

HAIRCUTTING TIPS

Sensory sensitivities are common among individuals with autism and can make certain aspects of a haircut distressing and overwhelming. Here are some general strategies that address sensory, environmental and behavioral components that can help you understand your child's needs in order to create a more positive haircutting experience for you and your child.



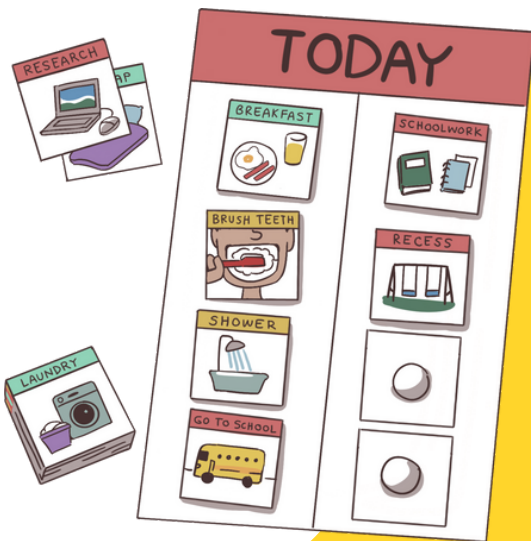
AUDITORY STRATEGIES

- Schedule a time when the salon is not as busy (typically weekday mornings)
- Skip the blow dryer to reduce noise
- Give your child noise-cancelling headphones and/or play preferred songs to reduce anxiety
- Allow your child to watch preferred videos to distract them from the noise
- Count out loud with your child (tell them that you are going to make 5 more cuts before stopping)
- Use scissors as opposed to electric clippers or consider purchasing quiet baby hair clippers



TACTILE STRATEGIES

- Try to avoid soft and gentle touch on the hair/scalp and provide firm pressure with your hands and comb instead (press down on top of head and shoulders while cutting hair).
- Provide calming deep pressure such as a weighted lap pad, weighted blanket, weighted shoulder pad, weighted vest or backpack during the appointment.
- Desensitize the scalp/shoulders by providing deep pressure massage for a few minutes right BEFORE the haircut
- Provide vibrating input to shoulders with a massager in times leading up to a haircut
- Consider bringing your own towel or cape from home if your child is sensitive to certain textures or materials.



VISUAL STRATEGIES



- Use visual schedule before the appointment to outline the sequence of events before and during the haircut appointment. Help your child know what to anticipate during their haircut.
- Consider using a visual timer to let your child know how much time they have left. Alternatively, if you know or can plan how long the haircut will take, you can also use a video of a certain duration, so once the video or playlist is done, the haircut is done
- If your child is sensitive to bright lights consider dimming them



ORAL STRATEGIES

- Oral input can be very calming during the haircut; some examples include chewing gum, lollipop, snacking on crunchy and chewy snacks (e.g., nuts and seeds, carrots, chips, crackers, pretzels, dried fruit), chewable necklace/chewies or pacifiers.



OLFACTORY STRATEGIES

- Your child might be sensitive to certain odors/smell
- Eliminate or reduce gel and/or hairspray
- Use unscented shampoo/conditioner and other smells in the room (perfume/air fresheners)
- The scent of sanitized tools can be off-putting for some; consider bringing your tools
- Consider using relaxing aromatherapy (e.g., lavender) before and during the appointment

PROPRIOCEPTIVE AND VESTIBULAR STRATEGIES

- Consider having your child sit on the floor, in a preferred chair, step-stool, wiggle chair, bath-tub, your lap, etc.
- Tilting the head back for washing or moving it for various angles of cutting can be disorienting or uncomfortable. Consider practicing these movements (looking up/down/left/right) with fun games/obstacle courses. If moving/tilting head is difficult and anxiety provoking simply have your child keep their head in the preferred position while you adjust your own body/hands. Some kids might respond very well to receiving rotary movement in the salon chair (or your office chair) during breaks.
- If your child can't reach the floor, grab a step stool to rest their feet (feeling the ground with their feet can make them stay more focused)
- Have your child complete heavy work to calm the nervous system before the haircut (ask your OT for specific recommendations or activity ideas)



BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES

- Create a social story with pictures and simple step-by-step explanation of the process of getting a haircut. Take pictures of the salon with permission from the salon owner and hairdresser and put them in the story to increase predictability. You can also try books about getting a haircut.
- Show videos of children or familiar people getting a haircut; repeat the story or video several times, until your child is very familiar with the routine
- Bring the child to the salon to watch you, their siblings and other family members getting a haircut to make this process more familiar
- Role-play using pretend scissors and a doll or a family member. When your child is comfortable, ask them to allow you to use the pretend scissors on their head or have them give you a quick haircut
- Whether the haircut is done at home or salon, do something fun and preferred (e.g., special toy, favorite snack/place, preferred activity) when the haircut is complete so they have something fun and motivating to look forward to
- Recognize that your child may need multiple breaks during the haircut to cope with sensory overload.
- Help your child engage in their “calming sequence” if they have one, prior to the clippers/scissors touching their head. This may involve deep breathing, hand squeezes, playing with a fidget item, or reciting a calming phrase.