relationships, academic outcomes, you name it, these kids often do BETTER than their less sensitive peers. Scientists call them orchid children — they

have more trouble when conditions aren't ideal, but in the right environment they really bloom.

So, what is the relationship between introversion, sensitivity, and social anxiety? And how can parents of ALL quiet kids benefit from the latest research on highly sensitive kids? Stay with us to find out.

But first: how did Priscilla ever manage to leave her son's preschool?

PRISCILLA: They came up with a lot of supportive rituals and routines to help him with that transition, waving to us, giving us a hug, settling down to work — it's a Montessori school so they call it work — with his friend. And the hysterical fit lying on the floor became just crying, then became just tears, then became just grimace, and then gradually he got acclimated.

SUSAN: James made it over that particular hurdle. But of course, for a sensitive child there are many situations that can trigger emotional distress.

DR. FRANKLIN SCHNEIER: There are different brain systems that are involved in this kind of behavior.

SUSAN: That's Dr. Franklin Schneier, a research psychiatrist investigating social anxiety at New York State Psychiatric Institute and a professor at Columbia University.

DR. SCHNEIER: There are systems of attention, so some people are more easily aware of threats in the environment. They are constantly focusing on threats, and reacting, and processing threats in a way that may lead to

them being more inhibited, for example, than someone else who is not so focused on finding social threats — an angry face in a crowd, for example.

SUSAN: This hyper vigilance is something that Priscilla Gilman and her son, James, are all too familiar with.

PRISCILLA: He would start to tear up as soon as he would see more than a couple of people in a space, never wanting to go to birthday parties. Sitting outside. Not wanting to go in. Hiding under tables. People coming up and trying to be friendly and just starting to tremble. And he got a social anxiety diagnosis just in the last couple of years.

SUSAN: That diagnosis has given James and Priscilla a framework to better deal with his anxieties. But a diagnosis doesn't answer why some children are more sensitive than others.

DR. THOMAS BOYCE: Well, I don't think the concepts of introversion, anxiety, and sensitivity to social context, I don't think those things can be entirely separated.

SUSAN: That's Dr. Thomas Boyce.

DR. BOYCE: The question then is how do we get from sensitivity and introversion to anxiety and things that we would really like to prevent and not have children experience?

SUSAN: Boyce is professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, School of

Medicine — and he's been studying how stress affects the physical and mental health of children for over 30 years.

DR. BOYCE: We started with preschoolers, so we were studying 3 and 4 year olds and (laughs) the way that adult behavioral medicine specialists were measuring stress reactivity was to have adults stick their hand in a bucket of ice water and measure their blood pressure. So we started by experimenting with, "Could we get 3 and 4 year olds to stick their hand in a bucket of ice water," and, of course, they wouldn't and refused to do it. So we kind of went back to the drawing board.

SUSAN: His team devised several tests to measure the stress response in the children, like having a stranger ask them questions about their family, having them watch emotional clips from children's movies, and getting them to repeat back a string of numbers.

DR. BOYCE: And we also has a physical challenge, which was a drop of lemon on their tongue. So the highly sensitive kids were the kids who had the most response in these two primary stress response systems in the human brain, and those are the cortisol system and the other is the fight or flight response that's activated by the autonomic response system that involves sweaty palms, and dilated pupils, and a faster heart rate. And we found that it was really a bell shaped curve. There were some kids who were very low in response in those challenges, there were a lot of kids in the middle, and there were a few kids at the very top.

SUSAN: Nearly 20 percent of the children were highly sensitive. And slowly a pattern began to emerge. Most (although not all) were shy or introverted relative to other kids. Many had sensory hypersensitivities like taste or sound aversions and they startled more easily.

DR. BOYCE: We began studying this basically in the periphery of the body, with things like measuring heart rate variability, blood pressure, things of that kind. But we have, as a field, quickly moved back into the brain itself and even into the genome and found that there are genomic differences in the actual DNA sequence that are different among these kids with high reactivity profiles.

SUSAN: So it turns out that these highly sensitive children aren't just acting fussy: they're hardwired to react to their environment more acutely. And they possess many gene variants that have been identified as markers related to health and social problems, like alcoholism and depression.

DR. BOYCE: Many of them are genes that are what we call the usual suspects in psychiatric and mental health disorders. One is BDNF the brain-derived neurotrophic hormone gene. Another is the dopamine receptor gene. Another one is the serotonin transport gene — these are all genes that have to do with brain function and the connectivity and the level of activity of brain circuitry in response to the things that we experience day-to-day.

SUSAN: Boyce and his team predicted that these high-reactive kids would be at greater risk for physical and mental illness than their low reactive counterparts. And

they were right. But here's where Boyce's research gets really interesting...

DR. BOYCE: In all of our studies we began looking at this, we began to see that these high-reactive children had either the worst outcomes when they were under conditions of high stress or the best outcomes of any of the kids in the study, if they were in nurturing supportive kinds of environments.

SUSAN: You heard that right.

DR. BOYCE: They had this peculiar kind of pattern of having either the best or the worst outcome depending upon the social context that they were experiencing or being reared in.

SUSAN: And those "bad genes"...

DR. BOYCE: It turns out all those genes that we thought might be bad guys aren't always bad guys; sometimes they are good guys as well. Which helps explain why they have persisted in the human gene pool over eons of human development and evolution.

SUSAN: Boyce and his partner dubbed these high reactive kids "orchid children." It's a play on the Swedish term "maskrosbarn." It means "dandelion children," which is used to describe low reactive children who, just like a real dandelion, seem to thrive equally well regardless of their environment.

SUSAN: Now, what makes this research so exciting — and empowering — is that it tells us that there is a lot that we

can do as caregivers to help orchid children blossom to their full potential.

DR. BOYCE: Rule number one is to realize that there are two sides to this orchid child coin. On the one hand, they are kids who can be at great risk, but they are also kids who have extraordinary abilities, extraordinary talents and capacities and can be the healthiest of children, if placed in the right kind of environment and treated with the right kind of care and support.

SUSAN: And Dr. Boyce should know. Not only is he one of the foremost experts in the field of orchid children, he's also the father of one.

DR. BOYCE: My daughter, who as so many kids who have the good or bad fortune of being children of scientists, she was one of our guinea pigs and remains to this day the most reactive child that we ever tested in our laboratory. She was a kid who was just very very sensitive to all kinds of stimuli. She hated having wrinkles in her socks when her shoes were put on, and she had certain kinds of taste aversions of things that she didn't like to eat or taste, and she was also very emotionally sensitive. As she has grown and matured, she has a lot of empathic capacity and just is very responsive to the environment she is experiencing at any given moment in time.

My wife and I both had a sense that our daughter was a child about whom great care needed to be taken and like many parents with these context sensitive kids, we did the best that we could.

SUSAN: Part of that, says Boyce, is acknowledging that there are going to be physical sensitivities that children are going to have that need to be honored.

DR. BOYCE: There's no sense sending an orchid child off with her socks in a bunch in her shoes off to school that way because it's just not going to work, so you get it right. And you understand that there are sensitivities that you as a parent might not have, but this little boy or little girl does have and it's important to deal with those.

SUSAN: But that doesn't mean you have to treat them with kid gloves. You don't want to put an orchid child in an environment that is too threatening or too overwhelming, but it is important that even orchid children are nudged into doing the kinds of things that will allow them to grow and thrive and learn new things.

DR. BOYCE: So these are not bubble children that have to be encapsulated in some kind of protective barrier. The key and difficult decision often is when to push and when to not push. That's the kind of decision that needs to be made on the ground organically as these things happen.

SCOTT BARRY KAUFMAN: As, personally, someone who felt deeply about everything growing up and getting generalized anxiety disorder from that, which I've never admitted to anyone before, I can completely understand and relate to that.

SUSAN: That's Scott Barry Kaufman, Scientific Director of The Imagination Institute in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

SCOTT: I grew up with a really loving parent, but someone who's also very protective. Up until my senior year of high school, my mom would drive me to the bus stop, which was literally down the street. She was afraid of having me walk to the bus stop. Some of these things are pretty obviously coddled, over-coddled. I didn't get a chance to experience failure that much. I didn't get a chance to experience these things because whenever things would be triggered, my mom would feel so bad about it and kind of try to shield me from the world. I don't think that's necessary the best route to take.

SUSAN: Scott's sheltered childhood has given him special insight into his professional work as a psychologist, and we'll ask him when we return: what IS the best way to parent a sensitive child? And, what environment will help these orchid kids bloom? Plus, we'll give you tips on how to best nurture your sensitive child — that's all ahead. But first, a word about our sponsors.

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Also, if you're the parent of a quiet child ages 3 to 9, I'm so excited to tell you about a new online course we've created that I really think can change the way you parent your child. The course is beautiful and it includes all kinds of interactive features like, for example, a tool to help you decide when and when not to press your child out of her comfort zone. And scripts for how to advocate for your child with people who say he's too shy. And you'll also have the chance to interact with other parents of quiet kids.

To check out the course just visit learn.quietrev.com.

Podcast:

SUSAN: And we're back.

I'm Susan Cain and this is *Quiet: The Power of Introverts*. Today we're looking at how to parent the highly sensitive child.

According to Dr. Thomas Boyce, nearly 1 in 5 kids are what he calls "orchid children" — those who are biologically predisposed to be highly sensitive. Like their namesake, orchid kids are exquisitely influenced by their environment: they're more sensitive to stress, but when conditions are right, they really thrive. So, how can we raise these sensitive kids thoughtfully? As a once highly sensitive child himself, psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman has these insights:

SCOTT: I think the best thing you can do is show an awful lot of compassion and love for your child and, in very small doses, expose them to some of their worst fears and things in a safe environment with love, with compassion, and build up and work your way up and show the child the world really isn't that bad, that the child can handle it, and that the child can grow up to be a resilient adult. That would be my deeply personal suggestion.

SUSAN: Parent and author Priscilla Gilman agrees. But as she worked with her son, James, she found it wasn't always easy to step back:

PRISCILLA: It was awful! Wrenching. I'm sure all of you parents out there who have had to separate from your child and you see the crying and the meltdowns and the hysteria and it's just so painful. And having — yourself as a parent — to surmount that desire, that impulse, that urge to immediately go to their side and hug them or just say "we

can go home and take him away from a party where it's becoming overwhelming," right? Occasionally you do have to do that. So the biggest challenge for me has been to learn how to support him, to be there for him without judging him, but yet how to encourage him not to just give up, but to hang in there and do the best that he can.

SUSAN: And we can help best, says social anxiety specialist Dr. Franklin Schneier, if instead of try to change our sensitive kids, we help them gain confidence in who they are.

DR. SCHNEIER: It looks like parents who are more, both more accepting of their child's personality as a trait, not something to be judged, but also help facilitate social interactions by helping the child gradually go into situations where they can master the situation. Not the most difficult situation, but maybe something that they are just on the edge of being able to get comfortable with. A play date with one child, instead of with five very overactive kids might be a way to start in that kind of situation. And encouraging the child with encouraging thoughts about the situation, focusing on the positive, focusing on what they are able to do, encouraging them to take some chances, to try some things out and have a positive experience that they can then build on.

SUSAN: There are a lot of strategies you can use to help an anxious child build confidence. Priscilla and James have been working on something called "exposure therapy," which is really another name for the idea of desensitization, which we talked about in a prior episode.

Priscilla explains:

PRISCILLA: One great strategy that his therapist gave him was ordering something that a store doesn't have and practicing embarrassment when they tell you, "I'm sorry we don't carry that on our menu." So, for example, we went to a Dunkin Donuts and he was told to order (for his mother) a Venti coffee because Dunkin Donuts doesn't qualify Tall, Venti, Grande, and then having to deal with the person working in the store looking at him with a perturbed expression and saying, "Um, that's Starbucks," and practicing that feeling of getting it wrong and making a mistake deliberately. And it was a great experience because he got through it, the waiter was not as angry or upset as he feared the waiter would be. And having it and having that positive experience gives you confidence going forward.

SUSAN: Making deliberate mistakes will help sensitive children better cope when they make accidental mistakes — but it won't change who they are. And that, says Priscilla, is a very good thing:

PRISCILLA: He's not broken. He doesn't need to be fixed. It's about just taking the edge off the anxiety to the point where he's able to participate in the things that he wants to do and he feels confident saying no to things that just don't make him feel comfortable.

SUSAN: It's also important to remember that you don't need to protect your child from every bump in the road. Instead, make sure to let them know that you support them and that you have confidence in their abilities. For Priscilla,

this strategy has already worked well with her older son, Benjamin.

PRISCILLA: I really really believe strongly that one of the most important things we can do as parents is identify the things that our kids really love to do and are good at doing and support them in that. So, Benji is at the point where, he had a lot of anxiety about performing in public and it's been with him a process of weaning off having to have another person there with him. So about four weeks ago he performed a Bach piece in my mother's church as part of a Christmas celebration. He walked up to the front of the congregation and performed it all by himself, and did wonderfully.

SUSAN: That confidence is what we all want for our kids. We just want them to see what we see: remarkable young people who are full of potential. For the past nine episodes, we've talked about how you can better understand and help your introverted child, and we hope you've found something useful here. But if there's one message we want you to take with you as we finish up this season, it's about how powerful quiet can really be.

And now, it's time for some concrete tips to help your highly sensitive child bloom.

SUSAN: But first, I want to tell you about a new book I have coming out this May for kids ages 9 to 12. It's called [*Quiet Power*](#), and it's a look at all the topics we've covered in this podcast — but from a kid's point of view. We look at life in the school cafeteria, in the classroom, and after school with your friends.

And now for today's tips:

1. Give your child alternative outlets for communicating with you, beyond just saying whatever's on his mind. Sensitive or introverted kids often process their thoughts internally and they may be uncomfortable vocalizing their ideas — especially the ones that make them feel vulnerable. So give your kids art projects, diaries, and puppets, and then listen carefully to see what they tell you through these media.
2. Declare victory. By this I mean that you should focus less on protecting your child from painful experiences than on providing positive ones — and then declaring victory when they happen. These victories don't have to be monumental. So your kid went to the birthday party, laughed at the magic show, and sang happy birthday? That's great! That's victory. Now you all get to go home and relax.
3. Don't over-protect. You really don't want to give your child the idea that the world is a dangerous place or, even more important, that you doubt his ability to handle its challenges. Remember that whatever you feel about your child internally will communicate itself one way or another. So you need to really have faith yourself that your child is going to be okay — not just okay — that he can thrive, just like all the other orchid children out there.

So that's it for our show today.

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I'm Susan Cain. Thanks for listening!