

## Getting a Haircut



**Access to reliable and useful information is important for understanding the needs of individuals on the autism spectrum. Not only are individual's lives dramatically affected but the lives of their families, friends, schools and colleagues are too.**

**Based on our knowledge and understanding of common challenges that arise, we continually develop our information resources on a range of day-to-day topics and issues. Our fact sheets help many to understand, develop practical skills and build confidence when interacting with someone on the autism spectrum.**

This is an area of self care that the child, adolescent or adult with autism can find challenging. Issues may arise due to sensory processing differences but may also stem from resistance to change and the level and nature of social interaction that is often associated with this type of experience.

The advice below is drawn from the accumulated experience of supporting many individuals and families to access this basic but often problematic activity. The advice given does not apply to everyone and is intended to help with short term approaches whilst longer term learning and understanding can build.

If someone you support has difficulties with getting haircuts or is resistant to this, it's important to start by trying to work out the reason/s why this is happening. Things to think about are:

- **Sensory stimulation:** This is particularly 'in your face' at the hairdressers: smells, sounds, being touched, lots to look at including people moving around. Sitting in front of a mirror means you are not only confronted with an image of yourself but you also have a view of the activity behind you. Hair washing also brings a range of sensory experiences, some of which may be enjoyable but they may also be challenging. There is also the added challenge of the reverse basin!

- Temperature: you are exposed to the room temperature, the noise and heat of hairdryers on and around you. Water temperature and the sensation of water on your head.
- High levels of social interaction and communication usually occur in this type of setting and it is often the most challenging type of conversation, chit chat and small talk; the sort of conversation that can be more difficult to predict and manage. There is also a high level of physical contact when having hair washed and cut.

**In the short term compromises are often possible. This will enable the person to get their hair cut in a way that will reduce some of their anxieties and will give a breathing space to enable you to work on longer term more sustainable solutions.**

**Some suggestions that cover both of these aspects are outlined below:**

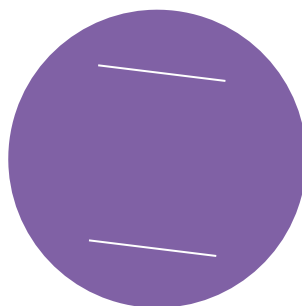
- Think about each aspect of a haircut separately and try to find what is/are the problems, worries or challenges for this person. Is it going into the hairdressers? Is it the sound or feel of the scissors or clippers? Is it the communication? Taking a systematic approach can help you to pin down what it is that is worrying or challenging.
- If the environment of the hairdressers is too overloading there are various alternatives. Could a hairdresser visit your own house? Are you any good with scissors or clippers yourself? If so, ensure that scissors and clippers are of good quality to avoid pulling the hair. Can you speak to the hairdresser and work out when there are quieter periods?
- If responding to small talk is an issue you may want to suggest to the hairdresser that it would be helpful to limit this sort of chat. Explain the way the person communicates best and their preferred topics of conversation. You will need to make a judgement regarding the extent to which you want to share insight into individual needs regarding communication or social interaction and understanding. You don't need to give out lots of personal information you might just want to explain that trying to process what other people are saying, especially on top of the sensations of having their hair cut, can be difficult and stressful.
- Use any visual schedules and supports that the person understands to explain what will happen before, during and after the haircut. You may want to think about including a motivator to finish with on the schedule.
- Ask the hairdresser to explain what he/she will be doing and in what sequence. Then you can make a visual schedule for the person and/or provide verbal reassurance as to what will be happening at each stage.
- Depending on the individual it may be enough for you or the hairdresser to tell the person what will happen at each stage, using clear, brief instructions to maximise understanding.
- Some people may enjoy using computer programmes to see how they will look with different hair styles. This may appeal to them as it provides some predictability around what will happen and give a concrete point of reference as well as the experience of seeing their appearance being altered.
- As with so many skills, the earlier you can establish predictability around haircuts the better.
- Hair washing can be a difficult experience for people with autism. If this stage can be left out of the haircut then this will reduce both overload and negative associations.
- If necessary, take it a bit at a time. For example only a dry cut with no products used initially, gradually increasing what is used over time if the person can tolerate this (e.g. progressing to hair being gently dampened before cutting, then having it washed before cutting, etc).
- Some parents have needed to take it even more slowly – one mum said that she cut her son's hair herself one bit at a time so that it might take a whole day to trim it all.
- If the person will tolerate a head massage, this may help to desensitize their scalp before the haircut (often a firmer touch is less uncomfortable than light touch for someone with tactile sensitivity).

- Whatever steps need to be taken, aim to make the experience as positive as possible so that future haircuts will be less anxiety provoking.
- Playing soothing music in the background may mask the noise of the scissors or clippers to an extent.
- A timer or watch can show how long the experience will last – often just knowing when something will finish makes it more bearable. If a timer or watch isn't understood by the person, what do they use to measure timescales? Can they be given a piece of music, a short DVD or another activity that lasts the right amount of time – when it is finished the haircut will be over.
- If necessary be scrupulous in removing all hair trimmings from the person – for someone with sensitive skin these can have a horrible sensation.
- Hairdressing activities such as dummy heads may be helpful for familiarising the person with the process, equipment and products used.



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## Suggested books/reading material:

**Homesoun Remedies: Strategies in the Home and Community for Children with Autistic Spectrum and Other Disorders**

[Paperback] Dion E. Betts & Nancy J. Patrick (Authors)

**My Social Stories Book**

[Paperback] Abbie Leigh White, Carol Gray & Sean McAndrew (Authors)

This book has several Social Stories on hairdressing. You might want to adapt these to the specific person you're supporting.

**Social Stories**

[www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories](http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories)

If you want to write your own Social Stories, websites such as the above have information on this.