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Occupational Therapy Advice for Hair Cutting

Whether it be a hair cut in the house or a hair-cut at a salon, it is important to prepare your child for the task.

Think about the time of day you pick, for example after school may not be a good idea because they may be tired from school and need to burn off some energy or have downtime after concentrating for the day. Also a time when you're not too rushed in case you need to take breaks.

When discussing the routine of having a haircut, if the word cut is a real trigger for your child, then avoid using this terminology and maybe try talking about getting hair tidied up, or smartened up or getting their hair done. This can help reduce the fear and encourage them to be more accepting of the task.

Talk them through the routine before-hand, use social stories (examples of these are available on www.andnextcomes1.com, even has a video which you can watch together.) Use photos, pictures, to discuss what happens first, next and then etc. If going to a salon then this is even more important, so that they know what the venue looks like on arrival, what is involved, what will they have to do. Photos of the reception area, the waiting room, the hairdresser chair, will all help to familiarise them, along with the smells and the sounds to expect.



Get them familiar with the tools, comb, scissors, clippers, gown, towel etc. in order to reduce some anxiety.

De-sensitisation is a good technique, hearing the clippers just switched on to begin with can help to introduce the tool without the sensation and the sound together, which can be overwhelming. Calm clippers or noise reducing clippers can be good for these situations, a variety are available online.

To block out sounds if your child still gets very distressed then using earplugs can help, as these won't interfere with the haircut. Also allowing your child to wear headphones can be good for distracting and using an IPAD or tablet, at the same time as having their hair cut can help to take their mind off what's going on and relax them too. There are even noise cancelling headphones that block out background noise very well.

If cutting your child's hair yourself, try using a gown or cape that's full length so will catch any hair that falls, or stop it falling on to your child's skin, as this sensation alone can be distressing for some children. Also planning a haircut and then getting them to shower or bath after so they can get rid of any loose hair off them, if this is something they enjoy and don't find stressful in itself. Dusting off hair frequently through the task can help with this too, using a soft towel instead of a brush might also work.

Talk through what you are doing for example, if cutting around the ears or the nape of the neck that tell them “Mum is just going to be using the comb by your ears now” and then use other cues such as “one last stroke” or “nearly done”.

If you have asked them to put their head down or sit still, then reassure them they are doing well and keep reiterating “well done for sitting so still” or “good job at keeping your head down”.

A visual timer will be helpful to give them an idea of when the task will be over, this can make the task a bit more bearable for your child.



Counting down or counting to 10 when they are having a bit done that they are finding distressing will help to keep them calm and make them feel as if they have a bit of control over the task.

Using an incentive or reward for after the task. Tell them before hand, if they can be brave and have their hair done they get to play their favourite game, eat their favourite snack, buy a favourite toy, whatever it is you decide, this may help them ease stress and have something to look forward to.

When you successfully complete your first routine of the task maybe try taking photos at different stages through the task, hopefully ending with a smiling photo, after the haircut, this will be a good reminder for the next time you have to introduce the task, and if they can see themselves happy and not distressed in a photo this can be good motivation and encouragement for the next time. It is important to regularly schedule haircuts in, so that it becomes a more regular task, and they will hopefully become less fearful and distressed by it.