

Parent Tip Sheet for Hair Cutting: Supporting Children with Sensory processing challenges

1) Understand the Challenges

- Children with sensory processing differences may find haircuts challenging because of
 - The sensation of hair being cut or falling on their skin.
 - Loud noises from clippers, scissors, or the salon environment.
 - The smell of products or hair clippings.
 - Bright lights or mirrors.
 - Fear of the unfamiliar or lack of control over the situation.

2) Prepare for Success

Familiarise Your Child

- **Practice at home:** Role-play haircuts using pretend scissors or a toy hairdresser kit. Let your child "cut" your hair or a doll's hair.
- **Use visuals:** Show pictures or videos of haircuts, especially ones featuring children enjoying the process.
- **Visit the salon beforehand:** Take your child for a casual visit to the salon to meet the hairdresser and explore the environment without getting a haircut.

Sensory Warm-Up

- **Calming activities before the haircut:** Deep pressure input, such as a bear hug or a weighted lap pad, can help your child feel grounded.
- **Oral motor activities:** Encourage chewing on crunchy snacks, blowing bubbles, or using a chewy tube to provide calming input.
- **Prepare the scalp:** Use a soft-bristled brush or massage their scalp gently before the haircut to desensitize the area.

A service provided in partnership with the CRC, Enable Ireland, the HSE and Kare

Plan Timing

- Choose a time of day when your child is usually calm and rested.
- Avoid scheduling a haircut when your child is hungry or tired.

3. Adapt the Environment

Haircut Location

- Start with haircuts at home in a familiar, comfortable space.
- Gradually transition to a salon once your child feels more comfortable.

Noise Reduction

- Use noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs to reduce the sound of clippers or salon noise.
- Ask the hairdresser to use quiet scissors instead of clippers if the sound is a trigger.

Reduce Sensory Overload

- Dim the lights if possible or use a quieter part of the salon.
- Bring familiar items, such as a favourite toy or fidget, to provide comfort.

4) Modify the Haircut Process

Break It Down

- Start with small steps, such as trimming a small section, and gradually increase the amount over time.
- Allow breaks during the haircut for your child to reset and relax.

Offer Control

- Let your child hold the scissors (supervised) or a water spray bottle to feel involved.
- Give them choices, such as, "Do you want to sit in the chair or stand up?" or "Do you want the clippers or scissors?"

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Sensory-Friendly Tools

- Use a cape with a soft texture or skip it altogether if it is uncomfortable.
- Try a neck towel instead of a tight cape to avoid pressure on the neck.
- Have a damp washcloth handy to quickly wipe off loose hair that may irritate the skin.

5) Make It Fun

- **Distractions:** Use a tablet, phone, or portable DVD player with their favourite show to keep them engaged during the haircut.
- **Positive reinforcement:** Offer praise, a small reward, or a sticker chart for each successful step.
- **Haircut games:** Pretend the hairdresser is giving them a superhero haircut or styling them like a favourite character.

6) Address Sensory Preferences

Hair Sensations

- Use a damp cloth to wipe off hair clippings during the haircut to reduce irritation.
- Allow your child to wear a comfortable shirt or bring a change of clothes if they dislike the sensation of hair on their skin.

Scalp Sensitivity

- Experiment with different water temperatures if washing hair is part of the process.
- Use a gentle, unscented shampoo or skip hair washing at the salon if it is too overwhelming.

Clippers or Scissors

- Introduce clippers slowly by letting your child feel the vibration on their arm or hand before using them on their hair.
- Use scissors instead of clippers if vibrations or buzzing are intolerable.

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7) Build Trust and Predictability

- **Use a countdown:** Let them know how long each step will take (e.g., "We'll cut for 10 seconds, then take a break").
- **Explain each step:** Use simple, plain language to describe what will happen next.
- **Stick to a routine:** Try to use the same hairdresser, tools, and setup each time.

8) Long-Term Strategies

- **Gradually increase tolerance:** Start with small, regular trims to build confidence over time.
- **Use visuals:** A social story about haircuts can help prepare your child for what to expect.
- **Celebrate success:** Praise your child after each haircut, even if it did not go perfectly.

9) Local hairdressers with sensory friendly sessions

The Gent's Den Barber Shop:

The Gent's Den Barbershop recently opened a sensory barber room which is autism-friendly, with sensory toys, light projector, and lava lamps. Before an appointment, there is a space where children can come to play without getting a haircut (free of charge) to get to know the room and build a relationship with their barber. This service is for autistic boys and girls.



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