

## Childhood Sensory Sensitivity: A Potential Precursor to Borderline Personality Disorder

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**Abstract :** TARA for borderline personality disorder (BPD), an education and advocacy organization, helps families to compassionately and effectively deal with troubling BPD behaviors. Our psychoeducational programs focus on understanding underlying neurobiological features of BPD and evidence-based methodology integrating dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and mentalization based therapy (MBT,) clarifying the inherent misunderstanding of BPD behaviors and improving family communication. TARA4BPD conducts online surveys, workshops, and topical webinars. For over 25 years, we have collected data from BPD helpline callers. This data drew our attention to particular childhood idiosyncrasies that seem to characterize many of the children who later met the criteria for BPD. The idiosyncrasies we observed, heightened sensory sensitivity and hypervigilance, were included in Adolf Stern's 1938 definition of "Borderline." This aspect of BPD has not been prioritized by personality disorder researchers, presently focused on emotion processing and social cognition in BPD. Parents described sleep reversal problems in infants who, early on, seem to exhibit dysregulation in circadian rhythm. Families describe children as supersensitive to sensory sensations, such as specific sounds, heightened sense of smell, taste, textures of foods, and an inability to tolerate various fabrics textures (i.e., seams in socks). They also exhibit high sensitivity to particular words and voice tones. Many have alexithymia and dyslexia. These children are either hypo- or hypersensitive to sensory sensations, including pain. Many suffer from fibromyalgia. BPD reactions to pain have been studied (C. Schmahl) and confirm the existence of hyper and hypo-reactions to pain stimuli in people with BPD. To date, there is little or no data regarding what comprises a normative range of sensitivity in infants and children. Many parents reported that their children were tested or treated for sensory processing disorder (SPD), learning disorders, and ADHD. SPD is not included in the DSM and is treated by occupational therapists. The overwhelming anecdotal data from thousands of parents of children who later met criteria for BPD led TARA4BPD to develop a sensitivity survey to develop evidence of the possible role of early sensory perception problems as a pre-cursor to BPD, hopefully initiating new directions in BPD research. At present, the research community seems unaware of the role supersensory sensitivity might play as an early indicator of BPD. Parents' observations of childhood sensitivity obtained through family interviews and results of an extensive online survey on sensory responses across various ages of development will be presented. People with BPD suffer from a sense of isolation and otherness that often results in later interpersonal difficulties. Early identification of supersensitive children while brain circuits are developing might decrease the development of social interaction deficits such as rejection sensitivity, self-referential processes, and negative bias, hallmarks of BPD, ultimately minimizing the maladaptive methods of coping with distress that characterizes BPD. Family experiences are an untapped resource for BPD research. It is hoped that this data will give family observations the critical credibility to inform future treatment and research directions.

**Keywords :** alexithymia, dyslexia, hypersensitivity, sensory processing disorder

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