

Autistic children and the HAIRDRESSERS!!!

Many parents find that taking their child to the hairdressers can be a very difficult experience for all involved. It can be very distressing for any child to have their hair cut, but for a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) a visit to a hairdresser may be particularly upsetting.

This document provides a guide for parents to explain briefly why an individual may become distressed when having a haircut, and also suggests some strategies to help with these situations.

Sensory difficulties

It is known that individuals who have an ASD often experience sensory difficulties. This is frequently overlooked as a possible cause of behaviour, but perhaps needs to be considered when going to the hairdressers. It is important to look at the environment of the hairdressers and to break down the process of having a haircut to gain better insight into why this experience may cause distress.

Many individuals experience difficulties with their touch system. Touch can be very painful for someone with an ASD which can make having a haircut very difficult. An individual may not like a hairdresser brushing and washing their hair, and the feel of the scissors or vibration of the hair clippers may be very uncomfortable. When having a haircut, a towel or drape is usually placed around the shoulders and neck of an individual which again may aggravate. The hairdresser or barber will also need to stand near the individual, and may brush against them, which may be distressing.

It can be uncomfortable for an individual to tilt their hair back or forward when having their haircut. This could particularly be an issue when having to tilt the head back to have the hair washed. The spray of the water may also be quite annoying for someone with an ASD.

If a child is sensitive to noise, then this needs to be considered when going to the hairdressers. It can be a noisy experience with the sound of hairdryers, hair clippers and background noise. Most hairdressers tend to have powerful lighting and the bright lights may reflect from the mirrors causing discomfort. Some individuals may also find the strong smell of hair products very unpleasant.

Other problems

If it is your child's first visit to the hairdressers, then perhaps not knowing what to expect may distress a child. If there has been no preparation for what is to be expected at the hairdressers, then the sight of an unknown person holding a pair of scissors near to the child's head can be very frightening.

Sometimes there may be a particular word which triggers a negative reaction. For example the word 'haircut' may have to be replaced with 'trimming' or 'shortening the hair'.

There may also be the problem of the individual not understanding the reason why they should have their hair cut, and may not actually want their hair to be shorter.

Possible solutions

There are a number of ways in which you can help your child prepare for the experience of having a haircut. The following are suggestions that you may wish to try.

- Many parents have found that it can help for a child to watch another person having their haircut so they have an insight into what to expect. If possible, it could help to make a video, perhaps of a sibling, going to the same hairdressers. This could include videoing the haircut and if you felt appropriate, the child getting a reward afterwards.
- Some younger children may benefit from play-acting, pretending to cut the hair of a doll. It would be important to make this as real as possible, and emphasising the sensory aspects that are a part of the process. You could also try use child-friendly scissors with your child, to cut up paper at home. This may help them become familiar with the use of scissors and reduce any anxiety which is caused by the sight of scissors.
- Social Stories were developed by Carol Gray to help individuals who have an autistic spectrum disorder to develop a greater social understanding. These can be an extremely useful resource to help explain why we have our hair cut, and about the process of having a haircut. In *My social stories book* (Gray 2002), there are a number of examples of Social Stories about having a haircut. This is a good starting point to introduce the haircut to a child. For further information about Social Stories, and help with writing your own, see the following website: www.thegraycenter.org/writing_social_stories.htm
- There are other ways in which using visual support can also be useful. Rather than surprising the child when the haircut is happening, it may be useful to use a haircut symbol on a calendar, so that the child is aware of when it will be taking place. It may help to choose a hair appointment near to the beginning or end of the day when it is likely to be quieter. Inform the hairdressers that your child may become very anxious if having to wait for their appointment. This will hopefully make the hairdresser aware of the need to be prompt when you and your child enter the shop. If you have booked an appointment, then it would be helpful to use a visual timetable for the day with perhaps a nicer activity after the haircut.
- The child may also like to know how long the haircut is going to last. By using a timer, you could visually show when the haircut starts and finishes. It would be useful to set the timer for slightly longer than anticipated, to prevent the timer ending when the haircut has yet to be finished.
- In a similar way to Social Stories, a simple flip chart or tick chart could be used whilst having the haircut. A series of simple pictures can be used in sequence to warn the child of what is happening next. This can be used in conjunction with verbal warnings from the hairdresser to say what they will be doing next. It is important that the hairdresser provides verbal instructions of the process, so as not to alarm the child when his head is being touched or the chair is being raised. It is also important that when talking to the child, the hairdresser is made aware of the need to keep their language clear and simple.
- If the sound or feel of the clippers causes too much distress, then it would be advisable to use scissors instead. If they are to be used, then warning the child when it will be turned on is crucial, and perhaps the child could get used to the vibration of the clippers when the barber is holding them.

- Some parents find that providing the child with earphones and perhaps a personal stereo with their favourite music on helps to keep the child calmer. This can help to shut out background noise which may annoy a child. If this is used then visual prompts must be clear to indicate when the hairdresser is going to touch the child. A number of hairdressers will have books or toys to entertain the child while having their haircut, however it may be more beneficial to bring favourite books or toys from home, even a hand-held computer game may offer valuable distraction. An alternative would be for the child to have a stress ball or Koosh ball to hold and manipulate whilst having their hair cut.
- If your child is very sensitive to strong smells and is to have their hair washed at the hairdressers, then it would be advisable to take unscented shampoo or the shampoo that he/she is used to from home. If the process of having the hair washed may be too much added pressure, then perhaps it would be more suitable to ask the hairdresser for a dry cut, or just dampening the hair with a water spray. Some children may like to get involved with the cut, by perhaps spraying the water themselves? If a child resists having their hair brushed, then encouraging them to brush their own hair may help them get more used to the experience of touch to their head when having their haircut.
- Once the hair has been cut, a child may find it irritating if there is stray hair on their skin. It may be useful to bring a change of clothes, so that hair won't be stuck to the top they are wearing.
- Many parents find it easier for a hairdresser to come to the home to cut their child's hair. This would eradicate the issue of a new environment; however, all the preparation as mentioned above should still be considered. A word of warning with this is that if it is a particularly bad experience for the child, then there may be a problem caused by associating this experience with the room where they had their haircut. However, this is only a small consideration when thinking of the practicalities of having the haircut at home.
- If you choose to have the haircut at home, you may need to ensure that there is a mirror available so that the child is aware of what is happening, whilst the hairdresser is standing behind them. Any unexpected touch (if not warned or if the child cannot see when he is being touched) may cause further anxiety.
- Some parents have found that the haircut is made easier by hugging their child in their lap. This can provide gentle pressure which may have a calming effect for the child and reduce their anxiety, whilst having their hair cut.
- Whether you choose a haircut at home or at the hairdressers, it may be useful to provide the person cutting the hair with information about ASD prior to the haircut. Also talk to them specifically about your child and about expected reactions, and don't hesitate to provide strategies and suggestions that may make the experience easier.

These are only suggestions that parents may wish to try, and as a parent you will know your child the best and what the reasons may be for them resisting having their haircut. Some parents may have found that all of the above have been tried before and not helped a situation. Parents in this situation have found that they have to resort to cutting their child's hair whilst they are sleeping as best they can.