HIGH-NEED BABIES

The Untold Truth

THE ULTIMATE PARENTING GUIDE
FOR HIGH-NEED CHILDREN



SUSAN McDOWELL

Thinking School

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The Ultimate Parenting Guide for High-Need Children

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Susan McDowell is a pen name. This book is for general information and does not replace individual advice from your pediatrician or another qualified health professional.

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Contents

Foreword 1
Introduction 5
01 The Characteristics of High-Need Babies 9
02 The First Months with a High-Need Baby 19
03 How High-Need Babies Sleep 29
04 The High-Need Child 39
05 How to Reach Them: Communication That Works 49
06 Managing Emotions 55
07 Home Organization 63
08 The Mother in a High-Need Family 69
09 The Father in a High-Need Family 75
10 The Couple in a High-Need Family 81
11 Siblings, Extended Family, and Professionals 85
12 Simplify Your Day-to-Day 91
13 Handling Criticism 95
14 Playing with a High-Need Baby and Child 101
15 How High-Need Children Learn 111
16 Finding Support 117
Final Words 121
Bibliography 125
Sources and References 129
About the Author 137
Also by Susan McDowell 139

Foreword

I DO NOT KNOW a single child who has never given their parents a headache. Children are our most precious treasure, and all of us, fathers and mothers alike, worry about them at the slightest sign that something may not be right. That is normal while raising our little ones. But within the normal range of challenges a baby can present, the truth is that some babies present very few of them, and others seem to present all of them at once: these are high-need babies.

High-need babies are not difficult, bad, or problematic children. They are none of the many labels I have seen them wear throughout my career as a psychologist (labels I have fought to remove). They are simply children who have greater needs in some areas, such as contact and stimulation, and smaller needs in others, such as hours of sleep.

> KEY IDEA
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> *High-need babies are not difficult, bad, or problematic children. They are simply children with greater needs in some areas and smaller needs in others.*

They are children who do not seem to follow the statistics of what a baby "should" be like, yet they are normal babies. People have simply forgotten that both ends of the bell curve exist, and that those ends are normal too. Not all children are the same: one parent will have the sleepiest child on the planet and another the least sleepy. Statistically speaking, there is a calmest baby and a most irritable baby, without anything being wrong with either of them.

They are the extremes of what is considered normal. In today's world, where parents have even less time to dedicate to their little ones than in the past, having a high-need baby becomes a serious problem for many families who do not understand what is happening. The biggest problem arises when parents do not realize that their child is simply like that, and they blame either the child or themselves, believing they are not good parents. Nothing could be further from the truth. Sometimes the answer is as simple as this: these parents need to understand the situation and learn a few tricks that work with these babies.

How can they get that information? Nothing works better than word of mouth from another parent who has been through the same thing. No one can understand parents of a high-need baby better than others who have lived similar situations, because these children do not need special treatment from pediatricians or psychologists: we are dealing with normal children.

This book is meant to be one of those tools that can help many parents in this situation, because it is written from experience and understanding.

How many times have parents of high-need babies felt judged? There is little understanding for them, and the judgment or advice usually comes from people who have no idea what it is like to be in their shoes.

In these pages, the author offers the understanding that so many parents need, along with her experience of the wonderful work she has done as the mother of a high-need baby. That is why this book is destined to become a cornerstone in raising these children. Reading the manuscript, I found words of support for parents, small tips and tricks to make babies happier, and, above all, common sense for the kinds of situations that overwhelm almost anyone. I hope common sense will prevail in raising our children, and that we will set aside the "anti-nature" (and "anti-heart") advice that is so often given.

This is an enjoyable, easy, and clear read that offers solutions for every aspect of parenting, from birth through later childhood. I believe *High-Need Babies: The Untold Truth* will become the bedside book for many parents looking for answers for their children. Above all, many of them will see themselves reflected in it and feel comforted by someone close to them, someone who understands them because she knows first-hand what it is like to walk that path.

— *Lynda Scheer*

Introduction

IF YOUR BABY CRIES harder, sleeps less, and settles only in your arms, this book is for you. It will help you understand why your child is like this, show you what tends to help at each stage, and give you ways to get through the hardest months with your health, your relationship, and your bond with your child intact.

With this book, I want to offer a broader view of high-need babies and children: what they are like, and how we can handle most of the situations that may arise while raising them. Motherhood involves a great deal of instinct, but it also requires some knowledge to guide you. In the past, that knowledge was gained simply by living in a community. Nobody needed to tell you what you should or should not do; you saw it in your own family: your mother, aunts, grandmothers, and neighbors.

Nowadays we live more isolated lives, and if you do not have someone nearby to guide you, things can be difficult, especially during the first few months. This is even harder if your child has greater needs than others, or if his behavior differs from that of most children. And that is exactly the case with high-need babies.

If all you know about babies is that they eat and sleep, and that you will spend your idle hours watching them sleep peacefully in their crib, reality may come as a shock. In truth, few babies behave like that. But the vast majority, once their basic needs are met (hunger, sleep, hygiene, and physical contact), fall asleep peacefully or at least stay calm.

With high-need babies, the reality is very different. From the very first moment, they can behave in a completely different way. They can spend long hours awake, eyes wide open, looking at everything around them. They resist sleep tooth and nail and may

cry explosively to avoid it. They take in too many stimuli, and this creates a nervousness that prevents them from relaxing enough to rest. When they finally fall asleep, their sleep is light and restless. In short, they sleep little and badly. On top of that, many of them will only tolerate being in your arms, and only yours, day and night.

Imagine that you expect a sweet, sleepy baby, and on the first day you meet an active, curious baby who wants anything but sleep, and who cries at a volume you have never heard from a baby at the slightest stimulation. You will be surprised, to say the least. You may think something is wrong, because this is not what you were told, nor what you see when you visit friends or walk down the street. Having a high-need baby brings many joys, but the first months are exhausting: because of the lack of sleep (you will literally hardly sleep), because of the physical demands, and because you are recovering from childbirth at the same time.

As babies grow, things fortunately change a great deal, but the high level of need and those urgent demands will remain, even if they show up in different ways. We must stay strong and keep it together to give our children everything they need, which is a lot, because this is the only way we can help them grow into the brilliant people they can become.

All these demands affect family life as a whole: the couple's relationship, the other siblings, the extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins), social life and even work life, our emotional balance, ordinary events such as a visit to the doctor or starting nursery school, and even our way of living and seeing life.

That is why, in this book, I have tried to gather all the advice I would have loved to receive when my daughter was born, along with everything I have learned through the different stages we have gone through until today. I have tried to cover every area that may matter to you, though I have probably left some out. It is difficult to cover everything.

I am sure that in the following pages you will find relief, understanding, and ideas to solve most of the difficulties that may

arise. No two high-need babies are exactly alike, but many of them behave similarly in many ways. Most of the advice in this book is based on my own experience with my two children. Where I rely on research, I say so and name it, and you will find every study listed by chapter in the "Sources and References" section at the end of the book. Where something comes from my own experience, or from the many parents I have listened to, I say that too. A study describes an average; your child is one child, and you are the person who knows him best.

Each chapter ends with a short "Try this week" box: two or three small, concrete steps. If you only have the energy for one page tonight, start with the box at the end of Chapter 3.

> KEY IDEA
>
> *No two high-need babies are exactly alike, but many of them behave similarly in many ways.*

I invite you to join me on this journey, in which I will help you change your approach so that you can draw out all the positive things these children have, and enjoy them. You will discover how lucky we are that these special children have chosen us as their mothers and fathers. Come with me; you will not regret it.

CHAPTER 1

The Characteristics of High-Need Babies

THE TERM *HIGH-NEED BABY* comes from the American pediatrician William Sears and his wife, the nurse Martha Sears. They began using it after the birth of their fourth child, a daughter named Hayden, who was very different from their other children.

Relatives and close friends tagged her with negative labels such as "crybaby" or "difficult," so Dr. Sears and his wife created a term to describe their daughter. These are the twelve characteristics Dr. Sears used to define high-need babies:

Intense	Hyperactive
Draining	Feeds frequently
Demanding	Awakens frequently
Unsatisfied	Unpredictable
Super-sensitive	Can't be put down
Not a self-soother	Separation-sensitive

Is your baby a high-need baby? Many mothers tell me they are not sure whether their baby fits the description. They notice their baby is different from the babies around them, and they feel overwhelmed and judged, but they are not one hundred percent sure.

Apart from the characteristics Dr. Sears described, there are other traits common to many high-need babies:

- They have big eyes that are always wide open, carefully observing everything from day one.
- Many parents say they held their heads up very early, almost without help.
- They cry a lot, and with great intensity.
- They cannot be away from their mother's body even for a second, day or night.
- They do not accept lying down; they always want to be upright, looking at everything.
- They resist sleep, and when they finally fall asleep, they wake up every 20 minutes.
- They do not like car rides, and cry desperately in the car.
- They do not accept the crib or the stroller. Some do not even accept the baby carrier; they just want arms, and more arms.
- They do not like baths.
- It is difficult to get them to take any medicine.
- They do not let anyone else hold them, which makes it hard for the doctor to examine them.

The first months of a baby's life are often difficult because everything is new for everyone: for the baby and for the parents, especially first-time parents. If the baby has greater needs, everything becomes more complicated, and the first months can be incredibly hard. Well-meaning advice from family and friends is not usually very helpful either, because these children are not widely understood, and what most people expect from a baby in the first months is that he eats and sleeps. If you have a baby and do not know whether he is a high-need baby, you may still have some doubts after reading these characteristics.

However, this is not a diagnosis that confirms whether or not your baby is high-need. It simply helps us see that our child is normal, that he is not the only one who behaves this way, and that