Understanding Parent Sensory Personalities: How Knowing Yourself Can Help You Better Connect with Your Child

**Intro**

Welcome to Sense by Meg Faure the podcast that's brought to you by Parent Sense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you are a new parent, then you are in good company. Your host Meg Faure is a well-known OT infant specialist and the author of eight parenting books. Each week we are going to spend time with new moms and dads just like you to chat about the week's wins, the challenges, and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the Parent Sense App and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life. And now, meet your host.

**Bailey:** Hello and welcome to everyone joining us for this episode of Sense by Meg Faure. It's brought to you by Parent Sense, the all in one baby app that takes the guesswork out of parenting. I'm Bailey Geordiades, a fellow mom, podcaster and media personality, and I am here with Meg. Love connecting with you. How are you?

**Meg:** I'm so well, Bailey. It's always fabulous. I love our sessions when we chat and we bring up all the questions that all the moms want to ask. So yeah, I'm very, very excited to chat with you again today.

**Bailey:** I get so excited and so educated on every topic and today's is no different. A while back we talked about sensory personalities, what they are, why they matter, why you call it the secret to successful parenting. And today we're going to take that one step further to talk about your sensory personality as a parent, I am fascinated.

**Meg:** It is fascinating and it does impact every area of life. And very often when parents hear about their baby sensory personality, and for those of you who haven't listened to that episode, you've got to go back. Bailey, it's is actually our most popular episode. It's our most downloaded episode. Do go back and listen to it. But when people listen to it, they go, oh my gosh, that's what my husband is or that's what my mother-in-law is, or that's what my teenage child is, or my brother or my sister. And so we all have these sensory personalities. And then often people want to know actually what does that mean? Like if I'm like this, then what does that mean for my child? And so understanding our own sensory personalities is so important.

**Bailey:** Well, I cannot wait to get stuck in. You've got me thinking now as to what am I. So why don't you start us off with a quick summary of the sensory personalities.

**Meg:** Yeah. So we've got the four sensory personalities. Two of them are actually sensory personalities that are very sensitive. So your sensitive personalities are the sensitive and the slow-to-warm-up. So, your sensitive person over perceives sensory input in the environment. So they are very alert to visual, auditory, tactile input and they can actually become quite overstimulated by a lot going on in the environment. So if you are one of those people who just can't deal with crying, your skin on your back can feel itchy. You hate massages. I mean, I don’t know who does that, but there are a lot of people who can't stand to be touched and to be massaged, you probably are more sensitive.

And then in that category of sensitive people are those who are slow to a map and a slow to a person is also sensitive, but once they know that something is noxious or not tricky or it is not dangerous, they can actually warm up to it quite nicely. And so they don't like novelty, they like control, they like predictability, they like to be in control. I'm a little bit of a slow to warm my personality. So I like to know what's coming next. Very often a slow to my person, their first line of defense to any new idea will be no. And so my husband really…My husband, and I have one child living at home now and her and I are both slow-to-warm-up, and any new idea that comes from my social butterfly husband because he loves new ideas is usually met with a no from myself or Emily. And that's one of the hallmark features of a slow-to-warm-up person is that we like to think through things once we think it's a good idea. We can be like a social butterfly, we can be this life and soul of the party, but we take time to warm up to things because we don't love novelty, because the world can be unpredictable for people who…Our natural threshold is sensitive, so the world can be unpredictable.

 So those are first two sensory personalities and they are on the sensitive side of the spectrum. On the under sensitive side of the spectrum are the settled and the social butterfly. Now the settled person or in my book your Sensory baby, I talk about the serene mum and they kind of tend to be really laid back and the whole world can be going on around about them and they don't really notice, you know, sound, smells, tastes, all of that sort of thing, you know, it's just, it's just part of the background information and they don't become overstimulated at all, ever. And they don't become overwhelmed by sensory input and a lot can be going on without them even noticing. So that's the type of mom who their baby's made a poo and you can smell it from three blocks away and they're sitting quite fine with it with their baby on their lap, completely laid back. They're happy, their baby's happy if their baby's a settled baby as well, and oblivious to the fact that there's a horrific smell in the environment. So we probably all know a mom like that and she's often…They look like kind of those earth mothers who are super laid back, don't go according to routines, you know, breastfeed or actually don't breastfeed, solids, you’re three years old, it just completely doesn't matter. And I once had a mom in my practice who was like that and just super laid back and when I was trying to instill a routine in her baby's life who was a super sensitive little one, she kept saying to me, I don’t know when she eats. I said, “Well give me a time of day that you think she has lunch.” She says, I don’t know when she has lunch. I guess she has lunch when I think she might be hungry.” You know, it was this kind of super laid back approach to life, so completely the opposite of me. But they tend to be very laid back, take things in their stride and never become overstimulated.

And then in this bucket of under sensitive people, you also then have people who actually notice that there's exciting stuff in the world and that their senses aren't picking up on all of it. And so they become what we call sensory seekers, and sensory seekers love social interaction. They love sensory engagement, the more the merrier. My husband and my son are those; you know, throw yourself down a mountain on a mountain bike, cut surf as fast as possible. They're very often into the adrenaline junkie type activities. They also really are wired socially, so they want to have social interaction all the time and they don't become overstimulated usually. And so we've got these four different sensory personalities, each two of them are on each side of the spectrum.

**Bailey:** I think for a lot of us, before we even become parents, we have this expectation of firstly how we will be as parents, how well we'll know our baby. And we don't really envision being so different from our little one from a sensory perspective, do we? In fact, it's not something that I've ever considered, but a very sensitive mom may well be parenting a little social butterfly who's not bothered with routine and wants to explore and doesn't seem to be afraid of anything, and that can be really hard. And until today I have never really thought about marrying those two together.

**Meg:** Yeah, so it's something that we call goodness of fit, and I think it's very important when we talk about goodness of fit, we're not talking about bad fit. So, that's important. Certainly we're not going to be saying, if you are a sensitive and you've got a social butterfly, like this is a bad fit. This is certainly not what we're saying. What we are saying is that there's some fits of personality that actually works really, really well together. And there are others that need a little bit of extra work. You need to parent with more consciousness. So for example, and this doesn't just go for your parenting, this goes for your marriage. In fact it goes for your marriage maybe even more than your parenting, and I think being able to articulate this with your partner is just so incredibly powerful.

**Bailey:** So powerful.

**Meg:** So powerful. So as I said, I'm a slow-to-warm-up, and as soon as you articulate that to your partner or as soon as I parent my teenage daughter as a slow-to-warm-up, I really get her. I understand why she has to say no first every time because she needs to work it out for herself. It needs to become more predictable and then she'll warm up to it and she'll go for it. And so our relationships become so much more empathic and so much more insightful and so much more reflective because we know about what the other person's feeling. And so it's a way in which we can get inside somebody's head and understand if we can understand this fit.

Now there are some fits that do work better than others. And you know, I think that an an example there would be if you've got a social butterfly mom who loves lots and lots of social interaction and she's got a social butterfly kitty who loves lots of not of social interaction, can you imagine the fun? I mean, can you imagine lots of fun, lots of stimulation, suits everyone. Problem is that social butterflies don't know that they have an off switch, and so what happens is that both mom and baby don't recognize off switches, they don't recognize that maybe there's overstimulation coming. And so you end up with a baby who is actually a social butterfly but is now very sensitive because they have become overstimulated. And so, it's being able to understand these dynamics that is really, really valuable, and that's why we call it the goodness of fit.

**Bailey:** So, let’s talk about likeness. How would both a mom and baby interact if they were both sensitive? I mean you've mentioned the social butterflies.

**Meg:** Yeah, so if you were both sensitive and this is so interesting because this is where you potentially have a situation that isn't a good fit. So when I was talking about the social butterflies, great that you’re both the same and you spark off each other. But what happens if you're both sensitive, what happens there? Well you've got a low threshold for crying and for niggling and for difficult…You know, you're sensitive and you've got this baby who doesn't stop crying because they're sensitive about everything. So a sensitive baby might cry just because they've got clothes on their back or they might cry because they've got bubbles in their tummy and so it looks like it's colic. And they have very fussy patches and sensitive babies do tend to be more fussy. And now you've got a sensitive mom who is now sensitive to sounds and of course this baby is crying so much. And so in those circumstances you do need to have some sort of escape mechanism for that mom particularly. Very interestingly, I did a lecture to psychiatry students at Falcon Burke Hospital many years ago. And this incredible dad who was starting to be a psychiatrist came up to me afterwards and he said, I know having listened to you that my wife is sensitive, she over responds to everything. She's sensitive, she can't stand loud noises, if the dog barks, she gets a fright. She just needs to have quiet spaces, low light. You know, she has very specific tastes in the type of clothing she'll put on. She doesn't like massages and we've navigated that in our marriage. And he said, “Now we are pregnant with twins and what am I going to do if one of my twins ends up being a sensitive baby? And what I said to him was, first of all, just the fact that you are acknowledging this, that you are acknowledging that your wife is sensitive is incredible because it immediately puts a different veneer on the situation, firstly.

Secondly, and the reason this was so powerful that a dad was telling me this story was that he would become the vessel that would protect the mom and the baby so he could be the holding space for them. And so when he could see that mom was over overstimulated, particularly end of the day we know that our thresholds get lower towards the end of the day, he would then be able to take the babies or he would give her more downtime. And you know, one of the things we know about sensitive people is that with their thresholds they need regular kind of breaks where they can just break from social interaction, break from sensory, have a sleep baby, have a rest, just have a walk, whatever it is, go for a jog, whatever it is that resets their sensory unload. And so we talked about how she would have time to do that.

And so I think when you've got two sensitive people, it's first of all, an awareness is very important and it's not that you're a bad mother or your baby's a bad baby, you know, those words shouldn't be in the vocabulary. It's that you're both sensitive and therefore you're going to need a little bit of extra help. You're going to need an extra set of hands around bath time because that's the tricky time of day for instance, right. You're going to need to have words to be able to describe it. So I think the insight there is very, very important.

**Commercial Break**

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**Bailey:** This is why I love this topic so much because I think everybody listening right now is going what am I? And really like now having a look at the family dynamic, I mean especially if we have more than one child. If we have one that is slow-to-warm-up, how would you recommend parenting your little one in terms of introducing them to new people or places or situations?

**Meg:** Yeah, so our slow-to-warm-up little ones do need time and they need predictability and you know, if you're a social butterfly mom in particular, you don't need predictability. In fact you much prefer not to have predictability. But it's been very, very conscious about it and it's also for your settled mom as well, serene mom, you need to be very conscious of it and make sure that you are positioning that your child's world to be very predictable for them. So here's a couple of ideas; one is that regular routines are very important and you know, in the Parent Sense App, we've got the regular routines, they work so well for these slow-to-warm-up babies and toddlers. So try and stick to their sleep times, try and stick to their mealtimes, try and have meal times and sleep times at specific times in the day where there's predictability. That's the first thing.

Second thing is that if there's a change coming up, and especially if you've got a verbal toddler, start to talk to them about the change. So we're going on holiday tomorrow, what are we going to pack? We're going on holiday next week, whatever countdown days or mommy's going back to work, or we're going to have a new baby or you're starting school. So we start to have countdown days and start to prepare them and then letting them just dip their foot into something very lightly. Like for instance, if it's a new school that they're going to, they go to the school for half an hour for a play date with you and then come home the first time so that they really get a sense of what happens and then they can kind of get into it.

Also with your toddlers quite early on you can start to use symbolic representations. So that's like an image that tells them what's coming next. So it's kind of like a calendar that we would have except it's a calendar for little ones. So it's got a picture of let's say bath times, a tricky time of day because transition times often are for slow-to-warm-up children. So, there'll be a picture of them playing outside, and then the next picture will be of them having supper, and the next picture will be of them having a bath, and the next one will be of story, and teeth brushing, bottle, and bed. And so each of these pictures creates a sequence of what's going to happen and we can say, “Come, we're doing this now and when we finish this we're going to go onto that one.” And so, really having a visual representation, almost like a storybook that helps them to understand it.

**Bailey**: Brilliant

**Meg:** So those are the type of things, you know also with new people, if you're going to go and meet new people, you want your little one to get used to them. Maybe a zoom call, or WhatsApp call, saying to the teacher, “Can I do a WhatsApp call with you? Because tomorrow we’re coming into the class, my little one is a slow-to-warm-up, it would just help me so much if he knew your face before we got there.

**Bailey:** That is such a nice idea. I love that.

**Meg:** Yeah, it's just preparing your little one for predictability and for helping them to understand what's coming.

**Bailey:** So let's talk about creating and sticking to a routine when you just aren't that kind of person, but your little one thrives in routine because I think at the end of the day this is something that a lot of parents struggle with, especially if they are the under desensitized ones.

**Meg:** And that was that story that I told at the beginning of the mom who was…She was super, super laid back and she really didn't know her child's routine at all, and this was I think an 18 month old. It was a long time ago, but the child who was brought to me was…Actually it was been questioned whether or not the child was on the autistic spectrum because she was that difficult. She was really, really difficult. And the first thing we had to do was put in place a routine. And you know, I think as parents there are things that we have to learn to do for our children and you know, I mean I can remember like waking up early in order to make school lunches on that first morning of when my children started school was like, hell. Like, “Oh my gosh.” You know, I have to do this. Of course, I don't even know how many school lunches I've done. It's probably been 15 years-worth of school lunches. You know, it's something you do in your sleep now.

But they are things that you just have to man up and do and creating a routine particularly for slow-to-warm-up little ones who need routines, but actually for most little ones, because most babies thrive on routines. It’s part of your duty. It's part of what you have to do and it's a discipline and it might not come naturally to you, but then hey, neither did breastfeeding before you breastfeed your first child, but you did it and you got your head around it. And so, that's why for me, routines are critically important for particularly our slow-to-warm-up and sensitive little ones. But actually the truth be told, all little ones do better on a routine and so it should be followed. And that doesn't mean it has to be utterly rigid and it doesn't mean that your whole life has to stop around the routines, but it does mean that for most of your child's days in life that there is some sort of predictability.

**Bailey:** In one of your books you talk about getting to know yourself as a mother. And I really love that because before I had children I would've described myself as a complete social butterfly. And even though that may be true in certain instances thinking about it, I'm probably slow-to-warm-up, but the minute I'm warm, I am settled and a social butterfly and confident and all those good things, but it really does impact certain situations. If I think about it, my first born is slow-to-warm-up and my second born is social butterfly, and I'm a totally different mom because where I went from being social butterfly to more now understanding that I have a slow-to-warm-up. I've realized I'm actually quite slow-to-warm-up too, and now my youngest has come in and reminded me of my social butterfly days, I suppose. And I'm now having to go into a completely different mode, and it's really interesting to look at how we parent, even though we're in under the same roots, same mom and dad, same upbringing, but totally different children.

**Meg:** Absolutely. It's so interesting, you know, I mean one of the questions that often come up, moms will actually ask me, and you've alluded to Tia, that you can show different sensory personalities. And moms have often said to me, “You know, I'm not sure about my baby sensory personality because sometimes they look like they're slow-to-warm-up and other times they look like they're social butterflies. Like what's that about?” And the reality is that our sensory personalities will adjust in response to situations.

So for example, children who have got a sensory threshold that maybe is just slightly slow-to-warm-up and maybe it's, could even be that they're just settled, it could be that they're just a settled baby and they are put into a highly, highly stressed, very, very chaotic social environment. So there's lots of violence in the home, there's violence in the community, there's poverty, there's not knowing where the next meal comes from, there's hunger. So you take all of that together, and that by the way is one of the biggest risk factors in human development, is poverty, and that's because of all that chaos that often comes with it. But in that chaotic situation, the child can end up actually being very, very sensitive because everything that goes on is dangerous actually. And so everything…You know, if a door slams, they'll start screaming. And we see this sometimes with children who've come out of trauma situations that they're highly, highly sensitized. And it goes for what happens in pregnancy as well, that if we are exposing ourselves to an enormous amount of stress in pregnancy, we can actually wire our baby's brains for hypersensitivity to stress. And so there are things that can happen environmentally that can really impact the manifestation of our genes. It's part of the theory of epigenetics.

And I think this is where it's so important that….And where this whole environment comes in, you know, that yes, we can shift into different sensory personalities because we are put into stress situations. It is important that we get to know ourselves as moms. It's important that we get to understand, you know, what our capacities are to be able to rely on support systems. Those types of things can be really protective when it comes to ourselves and to our little ones and to our sensory personalities for sure.

**Bailey:** It's so fascinating to really learn who we are as a mom, having those realistic expectations. And I suppose how realistic is it to expect a rigid routine?

**Meg:** So I mean I spoke about routines just now about how important they are and I mean it's so great that you brought that up because it is one of the things that parents often ask, you know, like I'm not a routine person. We've spoken about particularly those serene moms who are not routine people. And also, I don't want to have this rigid routine. How realistic is it?

So one of the things that we did with the Parent Sense App is that we built this routine into the app that said this is approximately the times the day that your baby should be doing things. And we realized actually that parents needed to be able to really make that adjust to their baby's own their own lives as well. And so what we've actually done is we've just done an overhaul of the app and it's just released now. And so for those of you who are listening, do go and have a look and update your app because we've introduced what's called the responsive routine. So the responsive routine responds to, first of all, what is important in your life.

So an example of that could be that your baby generally wakes up at seven, they don't wake up at five in the morning or that your baby generally wakes at eight, they don't wake up between five and seven because in the past we used to say wake your baby between five and seven. So you can actually input your baby's own awake time according to what you like. Likewise with your feed times, the app suggests the feed times according to their age and type of feeding, but we know that some moms want to feed differently. And so you can put in how long you want between your feeds, and likewise with bedtime, we have a recommended bedtime of seven o'clock because we don't think the babies should go to bed later than that, including toddlers, and sometimes it's earlier, but for some moms it's necessary for whatever reason. And so we've given parents the option, first of all, of putting in their own details and their own preferences.

**Bailey:** That is fantastic.

**Meg:** But the most incredible thing about this routine, and it's the first time it's been done worldwide is that we've actually built into the algorithm the ability of the routine to adjust to what gets tracked for the baby. So when you track for your baby that they had their feed 15 minutes before the app had said they should have their feeds, at quarter to nine, it say instead of nine o'clock, everything else adjusts for their feeds through the day. And likewise, the next feed, the next feed might then have been maybe quarter to 12, maybe if you were feeding three-hourly, but you actually fed them at half past 12, and then it'll adjust again and then the next feed, it'll be a little bit later. So, we've really made the routine completely respond to everything that you put inside. So as you track the data, it'll actually generate the right routine for you.

**Bailey:** Meg, that is so brilliant. Well done. That’s so exciting.

**Meg:** I’m excited, Bailey. It's the biggest change that we've made to the absence we launched it. Well, I suppose we added in the recipes at one point, which was a big shift, but this is a really, really incredible shift because what it does is it means that the mom who wants to be a little bit more rigid can follow the routine that's kind of been suggested. And the mom who wants to make up her own rules and have her own defined routines will do it. And then the baby, that what you track about your baby will actually define what comes out at the end of the day. And so it's a super, it's an incredible piece of technology. It's a very, very clever piece of technology. It's an algorithm that has taken months to build and I'm super proud of our Dev Team. So for those of you who've got the Parent Sense App, do go and have a look at that responsive routine because it is going to be a game changer for sure.

**Bailey:** This is the support that I'm talking about. This is why we say the Parent Sense App takes all the guesswork out of parenting. Meg, you are brilliant. I love talking to you. You have given me so much to think about with the sensory personalities. I'm now going to start looking at my family, my friends who’re slow-to-warm-up. It's actually uncovered so much, so thank you again. Thanks to everyone listening, thank you for being here and we will be back again soon, until then, happy parenting.

**Meg:** Thanks Bailey. Goodbye.

**Outro**

Thanks to everyone who joined us, we will see you the same time next week. Until then, download Parent Sense App and take the guesswork out of parenting.