Transcript for “Parenting Little Kids with Big Feelings”

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read, where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I'm your host Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought-provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast through their paper with Purpose Promise. Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community. There are plenty of metaphors in the world of parenting, and one common one is floral. We can have go with the flow kids who are often less affected by their environments, who are sometimes termed dandelions.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:28] There are moderately sensitive kids who are termed tulips, and there are highly sensitive kids who are orchids. We could spend plenty of time talking about all three, but today we're going to talk about the orchids. How to care for them and support their families. Sometimes called spirited or deeply feeling highly sensitive, children are more likely to have challenges regulating their big emotions because their brains are wired to process and react to their experiences in the world more deeply than other children. We're going to talk about how to recognize the temperament traits of highly sensitive children. The pros and cons of various parenting approaches, and how clinicians can support families with highly sensitive kids. Our guest today is Claire Lerner, a licensed social worker and founder of Lerner Child Development. Claire has more than three decades of clinical experience in child and parent mental health, including a 20 plus year tenure as director of parenting resources at 0 to 3. She's the author of two books on parenting, Why Is My Child in Charge? And her latest book, Big Reactors Practical Strategies for Parenting Highly Sensitive Children. I had the joy of reading an advance copy of this book because I was asked to write a

blurb for this book, and of course, once I finished and did that blurb, I invited Claire to be on the show. Claire, thanks for joining us.

Claire Lerner: [00:02:47] I'm so glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:51] So let's start off, what prompted this book and why now?

Claire Lerner: [00:02:56] Well, what prompted the book was actually the fact that why is my child in charge had struck a nerve and had been useful and had done rather well. So my publisher came back to me and said, do you have another book in you? And my answer was simple, like the only book I had in me that wasn't going to add to the cacophony of content out there for parents, that wasn't going to be repetitive or duplicative. More about discipline, or how to deal with tantrums or separation anxiety. You know, the range of stuff that comes up in the early years was to talk about my work in the trenches with this group of kids that we think of as highly sensitive, because when parents come to me, many of them are extremely distraught, feel very alone. Had read an article that I had written about the ten traits of highly sensitive children, and felt like for the first time they had been seen and understood. And so I felt like that was going to be a an actual contribution to help these parents see that they're not alone, that they come by these challenges honestly, that there is a way forward that may not be in line with what they're reading about attachment parenting or gentle parenting, or even positive parenting. A lot of the popular parenting messaging tends to not only not work, but sometimes actually exacerbate and backfire with these kids. And so I felt like it was a gap that was critically important for me to fill.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:04:45] Sure, sure, sure. Yeah. And I'm interested to talk about some of those other forms of parenting and contrast in a little while here, but I think let's start by defining in more detail what what's meant by a highly sensitive child, and what might people see playing out in a real world setting.

Claire Lerner: [00:05:08] Well, as you said in the intro, these are kids who have this temperament trait, which means that this is not something they chose. They didn't come into the world planning on having seemingly outsized reactions and mortifying their parents in public when something doesn't happen the way they expect or want, or being super inflexible and flipping out when you cut their peanut butter and jelly sandwich on the wrong diagonal like they didn't plan any of that. They're not doing it.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:42] That's not the secret motive. Got it. Okay.

Claire Lerner: [00:05:45] And it's not something parents created. It's a constitutional phenomenon, and it's based in their wiring. How their neurological system and sensory

system processes, their experiences in the world. So the way I have come to think of it, because now I think of how to support these kids really in terms of functionality, like really, what does it feel like in the trenches with these kids? And what is happening for these kids is that they don't have the same kind of filter that other kids have. It's like not just being a sponge, right? We call lots of kids sponges because they're absorbing information and they, you know, have amazing memories. But these kids, it's like everything is processed and registered at a very deep level. So they their systems aren't working for them in the sense of like not paying attention to things that aren't that important in their environment, right. So that they can go into a new preschool class and easily engage instead. These kids focus so intensely on every aspect of their environment, which makes them incredibly insightful and empathetic and bright and intuitive because they're tuning into who's this new teacher? And how does she respond to the kids? And am I going to feel safe with her? And who are these other kids in the classroom, and are they going to invade my space? And, you know, am I going to be able to do the tasks in this new place? Like their brains never turn off? They are processing everything so deeply that it gets very overwhelming.

Claire Lerner: [00:07:38] It's it's more than their system can handle. And so what happens is they They engage in all sorts of coping mechanisms to make the world more manageable. And that's what leads to a lot of the behaviors and the attributes that I talk about in the book that I have identified. Right. So I want to be very clear that it's not like I've done a scientific research, double blind study to decide what are the key traits. I want to make that really clear. What I'm offering is my experience in the trenches with thousands of families, with kids who have this temperament trait, who tend to have more challenges than other kids because of how they're wired.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:32] Yeah, yeah. You're offering a way to think about and approach this set of traits, not necessarily a diagnosis.

Claire Lerner: [00:08:41] Exactly, exactly. And so the thing that can become confusing and I know we haven't gone into the traits yet. So I may be, you know, getting ahead of myself, but it's why there's a lot of confusion about the difference between high sensitivity and high functioning autism and ADHD and sensory processing disorder and anxiety. Because really, like in my practice, I've got lots of kids with all of those diagnoses and it's like a Venn diagram. They they share similar traits, but often for different reasons. Right. So for the highly sensitive child, it's not a disorder. It's not a diagnosis. Right. It's you know, another temperament trait is activity level, right. That's just something that's inborn in a child. So you have some kids who we think of as driven by a motor because their systems are so driven towards movement. And then you have other kids who temperamentally are more sedentary and maybe more in their brains, and they're more focused on ideas than in physical

movement. Right. So these are temperament traits, not disorders, but they do share similar attributes, especially things like inflexibility.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:08] Yeah. So you mentioned the traits. Let's actually walk through some of them. So our listeners have a sense of what we're talking about.

Claire Lerner: [00:10:15] Yeah. Good idea. So first I think the most obvious is and universal are very intense reactions to their experiences in the world. Right. So they can get triggered very easily into upset on things that seem Seemingly benign, right? So grandma comes to pick the child up from child care, who they love. But they were expecting daddy. Because, remember, for these kids, because the world can feel very overwhelming, because their brains never turn off and they're processing so much more than they can handle. A way to cope with the world is to have things be very predictable. Like, as long as my sandwich looks this way, all is right in the world. As long as daddy picks me up as I was expecting. All is right with the world, right? As long as this chair is in the living room, exactly where I expect it all is right with the world. But as soon as there is a shift that they don't expect, it can be very distressing to their systems. And they are thrown into dysregulation because at a very cellular level, it's a feeling of being out of control. So you could imagine if you have a child who is triggered into upset by everyday life experiences, right? Like this stuff is going to happen. You know, your dad's going to get stuck at work or at the doctor and somebody else is going to come pick you up, or someone's going to hand you a banana and it's going to break. So, so or your parents are going to decide to get a new couch, and your old couch is no longer there, right? Or you're going to have a new sibling.

Claire Lerner: [00:12:03] And you can imagine you know what that brings. So. Sure. So these kids have more frequent and intense meltdowns. So that's that is a major feature when you know, when families come to see me. Another biggie is this control issue these kids. And again I'm generalizing. But in general these kids are like heat seeking missiles for control and power. They will go to unbelievable extremes that still take my breath away 35 years into doing this work. The lengths they will go to be in charge, even to their own detriment. Right there, parents are bribing them. If you just poop on the potty, I'll take you to Disneyland. And they're like, nah, not really interested in Disneyland because their desire to be in control and not eat crow and cave to your agenda, which is to get me to poop on this potty, is bigger than my desire to go to Disneyland. Right? So I've got like thousands of these examples, but it looks kind of insane and so incredibly irrational on the outside. But when you look at it from their perspective, from their experience, it starts to make sense is that they're inflexibility and their rigidity is again a coping mechanism? Right. Like, if I can control where everybody sits and what everybody does and how everybody plays, then I can feel calm and comfortable. But if my idea is for the dinosaurs to be going on an adventure in the mountains, but my peer

here wants to have the dinosaurs be going out for lunch, I'm now in a conflict because I'm not in control anymore.

Claire Lerner: [00:14:02] And so you get things like more conflict, right? More meltdowns. And on the outside, again, it looks, you know, spoiled. And, you know, these are all the things that come out of parents and teachers mouths. You know, they're spoiled. They're a fascist dictator. They're a master manipulator. I had two moms who told me that they wanted their four year old to have agency, so they gave her tons of choices. And now she thinks she's an equity partner. Right? Because they were both attorneys. So like, these are the kinds of things I hear every day. And again, as I put together the pieces of the puzzle together with the parent for each child, we can always make sense of it. It's just the child's attempt to feel in control of a world that can feel very out of control. But behaviorally, it presents a lot of challenges when, you know they go to preschool and they can't be the line leader and they have to accept another job where other kids, the dandelions, the kids who are more flexible, who don't process these things so deeply. Those are the kids, by the way, that make their parents and teachers look so good. It's like time to get out of the out of the, you know, sandbox. No problem. They're running to get out of the sandbox and move on to the next thing. Well, the highly sensitive kid is melting down because they were still keenly involved in their activity. And they have to make a shift, which is harder for them.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:35] So traits, obviously pose challenges, but you've written that from an evolutionary perspective. They're necessary. Can you say more as to why?

Claire Lerner: [00:15:45] Well, yeah. Elaine Aron, who is really the pioneer of understanding this temperament trait and highly sensitive kids, talks a lot about the evolutionary nature of high sensitivity and why you would have 25 to 30% of the population have this temperament trait. And what she talks about is that for our culture and our society to survive, you need people who are keenly attuned to the world around them. And on the lookout for danger and get the nuances and subtleties of what is going on in the world.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:16:28] Right, right, right.

Claire Lerner: [00:16:29] Plus, many of the most successful people in our history are people who were highly sensitive, because that keen focus and looking at the nuances helps them understand things in a way that is much deeper than somebody who is not paying that close attention. So there's so many incredibly wonderful things about these kids. The things, the connections that they make are sometimes so profound. And their insights and their creativity and their empathy is awe inspiring. And, you know, here's some of the the great things that I've heard kids say. One parent told their child that their grandma was in a better place, and he said, well, if she's in a better place, why aren't we all going there? Right? Another child

also, unfortunately around death. The parent said she lives in our hearts. And the child said, and I'm talking literally four and five year olds saying, how did she get so small to live in our heart like they are? Their brains never turn off. But what you also see is another big trait is the more fearful, cautious, anxious trait for this very reason, because they overthink everything. So I can't tell you how many kids I've had in my practice where one child, for example, during a rainstorm, saw a tree limb fall on the neighbor's car And she said to her parents, what would happen if somebody was in that car? And the parents tried to help her understand that this would be highly unusual. But for this child, she for a long period of time, never wanted to go out in the rain because her brain is saying rain danger. A limb can fall onto this cart. They when it's a 1 in 1,000,000 chance, they focus on the one.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:18:58] The one? Sure.

Claire Lerner: [00:18:59] Yeah. So that caution is another common trait. And you saw it in some of my earlier stories. So they go into a new situation, like a new classroom. And unlike the dandelion, whose like are 10,000 magnet tiles I'll never have in my own home, this is awesome. And they're off to the races, not even turning back where the highly sensitive child, as I said before, is noticing everything and wondering, what am I going to feel like? What is this going to be like? So it looks like anxiety, right? And it looks like fear. But a lot of the times it's just caution. They're cautious because they're thinking very deeply. And most of them get there with. With supportive parenting. Many of these kids learn to muscle through those those situations that can be triggering and build incredible resilience. So I don't want to give the impression that these kids are fragile. It's just that they need a different kind of support in order to work through the anxiety to not have their parent either over protect and say, oh, my child can't deal with birthday parties. She gets overwhelmed by all the cacophony. Or she, you know, she can't do soccer because competition is hard for her because it's a control issue. If you don't win, you feel out of control. And by the way, that's another temperament trait or attribute that I find in these kids is a lot of trouble losing very perfectionistic, very low tolerance for frustration, all rooted in this issue of needing to be in control.

Claire Lerner: [00:20:53] Right? Like I want to be the one who made the soccer goal. So when they're not, they feel first of all, they're very quick to shame, they're very self-conscious, and they feel like they didn't. They lost control. They didn't. Their body didn't do what they wanted their body to do. Maybe they feel some disappointment from the people in their world. And so now they don't want to go to soccer. So one parenting approach is to just say, no problem. You don't have to do soccer. Soccer is, you know, not mandatory. And why would I make you do that when it's so uncomfortable for you? That's one option. The other option is go play. Everyone else is doing it. Suck it up, get out on that field or there's no screen time for the rest of the week, right? So like, of course I'm exaggerating to make a point, but what they really need is something like this I know you love soccer. You love

playing soccer. It's so fun and it can feel really uncomfortable when your team doesn't win, or when your body doesn't do what you want it to do.

Claire Lerner: [00:22:06] I totally get that. And the way we learn to cope with that is by doing it. And so we are going to go every Saturday at 10:00 Clock. That's my job as your mom or dad is to take you to the soccer field so you can have that experience and learn to muscle through. And I believe in you. I know it's hard, but I believe in you. And then you allow the kid. I mean, you can't. You can't make kids do anything, so you can't make them actually participate. But what I find is if you don't create the exposure and you just say, fine, you can stay home, they never have a chance to muscle through it. And what happens most of the time is that the child may watch for a while. I do lots of creative things, like give kids a reporter's notebook, and if they're going to be a watcher, they can just take notes and report back on what happened on the soccer field. There's lots of things we don't have time to go into today but are in the book. Sure. And ultimately, often what happens is the child ends up participating. But if you never create the exposure, the child doesn't have the chance to.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:23:23] That let them work to the discomfort, right? Yeah, right. You talked about parenting approaches here, and you'd earlier mentioned positive parenting and gentle parenting. And you know, and history is littered with countless parenting approaches, right? Yeah. And you point out that they can backfire. Can you explain how. Because these are fairly popular ways of going about this, this thing we call parenting?

Claire Lerner: [00:23:49] Well, I also I don't want to necessarily malign these like broad categories of parenting, which I just think are in general super problematic for families because there's not a one size fits all approach for anybody. And I think, of course, I think most of us believe in gentle parenting and positive parenting and strong attachments. Right? It's just the messaging that has come out. Especially with the advent of social media, that has led many of my parents to feel very incompetent and wonder what is wrong with me and what is wrong with my child when they don't work. So one clear example is something I think of as less is more in in the parenting world now, more is where it's at. More validation, more empathy. Let's talk this through. This is a really tricky moment. And trying to process the child's feelings because of all the science you guys have done around brain development and the importance of emotions, which is all 100% true and critical. It's just that in reality, How you go about the validation makes a huge difference for these kids. So what I find again in general is that when the child is triggered into upset, the more the parent tries to get them to talk about their feelings and the more validation they do, the more disregulated the child gets. It's too much. They can't process what the parent is trying to communicate, and so it actually ends up being less helpful and loving, if you will, because it's not what the child needs in that moment. So here's an in the weeds example. I had a family many years ago, and it's actually my work with my family that taught me a lot of these lessons.

Claire Lerner: [00:26:04] This particular mom was very distraught because she would take her child to school. Major separation issues. Very difficult. But the mom eventually made the, you know, the separation and the child did an amazing job of adapting and thriving at school. But when the mom would come back, the child would again be thrown into dysregulation. She would be hiding under a table. She would be screaming at her to go away. It's not time for her to come back. Which of course was also confusing to this mom who six hours before this child was clinging to for dear life. But that's not unusual for highly sensitive kids, because their attachments are so fierce that making these separations is hard. And once she turns her attention to connecting with her friends and her teachers, now shifting back to mom and home is also right is a challenge. So what this mom was doing making special treats to bring, bringing books to read to her, bringing toys to bring to her. Spending up to 30 minutes trying to convince her child to agree to leave the school. And she was exhausted. Her child was completely out of sorts. They both were miserable. And I had this aha moment that what this child really needed was for this mom to show validation with one statement and with a calm mind and body and move her through this difficult moment, that the more time that was spent trying to get this child to get with the program only led to escalation, because she wasn't able to do that in that moment. And so what feels mean is often the most loving thing.

Claire Lerner: [00:28:03] What she needed was, I know Sarah, it's really hard to go from school to home, I feel you. You have two great choices. You can go into the car using your body and getting yourself in. That's one great option. If you have a hard time doing that or you don't want to do that, no problem. I'll be a helper. And she moved her through it as calmly as she could. She got her into the car. She had to take off her child's shoes, because her child would be so dysregulated that she would take them off and throw them at her. And so what I've learned is that we're not controlling children. We're controlling the situation. We're not yelling at kids to stop throwing shoes at us. We're saying, I know your body is acting before your brain. I'm going to be your helper. And you take the shoes away and you let them have their meltdown. And you say one time, I know that was a really difficult moment. And then you put a book on tape or an audiobook, or you talk about what you're going to make for dinner and your child might still be raging and all you're doing is saying to yourself, I have a great kid having a difficult moment. She needs me to be her rock. And so this less is more concept has been so helpful to freeing parents from feeling like they have to make it all better. Or the answer is to go deep into feelings 24 over seven when what the child really needs is for you, just to help them move through a difficult situation.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:37] And it sounds like there's a lot of this, what you discuss as parental self-regulation in this. Right? What's, you know, you mentioned the parents feeling like, oh, I'm a failure. I'm not doing this right. This must be about what I'm doing wrong. And

when you're not regulated, your child is going to pick up on that as well. And then you can all be dysregulated together, unfortunately. But that's not pleasant for anyone involved.

Claire Lerner: [00:30:03] Yeah. And I would say that the families I work with, it is nothing short of heroic. The amount of self-regulation and self-control that they have to practice is, is really not short of superhuman, because these moments can be so triggering. And parents are human. And these parents especially are often judged right by their parents, by their peers, by their teachers.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:40] By the strangers on the street.

Claire Lerner: [00:30:42] Strangers on the street. You know, he's just spoiled, you know, or you know, you're indulging him or you're not being gentle enough when what is required of them is very different than what is required of a parent of a more flexible child. There's just no two ways about it. These kids are more challenging. There is. This is not maligning these kids. This is just the truth. They're amazing humans and they also get triggered very easily into upset and dysregulation. And they need their parents to be their rock. And it's really the kids who need the most clear limits and boundaries that are the hardest to set them with. That's the reality that these parents face. And so they deserve an incredible amount of empathy and understanding until you've walked in their shoes and you've witnessed one of these knock down, drag out meltdowns that sometimes can include physical aggression and lots of venom. It you would be in awe of the parents who ultimately find ways to gain that calm in order to be the rock their children need them to be, because it's life changing. Once they are able to master that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:32:19] We're almost out of time. But is there a point where maybe a parent says, gosh, I, I think we might need more help? What are the warning signs that that might actually be the case, that they should be talking to their health care provider or someone else to say this seems like more than what I'd expect.

Claire Lerner: [00:32:39] So I think either when a child's behavior is interfering in their functioning, like if their meltdowns or inflexibility or difficulty with frustration tolerance is interfering in their learning and their social relationships. Then for me, that's a very important litmus test, right? So if a parent says, well, these meltdowns are happening, you know, once a day at school and a couple times a week, then 99% of the time the child is coping right. But if a teacher or in your family, you're feeling like the child is sucking all the oxygen out of the room and it's interfering in your family's functioning and or you as a parent are feeling out of control. Those are critical indicators, because what many parents do find when they do find me is there are times when we need to give the child some of their own individual help, but in a lot of situations, these kids actually have more resilience than they appear to have. So when

I'm working with them, the parent often comes feeling like there is something very wrong with their child. So what I'm doing is helping us figure out, are there parenting approaches that can help the child get more regulated? And if we have success with that, we're good to go. If if the issues persist and it is interfering at that point in the child's functioning, then I am often referring kids to either for a developmental assessment for OT, for a social skills group, for other interventions that are going to be necessary to support this child's and family.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:34:54] Claire, thank you so much for this book. I think it really encourages, encourages all of us to think really about putting ourselves in the the mind of a child, but also the mind of parents. And just recognize that, not everyone perceives the world in the same way that we might. And thoughtful approaches to that will help us all.

Claire Lerner: [00:35:14] Exactly.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:35:15] Great. Thank you.

Claire Lerner: [00:35:16] Yeah. It was wonderful to be here.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:35:21] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. I think one of the lessons we learned from our conversation today was how much, seemingly minor or not, significant issues can actually loom large in a child's mind and how much we can learn to recognize that that's sometimes the case. I was reminded of a poem by none other than Judith Viorst that I think highlights some of that about how big the emotions can feel at times for young children. The poem is called Since Hannah Moved Away. The tires on my bike are flat. The sky is grouchy gray. At least it sure feels like that since Hannah moved away. Chocolate ice cream tastes like prunes. Decembers come to stay. They've taken back the Mays and June's. Since Hannah moved away. Flowers smell like halibut. Velvet feels like hay. Every handsome dog's a mutt. Since Hannah moved away, nothing's fun to laugh about. Nothing's fun to play. They call me but I won't come out. Since Hannah moved away. And that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read podcast. Reach Out and Read is a nonprofit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily and supports coaches and celebrates engaging in those language rich activities with young children. We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and early relational health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to. Our show is a production of Reach Out and Read. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lori Brooks is our chief external affairs officer. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise Paper, for making a

difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host, Doctor Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon. And remember, books build better brains.