

# Individuality

Is your child sensitive to overstimulation or groups of people? Does she lash out when feeling anxious? Worried about her son, **Lucinda Leo** discovered a new approach through PowerWood

Thomas is 10. He is constantly in motion, can't sit still unless he is highly engrossed, and finds it really hard to find a pair of socks that don't feel scratchy. He gets angry at seemingly trivial things, and can shock those around him by lashing out physically, apparently out of the blue. He punches his sister if he loses at Snakes and Ladders, and at school he asks incessant questions and can't take "Because I say so" for an answer.

People sometimes accuse Amelie's parents of pandering to her, while Thomas's new teacher sees his questioning as a lack of respect and thinks his parents need to teach him some self-discipline.

## What is OE?

Thomas and Amelie are very different from each other, yet they share a set of innate personality traits known as OEs. Their nervous systems are both more responsive, and more sensitive, to stimuli. Although OE is short for 'overexcitability',

'OE' is preferred because many children with these traits behave quite differently from what would normally be described as overexcitable.

Psychologists have identified five types of OE: emotional, imaginal, intellectual, psychomotor and sensual. Many children have a combination of OE traits, each bringing its own strengths and challenges. For example, an 8-year-old girl with imaginal and emotional OEs might entertain herself or her friends for hours with her complex games and ideas, but at bedtime that same imagination can conjure bleak scenarios that prevent her falling asleep, because they feel as real to her as if they were actually happening.

A 9-year-old boy with intellectual and sensual OEs might love to spend time among the rich colours, sounds and scents of nature, organising plants into his own categories. But those same sensitivities that allow him to appreciate nature so intensely might make a simple shopping trip feel like a full-on sensory assault and trigger a morning of non-stop arguing with his poor mother!

## Over-stimulated or 'spoilt'?

My son, Jacob, is a lot like Thomas. Jacob has sensual, imaginal, intellectual and psychomotor OEs. I first noticed he was different from other children when he was about 5. His reception class had a beautiful outdoor play area, and his teachers would complain that after playing in the garden Jacob would shout and kick when he was made to come back inside and sit on the carpet with his classmates.

At home, any play-date longer than half an hour would over-stimulate Jacob to the point of extreme and (to me) embarrassing rudeness. He loves outdoor activities but finds groups too arousing, and was devastated when he was asked to leave a multi-sports summer camp after just one day because he couldn't stop using bad language when he was overwhelmed. Once, when he was 7, he was scooting ahead of me at the park when he fell off and hurt himself. I watched a kind stranger approach him and sympathetically ask

**T**hirteen-year-old Amelie experiences life differently from most people. She is intense and easily overwhelmed, and suffers stomach aches when she has to visit a house that doesn't smell right. She is also compassionate and empathic. She has deep emotional bonds with her mum and younger brother, and she goes out of her way to prevent tense family situations arising. Amelie won't go on holiday unless Monkey the Labrador can go too, and she only feels safe at night cuddling the same lilac fleece cushion she slept with as a toddler.



if he was OK – and then quickly back away in the face of his stream of abuse!

Jacob loves the Harry Potter books and begged to visit the Warner Brothers' studio tour, whizzing excitedly around the exhibits and enjoying himself enormously. But I can still remember the looks on our fellow visitors' faces during his very public meltdown in the gift shop at the end of the day. They didn't have to say anything for us to know they were thinking, "Look at that spoilt child!"

It's not just strangers who point the finger of blame. Grandparents might quietly (or less quietly) hint that a child is being over-indulged. Well-meaning friends suggest that if you only used the discipline techniques that have worked wonders with their own children (who don't have OEs), your child would behave much better. In stressful situations partners often second-guess one another, and blame can even come from an overwhelmed child herself: "I hate you! You're the worst mother in the world!" In short, parenting a child with OEs can be a deeply isolating experience.

I've always known deep down that there is absolutely nothing wrong with Jacob – he's just wired differently. I could see that he wasn't being rude or misbehaving on purpose, so I knew that punishing him wouldn't help. But in the face of so much negative environmental input and in the absence of any alternative parenting tools, it was difficult to feel confident that I was doing the right thing by my son. Should I trust my instincts, or was I, as others suspected, creating a 'brat'?

Then one day last February I spotted an advert for a workshop about children "who seem hypersensitive, appear to overreact to everyday situations, and generally seem to experience life more intensely than most people". "That's Jacob!" I remember shouting excitedly to my husband.

"When our daughter was 6, she had trouble sleeping, suffered from anxiety attacks, scratched her head until it bled, hit her younger brother and then fell into deep despair about her own behaviour. She said she wanted to die, we didn't love her and she hated herself. My drive to understand her and to be able to support her brought me where I am today," says Simone de Hoogh.

PowerWood is a not-for-profit social enterprise committed to supporting intense, sensitive and highly reactive children.  
[www.powerwood.org.uk](http://www.powerwood.org.uk)

The workshop, led by PowerWood founder Simone de Hoogh, changed all our lives. I now understand that Jacob's behaviour is just an expression of his inability to deal with an overloaded nervous system. I appreciate the importance of taking good care of myself, so I have enough resilience not to let Jacob's behaviour trigger my own emotional upset. And from that place of wellbeing I'm able to parent Jacob in the conscious way I want to, using the tools Simone gave us. For example, when Jacob uses bad language I calmly tell him, "We don't use words like that. I know you must be feeling very stressed to swear. How can I help you get back in control?" I might offer a hug or suggest he go outside and bounce on the trampoline.

Perhaps even more beneficial than the knowledge and tools I took away from the PowerWood workshop is the fact that, as a part of a growing community of families living positively with OEs, I no longer feel isolated or spend desperate moments wondering what I'm doing wrong as a parent. Connecting with other parents who are dealing with OEs has made a big contribution to my sanity. Talking with parents of older teenagers and young adults has also been invaluable. For example, one mum I met at the PowerWood summer camp inspired me hugely when she told me, "Now Olivia is 15, it's easier to see how she can belong in this world, but at 8, although I could see her brilliant mind, empathic nature

and other amazing OE attributes, her behaviour overshadowed all of this, so that we were scared she would not be able to succeed in this world. I think it's important for other parents to know that these wonderful and challenging children do gain balance with maturity."

## Label or characteristic?

Some parents, afraid of labelling, are cautious of discussing OE with their children, but for me any disadvantages are outweighed by the benefits of increased self-awareness. My daughter (who also has OEs) knows she has blue eyes, curly hair, and emotional, sensual and imaginal OEs. Thanks to our new understanding and language, my children no longer worry that there's something wrong with them simply because they react intensely to things that don't bother other children. They know that they just have more sensitive nervous systems.

## The positive side of OEs

Children like Jacob, Amelie and Thomas live life more intensely than other children. They are sensitive and prone to overreact, but their OEs can also give them empathy, vivid imaginations, a deep thirst for knowledge and a powerful capacity to enjoy life to the fullest. Many children with OEs also have a strong sense of fairness and social justice, and a keen drive to improve themselves and the world around them. If we focus only on their bad behaviour and dismiss them as naughty and in need of discipline, the world will miss out on the special contribution these children can make. But given the right support to help them manage their intensity, they can mature into adults who are able to apply their often powerful energies towards their self-chosen goals – whether that's designing eco-friendly houses, eradicating world hunger, composing beautiful music, or simply creating happy, peaceful homes. ●

**Lucinda Leo** is a former lawyer who retrained as a cognitive hypnotherapist after using hypnosis to give birth, painlessly, to her second child at home. She currently home educates her son and daughter and works as a PowerWood volunteer to help raise awareness of OEs.