Autism ONTARIO

Supporting Successful Appointments

Going to the Hairdresser

Haircuts can feel overwhelming for some autistic children and youth because of sounds, smells, touch, waiting, or changes in routine. A child's response can also change from day to day depending on stress, tiredness, or how they are feeling.

Practicing at home ahead of time, in small steps and at your child's pace, can help the experience feel safe and familiar before you ever go to the salon.

1. **Have Fun at Home**
2. **Practice the Feeling of a Haircut**
3. **Prepare for Sounds and Smells**
4. **Practice Sitting and Seeing**



1 Have Fun at Home

The first step is just helping your child get used to the idea of a haircut in a low-pressure, playful way. Try these fun strategies:

Play salon with toys
Let your child pretend to give a haircut to a favorite doll or stuffed animal.

Switch roles
Let your child be the barber! Give them a pair of toy scissors and let them pretend to style your hair.

Watch and read
Read picture books or watch friendly videos together about what happens during a haircut.

Set up a practice station
Place a special chair in front of a mirror at home to act as your "practice salon" so the setup feels familiar.

Try haircut games
Download a fun hair-styling app on a phone or tablet so they can experiment with cutting and styling digital hair.



2 Practice the Feeling of a Haircut

Many children thrive with firm, steady pressure but might flinch or feel upset by light, ticklish, or surprise touches. Try these ideas during calm moments at home:

The warm towel hug
Gently press a warm, damp towel over your child's neck and shoulders. This grounded weight can feel calming.

Slow, firm brushing
When combing their hair, use slow, rhythmic, downward strokes with a wide-toothed brush. Avoid light grazing or quick, short strokes. [1]

The "heavy cape" trick
Wrap a heavy winter coat, a weighted lap pad, or a snugly wrapped bath towel around them to mimic a salon cape while providing comforting deep pressure.

Use the "3-Second Rule"
Always say, "Touch coming in 3... 2... 1..." before brushing or using a tool so they are never surprised . You can also sing a short song so they know exactly when the touch will start and stop.[1]



3 Prepare for Sounds and Smells

The loud buzz of clippers and the strong scent of hair products can be overwhelming. You can help desensitize these senses at home using these strategies:



Block the noise
Let your child wear noise-canceling earbuds or play their favorite music to block out salon sounds.



Slowly introduce the buzz
Play a video or an app with clipper sounds on your phone. Start with the volume low across the room, and slowly bring it closer over a few days as they get used to it.



Wash at home or bring your own products
Call ahead to ask if you can wash your child's hair at home right before the appointment using their familiar shampoo. This cuts their time in the chair and surrounds them with a comforting, recognizable scent. If the stylist needs to wash or wet the hair at the salon, bring your child's everyday shampoo and conditioner and ask them to use those instead of scented salon brands.

4 Practice Sitting and Seeing

Sitting still without knowing what's happening behind your back can cause a lot of anxiety. Practice these steps to build confidence:



Plant their feet
Make sure your child sits in a chair where their feet can press firmly onto a stool, boxes, or the floor. Grounded feet help the body feel physically secure[1]



Watch in the mirror
Put a mirror right in front of them and talk through exactly what you are doing so they can connect what they see with what they feel[1].



Give them control
Let them hold a small handheld mirror to look at the back of their head, and let them tilt their own chin up or down when needed instead of moving their head for them[1].



Dim the lights
If a room feels too bright, turn off some overhead lights or close the blinds during your practice sessions to reduce sensory overload[1].



Build up waiting tolerance
Start with just 30 seconds of sitting in the practice chair, then slowly make the sessions longer as their comfort grows.

Keep a quick notebook of what works best, including:

- Which sensory tools helped them stay calm.
- The best time of day for their appointment (for example, right after a snack or a nap).
- The specific words or warnings that helped them feel safe.

For more information on what to do when you get to the hairdresser, visit "Everyday Advocacy: Going to the Hairdresser"



References:
Yack, E., Aquilla, P., & Sutton, S. (2015). Building bridges through sensory integration: Therapy for children with autism and other pervasive developmental disorders (3rd ed.). Future Horizons.