

## Occupational Therapy Service For Children and Young People

### **Haircutting & Brushing Tips**

Because of the high amount of unfamiliar and unpredictable sensations involved in getting a haircut (in movement, touch and sound), and hair brushing, the following strategies may help the hypersensitive/over-responsive child prepare for and therefore be more accepting of getting a haircut / hair brushing.

#### **HAIR BRUSHING:**

- Try using deep pressure touch / calming techniques prior to the hair cut/brush:
  - Massage the head (or encourage the child to massage their head themselves)
  - Give deep pressure input to head and shoulders using the palms of your hands/rubbing roughly
  - Use a weighted shoulder pad
  - Rub the head roughly using a towel
- Make a picture card sequence of a haircut / brushing, so they know what to expect
- Teach the child a 'stop' signal to use, such as holding up a hand. If the child signals to stop, then stop immediately.
- Using a timer may help the child feel confident that the haircut / brushing will end shortly
- Sit the child firmly on your lap or between your legs if you can. This provides calming deep pressure. If this is not possible, ensure your child is sitting in a supportive chair with their feet flat on the floor. This may reduce anxiety by increasing postural support.
- Seat your child in front of the mirror so they can see what you're doing and when.
- Establish a predictable routine e.g. time of day / day in the week.
- Use a firm stroke or pressure as you comb or wash your child's hair
- Have your child count as you comb, wash, cut or rinse the hair – give definite time limits to the task e.g. "let's count to 10, then it's finished".
- Give the child something to squeeze and handle in their hands.
- Try and brush the hair in the bath when there is conditioner in the hair.

- Hold your hand firmly on the child's head and brush starting at the ends of the hair, then work up to avoid making one large knot and avoid pulling on the scalp.
- Use a 'tangle-teaser' brush, or a brush with a large head and wide teeth.

### **HAIR CUTTING:**

- Use a mobile hairdresser that can come to the home if possible so that the individual's hair can be cut in a familiar, less sensory complex environment. Hairdressing at home also affords greater opportunities for implementing sensory strategies / distraction techniques.
- Use an eye guard or goggles during hair washing if the child dislikes water in their eyes
- Use a hair cape to avoid any loose hair falling onto the child and causing irritation. The sensation of hair on skin may be stressful for an individual. Encourage them to shower / bathe straight after hair cutting to remove hair from the body.
- Brush off any loose hair immediately after cutting using firm pressure (or use a dryer to blow off the hairs if the child prefers)
- Consider whether hair can be cut with scissors and / or clippers. Both generate different sounds and have a different feel against the skin. For example, for some individuals the vibration of clippers against the skin may be calming, but for others the noise may be irritating.
- If the child is bothered by noise, use ear buds to reduce the level of auditory stimuli
- Go with a haircut that can be done in the least amount of time possible with the fewest number of tools. It is much more important that the child has a positive experience with a haircut which appears ok, rather than having a perfect trim.
- When visiting the hairdressers:
  - Prior to a having a haircut, visit the hairdressers in advance on one or more occasion to familiarise the individual. A social story could be used to help explain the reason for the visit and what will happen. Once the visit is complete provide an instant reward to help reinforce it as a 'good' / 'safe' place.
  - Think about the time of day of the visit. First thing in the morning is not as hot, nor as noisy. You will also likely be first there so no waiting either!
  - On the trip to the hairdressers encourage the individual to wear a weighted backpack and / or cap. The increased proprioceptive input to their head, neck and shoulders will provide a calming effect, enabling them to better tolerate the multi – sensory environment of the hairdressers and the touch encountered during hair cutting.
  - Consider the effect of the material of the hairdressing gown. Alternatively, can you take something from home they are familiar with in terms of touch and smell?
  - Is it necessary to provide a distraction (i.e. tablet, favourite toy figure, music played through earphones, etc.)?
  - Provide chewy foods / sports bottle drinks during the activity (calming).
  - At the end of the visit use calming strategies to regulate any increase in arousal level (i.e. walk home wearing weighted back- pack and / or cap).