

HAIR CARE & SENSORY SENSITIVITY

The following suggestions may help a child who has difficulty tolerating hair care like hair washing, cutting or brushing, due to tactile sensitivities.

General Strategies to Try During Hair Care

- Your child may benefit from massage/input to their head to prepare for hair washing, brushing or cutting. Generally, deep pressure input is better tolerated than light touch and this may need to be gradually introduced as they may initially have difficulty with input to their head.
- When applying water over their head, the child may prefer to have some active participation (i.e., pour the water themselves) or they could participate/observe the task with a doll first to prepare for their own experience.
- If the difficulty for hair cutting is the noise of the clippers, they may benefit from using ear protection headphones to increase their tolerance for this task.
- To help with calming during hair washing/cutting/brushing, consider using an “x-ray cape”; the weight may have a calming effect. These are available on Amazon in different sizes including pediatric sizes. Note that a cape without the thyroid protection cover should be utilized, as a thyroid protector would be too restrictive.
- For children who get tangled hair because they do not tolerate regular hair care, consider using a silk or satin pillowcase, which could help prevent some hair knots. Also, consider the use of a silk/satin bonnet, which could also prevent hair knots. In addition to use of silk or satin pillowcase and bonnet, consider following a hair routine to prevent tangles i.e. use of dry shampoo if unable to wash hair enough; use of hair detangler before hair brushing; trial of different detangling hair brushes, like a “wet brush”.

Hair Brushing

- Brush hair while in the tub or sink
 - You can build on the relaxed mood to complete a stressful task
 - Warm water temperature offers calming sensory input
 - Having probably just washed your child’s hair, the conditioner/oil (depending on hair type) will help to allow a comb to slip through your child’s hair with ease
 - You will also be able to work out any larger knots they may have with your fingers much easier as the water runs in the direction of hair growth
 - Your child will more than likely be distracted with toys that are in the tub/activity occurring around the sink area, keeping the focus off having their hair brushed
 - Consider braiding your child’s hair to prevent tangles in the morning.

- Don't have time to wash your child's hair every night, or don't take a bath daily? Use a spray bottle to moisten your child's hair, then brush it out. You can use a detangle to bring an extra element of fun to it too!
- When it comes to brushing, the most important thing is to set up a routine, using the hair brushing techniques that work for the child's hair type. Stick to that routine. Consider using a [visual schedule](#), written schedule, or checklist.
- Turn hair brushing into a game
 - Using humor and distraction in the form of a game is another great way to help your child feel less stress and sensory issues during hair brushing. You can have them "earn" points for each stroke or set of strokes, have a countdown, or sing a silly song.
- Use role play in hair brushing
 - Children learn best through play! Practice with a doll or let them brush your hair. As you do this, talk about how they are feeling and acting when they are brushing your hair. Are they being gentle? What can they do if they hit a knot? It will also be helpful if you talk to them about how you're feeling or how the doll might be feeling while having their hair brushed. Do you feel calm? Is getting your hair brushed hurting you?
 - Make sure that you emphasize the positives as well! Share with your child how good it feels to have your hair brushed, that it makes you feel clean, and that it helps you be ready for the day.
- Let your child do it themselves
 - When you give your child control of an activity, you take away fear of the unknown, or in this case, give back control over what you are asking to be done. This works well for children who say that you're pulling too hard, their scalp is super sensitive, or they dread having to work out knots. By letting them brush their own hair, they are in charge of the pressure, pace and how they work through knots in their hair. Your child may also be more willing to participate if they know that they are in control of the situation. Be on standby in case they need help!
 - If the whole hair brushing process can't be done by the child, let them participate in some aspect. That might be applying conditioner/oil. It might be that they hand the brush or comb to the person brushing. The main concept here is taking ownership in the task through active participation.

- Use a wide tooth comb
 - A wide tooth comb will slide through hair much easier, and with less resistance than a traditional brush.
 - Another perk to a wide tooth comb is that it doesn't have bristles, which many kids find irritating to their scalp, and often gets caught easily in long hair.
 - Amazon has several different types of brushes and combs for sensitive scalps. They also have detangling brushes. Just type "sensitive scalp brush" into the search box. Or try a [comb with wider teeth](#), depending on the hair type.
- Hold hair close to the scalp
 - Whether your child has long or short hair, holding hair close to the scalp or placing your other hand on their head can help to limit the amount of tugging they feel during hair brushing.
 - Limiting the tugging sensation by keeping their head stabilized will also prevent activation of the inner ear, which can be alerting or cause dizziness. If they are particularly sensitive to the tugging sensation, or have poor head/neck control, they may be compensating by letting their head drop back with the slightest of tugs. Helping to support their head may be helpful.

Behavioural Strategies to Try During Hair Care

- To introduce new items for hair care (i.e. silk/sating bonnet or a new brush), consider utilizing a social story. There are social stories available online and websites that can help you create social stories.
- Pairing the new item (i.e. bonnet/brush) with a new fidget toy that your child enjoys.
- Using a visual timer for short/tolerable duration of hair care (i.e. 1 minute of detangling hair), then offering a reward and break when time is up.
- Pairing hair care task with a pleasant activity that your child enjoys, like blowing bubbles, to distract them and also for the child to associate hair care with something pleasant.
- If your child is stimming in way that causes hair knots (i.e. rubbing their head), try to replace their sensory behaviour with another kind of stim. Things to consider:
 - If the child seems to like the sound of their head rubbing a surface, try a white noise machine at bedtime.
 - If the child seems to need to calm themselves to be able to fall asleep, try to distract them with a fidget toy/vibrating toy/something to keep their hands busy but safe to keep in bed with them.

If you have a behavioural specialist (i.e. ABA therapist through OAP or school board) on your team, please consult them for additional strategies that are specific to your child's needs.

Start by trying one recommendation that you think will work for your child, give it a week, and if it's still not working, try another. Working through hair sensory challenges takes time, and is a trial-and-error process.

If you have any questions or if the child shows stress signals, step back to re-assess activities that were presented and discontinue activity. Since the child can develop tolerance over time, consider trying the activity at a later time to reassess their needs.

* Recommendations were compiled from various web resources and therapists' experiences.