

CARE & LEARNING SERVICE OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ADVICE FOR

HAIR BRUSHING, HAIR WASHING AND HAIR CUTTING

If your child is finding hair brushing, washing or cutting difficult the following suggestions may be helpful;

Hair Brushing

- Encourage your child to brush their own hair if able, as this will help them to feel in control.
- Prepare their head first; try using a hand held massager on the scalp or a firm pressure hand massage.
- Push down firmly on their head, ensuring their head is in alignment with their body, ie their neck and back are straight. Some children enjoy a constant pressure, whereas others prefer you to push down and relax in pulses. Some children who really enjoy this will push back into your hand.
- Push down firmly through their shoulders – as above.
 - Use a brush with bristles which does not pull on the hair.
 - Brush firmly and rhythmically.
 - Use a tangle free conditioner.
 - Brush your child in front of the mirror to let them know when the brush is coming. This gives them a greater feeling of control.
 - Brush your child's hair whilst they are sitting in a bean bag, or in your lap – for constant deep pressure.
- Use a weighted vest or lap blanket whilst brushing.
- Count to (or down from) 10 and then the hair brushing will stop.
- Keep hair to a length that is manageable. It is easier than going through a stressful start to every day, if it can be avoided.



Hair Washing

- Choose a time when your child and yourself are more relaxed and not in a rush.
- Consider your expectations – creating a positive experience can be more important at this stage and allows you to slowly build up to washing hair on a regular basis.
- Prepare the head with a hand held massager, hand massage or firm pressure.
- Try a dry shampoo for in between washes.
- Wearing goggles or ear plugs can be more comfortable for your child.



- A fidget toy for distraction or talk to you child about a topic of their interest as a distraction.
- If your child swims regularly, you could try washing their hair when they shower at the pool.
- Encourage your child to try and wash their own hair with your supervision, as this will help them feel more in control.
- If hair is short a cloth with a little diluted shampoo rubbed onto the head may be tolerated; your child can then wash off the shampoo with a wet flannel.
- Use a fragrance free, no tears shampoo if certain smells are an issue. For other children being able to choose a shampoo, ie certain fragrance or character bottle can increase motivation.
- Check the water temperature is right for your child, particularly if your child is sensitive to water temperature.
- Try letting your child kneel over the side of the tub or stand and lean forward over the sink while washing their hair. Allow them to hold a wash cloth or drying towel over their face to prevent water from running into the eyes, nose and ears. When rinsing use a large cup or plastic bowl and have the child turn side ways when rinsing the back and sides of the head. This will allow the water to fall away from the face and the child will feel in control of the situation. They can stop the procedure at any time.
- Consider using a picture sequence so that your child understands what to expect.
- Consider using a visual timer.
- Count to (or down from) 10 and then that part of the hair washing sequence will stop, ie rinsing.
- Using a large plastic cup to rinse can feel more comfortable than a spout, shower spray or dunking their hair in the water.
- Younger children can practice washing their dolls hair to understand the process and become familiar with the task.
- Give plenty of opportunity for your child to see other people having their hair washed and their observing the person's reactions.
- Consider purchasing face shields or soft jugs/cups with cut outs or that will sit flush against the forehead to create a tight seal to prevent water and shampoo on the facet (available at Boots Chemist, large supermarkets, Mothercare and eBay, etc).

Hair Cutting

- Help your child get used to the sound of the razor. Hold a battery operated toothbrush or other vibrating device near your child's ears when at home.
- The week before the haircut, "rehearse" a haircut several times through play, at a time of day when the child is happy and relaxed. "Pretending" to have a haircut provides a way of introducing the sequence of the activity, as well as the sensory components in a familiar environment with a trusted person. Imitate the associated sounds as you pretend to cut the child's hair and keep the play routine short!
- Make a 4/5 picture sequence of a haircut with numbers or arrows to indicate the progression, eg

1. "Get ready" in seat
2. Cut the top
3. Cut the sides and back
4. Trim around the edges
5. Brush off



6. Finished – time to leave and/or get a reward. Verbalize the sequence as you “play” explaining that it is not finished until every step is completed. Have the child point to and verbalize the sequence as you progress through it. Start with each step being very brief (5-10 seconds) and gradually increase the time to approximate the actual time required. Take the sequence pictures with you to the haircut.

- Wash your child’s hair at home before you go, to reduce the time spent in the hairdresser.
- Schedule the hair cut for a time of day when your child will be more relaxed.
- It can be helpful to visit the hairdresser/barber before the appointment so that your child can become familiar with the environment and the person cutting their hair. Ensure that your child understands the difference between a visit and an appointment.



- Introduce the child gradually to the “tools” used in haircutting, such as the soft “shaving” brush, the clippers, the hair dryer, the combs, the scissors, etc. As allowed by the stylist, with guided supervision let the child touch and operate the tools. Use simple language, repeating sensory words associated with haircutting: buzz, snip, tickle, vibrate, touch, etc.
- Ask if the stylist will let the child turn the clippers on/off or help in other ways, to give the child a sense of control over the experience.
- Encourage the hairdresser to turn the razor on away from the child and slowly bring it closer.
- Prepare the head first by using a hand held massager on their scalp or a hand massage or firm pressure.
- Choose a haircut that can be done in the least amount of time possible with the fewest number of tools, such as a “Buzz Cut” or single layer “Blunt Cut”. If you find that your child reacts negatively to a certain tool, such as reacting to the trimmers but tolerating the scissors, ask the stylist for a style that can be done with the preferred tool. Make sure that the stylist understands that, at this point, it is much more important to you that the child has a positive experience with a “so-so” haircut than having a perfect trim.
- Provide your child with ear plugs or music. Take a “distracter” for use during the haircut, such as a hand held electronic game or headphones (for listening to music), to focus the child’s attention on something of interest. This is especially helpful if it is something with sounds or movement, or something new and tantalizing. Staying next to the child and calmly talking about people or interesting items in the shop can also be helpful in diverting the child’s attention.
- Ensure your child is not irritated by the cape around their neck. They may prefer a soft towel.
- Blow cut hair off your child with a hairdryer set on cool.
- Organise appointments with your hairdresser for when there are no chemicals being used for hair colouring, etc. Your child may have difficulty with the smells.
- Sit your child in your lap to enable you to provide deep pressure throughout the haircut.
- Let your child watch other people having their hair cut.
- Use a weighted vest or lap blanket.



- Teach the child a “stop” signal to use, such as holding up a hand. If the child signals to stop, then stop immediately, even in the pretend haircut play. Praise the child for doing well up to this point; “Do you need a little break? You were doing GREAT!” After a brief break, refer to the sequence chart calmly; “Now let’s finish.”
- Using a timer may help the child feel confident that the haircut will end shortly.
- Follow up with an enjoyable activity.
- Consider using a mobile hairdresser so that your child is in familiar surroundings.

References:

National Autistic Society

Scottish Autism

Raising a Sensory Smart Child - Biel and Peske

Exploring the Spectrum of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders - Murray-Slutsky and Paris

Building Bridges through Sensory Integration - Yack, Sutton and Aquilla

See:

http://www.visualaidsforlearning.com/images/sequences/VisualAids_Haircut_16_Images_Per_Page.pdf

For examples of visual aid for hair cutting

You can also make your own taking photographs