

Haircare

Sensory processing differences can be one of multiple factors that contribute to self-care difficulties. Children may have difficulties processing sensory aspects of the environment such as noise or smell or processing the internal sensations. Some children find having their hair washed or brushed very uncomfortable. Hair cutting can also feel very uncomfortable for them. Going to the hairdressers may be challenging due to the noise, touch, and sometimes visual information being too much to process. Whilst some children may refuse to brush or wash their hair, others may avoid or become distressed, due to their sensory experiences.

The following ideas are designed to help address these challenges. When using them, consider your child's age, any potential risks and their sensory preferences. Reflect on how to adapt these strategies to best support your child in feeling calm and relaxed during haircare activities.

Area of difficulty	Strategy	Tick when strategy has been tried and add comments
Child avoids or becomes distressed during hair brushing	In preparation of hair brushing, place your hands on top of their head and exert gentle but constant pressure down (providing deep calming pressure).	
	Have your child positioned between your legs and squeeze them firmly between your knees to provide deep pressure.	
	Brushing hair in the bath or shower, or using a spray or leave-in conditioner, can reduce discomfort when brushing.	
	When brushing your child's hair, use firm strokes holding the hair at the root to reduce pulling.	
	Try a Tangle Teezer or Wet Brush hairbrush to gently detangle hair.	
	Encourage your child to brush their own hair using a mirror.	
	Tie up long hair overnight to reduce knotting.	

	Use a visual or audial countdown such as counting/sand timer/phone timer/songs to give the activity a clear ending.	
	Use visual distractions your child may engage in whilst completing brushing hair	
	Use social stories™ to help your child understand the process of hair brushing and why it is happening. Further information on social stories™ available at: Social Stories - Carol Gray - Social Stories (carolgraysocialstories.com)	
Child becomes distressed by hair cutting	Use comforters, such as music/books/tablet/soft blanket to help to distract them and block other sensations out.	
	Use visuals to break the task down and remind them of the order of each step.	
	Use social stories™ to educate them around the order of tasks in the hair cutting routine. For further. Further information on social stories™ available at: Social Stories - Carol Gray - Social Stories (carolgraysocialstories.com)	
	Try to find a mobile hairdresser so the child can be in their home environment (and without the overwhelm from the hair salon environment).	
	Use calming or quieter clippers.	
	To help block out the sound of clippers or scissors, try using calmer ear buds or headphones so your child can play their own music.	
	Use “now and next” motivators e.g. “first we will cut your hair, then you can play your game.”	
	Enable your child to pause the task, through an agreed word or action, and return to the task when they feel ready.	
	Start by practicing with the clippers turned off. Gently place the clippers on your child’s head for 1-5 seconds, then remove them. If using the clippers while switched on, stop after a few seconds. Encourage your child to turn the clippers on themselves and hand them to an adult to touch their head	

	for 5-10 seconds. Gradually increase the duration, aiming for around five repetitions. Allow time for your child to re-regulate between attempts if needed. Never force the use of clippers if your child becomes distressed and avoid trying this while they are sleeping.	
	Consider the other factors that may be influencing your child's anxiety/stress level. Consider planning haircuts on days when there are fewer demands that cause your child stress.	
	See Attending Appointments Worksheet in 'Occupational Therapy Sensory Resource Pack' on our website.	
Child becomes distressed with hair washing	See Washing Worksheet in 'Occupational Therapy Sensory Resource Pack' on our website.	

Useful resources:

Hair care guidance: [Home – Hair Care – Sensory Processing \(humber.nhs.uk\)](http://humber.nhs.uk)

Visual supports for hair washing: [washing hair \(eput.nhs.uk\)](http://eput.nhs.uk)