

Hair care, common sensory issues, and practical tips

Children's Therapy Services Patient information

Why can hair care be challenging?

We all interpret information from the environment around us in different ways. Some people find certain types of input more distressing or distracting than others such as touch, also known as tactile input. This discomfort may be particularly present with light touch on the skin, such as from a shower spray or being tickled. Unexpected sensory experiences can be threatening to children, such as being tickled suddenly from behind. **The head is particularly sensitive to touch**, which can make hair washing, brushing, or cutting an uncomfortable and sometimes distressing experience.

Touch is a primary and basic sensory system. When children are sensitive to touch, they may react negatively to touch input by screaming, crying, or hitting back. This is because the nervous system is interpreting the stimulus as potentially harmful or dangerous.

As well as touch, the child may be sensitive to the sound, movement, and smell associated with hair washing, brushing and haircuts. For example, they may dislike the sound of clippers or hairdryers, they may struggle to tilt their head backwards to have their hair washed or feel wobbly when sitting on a chair without their feet supported, or they may struggle to tolerate the smell of shampoo and other hair products.

Below are some tips to try that may help reduce stress levels around hair grooming. Please keep in mind that every child is unique, and what may work for one child may not work for another. Also, a certain method that works for a child one day, may not work for that same child the next day.

To help your child manage hair care, you can:

- prepare your child for the task using visual supports for hair washing, brushing, or haircuts. This can help many children. For example, you can use a picture to represent the activity. This could be hair brushing with a picture to represent a preferred activity such as snack or TV. Explain to your child that first they will have their hair brushed, and then they can have their snack. Using a social story can sometimes be appropriate for children that understand these.
- encourage your child to do an activity or use any of the sensory strategies they have identified make them feel very relaxed. Use these before, during or after hair washing, brushing or haircuts.
- make sure your child is visually warned that someone is going to touch their heads, where on their head, and for how long. Give them time to respond.
- use firm pressure. Do not lightly touch the hair, provide firm pressure to the head when touching it. Avoid touching the neck if they find this very sensitive.
- allow your child to see someone else having their hair washed, brushed, or cut to help them understand what to expect.
- only attempt to wash, brush, or cut your child's hair when they are calm and settled.

Hair washing tips:

- Keeping your child's hair short makes hair washing or rinsing much easier.
- Using dry shampoo, which is available from pharmacies and supermarkets, between hair washes, can reduce the frequency you need to wash your child's hair.
- Try using waterless shampoo which is a rinse-free product and does not require any water, which removes the need for bathing. This product is massaged into the hair for approximately two minutes and then just requires towel drying. Waterless shampoo can be purchased online from www.dignitylcservices.co.uk
- If your child's hair is short, a wet flannel or washer may be enough to wet and then rinse your child's hair.
- Some children do not like water in their ears, you can try ear plugs to protect them.
- Hold a flannel or small towel over their eyes and face, or you can even try and encourage your child to hold the flannel themselves. A hair washing 'hat', available from many pharmacies and supermarkets, can also help keep water out of eyes and off the face. You can even try goggles or a snorkel mask.
- Experiment with shower versus the bath. If you have a shower over the bath, try taking the detachable hose off the hook and using it on a low pressure setting to rinse your child's hair.
- Try using a jug or water cupped in your hands to wet and rinse your child's hair.
- Experiment with unscented shampoo.
- Wash your child's hair over the sink or a basin, as some children can tolerate leaning forward to wet their hair better than lying down in the bath with their head back.
- Sometimes children are more tolerant of sensations when they are in control of them. Encourage your child to become independent in washing their own hair.
- Try talking to your child about what it is they do not like about hair washing. It may be a fear of getting water in their eyes, disliking the feeling of wet hair, or the scent of the shampoo.
- Try using hair washing brushes when attempting to wash hair to assist in spreading shampoo. For example, the Etac Beauty hair washer or the Denman D6 shower brush.
- Use a shampoo which comes in a pump, or a soap style bar, to prevent having to squeeze shampoo out of bottle. Additionally, consider using a combined shampoo and conditioner as this will allow reduce the number of times that you need to spread shampoo or conditioner in their hair.
- Select a shampoo which develops a lot of lather, as this will reduce the amount of effort required to spread shampoo in the hair.

Hair brushing tips:

- Use a brush with a large head.
- When brushing, use firm strokes.
- Brush in front of the mirror so your child can predict when the brush is coming, however do not do this if this makes your child even more anxious.
- Massage the scalp before brushing their hair.
- Use a conditioner to detangle as much as possible.
- With tangles, start at the bottom of the hair, holding just above the tangle and then work up to the root.
- Use hairbrushes especially designed for tangles or sensitive heads, for example the Wet Brush Intelliflex, which can be used on wet or dry hair.
- Encourage your child when they are calm and settled to brush their own hair. Start off with small steps, like asking your child to do one brush stroke and then you do the rest. Gradually increase the number of brushes your child can complete until they are brushing their own hair.

Haircuts tips:

- Try using a weighted neck roll, this can be a long sock filled with dry rice, or a heated wheat bag to provide both calming sensory input and a block for loose hair going down collars.
- Use scissors rather than clippers if your child finds clippers distressing. Scissors are quieter and don't vibrate on your head. Alternatively, look for quiet clippers which have inbuilt noise reduction technology.
- Give your child things they enjoy to distract them, such as snacks, chew toys if they have them, or books to look at. iPads can be also be useful at these times.
- Listening to music or singing can help drown out unwanted sounds and distract your child. They could have their own headphones to listen to music if the person cutting their hair is happy to work around them.
- Have a mirror in front of the child so they can see what is going on behind them. Or equally, try without a mirror if this is too much visual information.
- Try and find an understanding hairdresser or barber who is happy to keep spoken communication to a minimum and go at the child's pace. If your child can only tolerate a small amount, consider just getting the sides cut, or just the fringe, and go back another day to do more.
- You can use other sensory calming strategies such as a weighted vest, a weighted lap pad which could be a pillow filled with dried rice, bear hugs, and gently but firmly applying deep pressure on shoulders.

Contact details

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