

TIP OF THE ISSUE

SURVIVING A TRIP TO THE HAIRDRESSER

Getting a toddler's hair cut can be an ordeal for any parent. But for children with Down syndrome the experience can be harder. This article looks at some of the reasons why children find a trip to the hairdresser a scary experience and suggests some strategies that may be of help.

First of all, it might be useful to look at the experience through the eyes of a child. You go to an unfamiliar environment and are asked to sit in a chair while a big stranger comes at head with large pointy scissors. You know your hair will be cut but you are not really sure whether it will hurt or whether it will ever grow back. You feel like you might lose a piece of yourself forever. You may have been told by adults that it will all be all right but you have no experience to base this off. You might remember that your parents told you never to play with scissors because they are 'dangerous', yet here is a stranger wanting to use them next to your head.

Children with Down syndrome go through these thought processes but also have some aspects that may make the experience even scarier. Children with Down syndrome are often very sensitive to people touching their heads. Many are very sensitive to some textures and sounds. For example, a child may find the noise of hair clippers close to his ears distressing. She may be very uncomfortable with the feeling of hair falling on her skin. Seeing hair fall on clothing or on to the floor can also cause distress.

Yet, just as with any child, there are some steps we can take to prepare a child for their first visit to a hairdresser.



Before the Hairdresser

- ☺ Schedule a haircut when the child is least likely to have 'sensory overload' (feeling overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of the day). If at all possible, avoid scheduling the appointment after school or kindy.
- ☺ Arrange for the haircut to be part of a fun day - out for lunch, haircut, then movie or park.
- ☺ Explain to the child exactly what will happen during the haircut. Use short sentences and visual supports. Let the child know that his/her hair will grow back - snip a piece of your hair to prove it.
- ☺ Get the child to give teddy a 'haircut'. This may help the child to generalise the the experience. Explain to the child that Teddy will feel worried or scared but that everything will be OK because mummy or daddy etc will be there to help him. Get the child to say 'it's OK, the haircut is finished now' when Teddy's haircut is over.
- ☺ Use the Teddy to act out what the hairdresser might ask - 'turn your head', 'look down'.
- ☺ Have a cape, comb, mirror and pretend scissors at home to roleplay a haircut with other family members.
- ☺ Encourage the child to watch someone else getting a haircut at a hairdresser. Take photos or a video of the process and make these into a story when you get home to go over with the child.
- ☺ Go with washed hair - it's easier for the child to hop up on a chair and get going.

At the Hairdresser

- ☺ Use positive reinforcement. “Good sitting, what a big girl” etc. It makes them feel grown up and they tend to concentrate on how well things are going.
- ☺ Be sure the child has a cape, sheet or towel draped over him if he is sensitive to the feeling of falling hair.
- ☺ Reassure your child during the haircut. Explain each step of the way in a calm voice - “good job for keeping your head still”, Let your child know there is an end in sight - “All will be finished after ...”.
- ☺ If your child gets distressed just get the fringe cut at the first visit.
- ☺ Once the haircut is done admire your child’s appearance. Take before and after photos so they can see the benefits too!
- ☺ Let your child chose a reward for getting through the haircut so well.

After the Hairdresser

- ☺ It is important after the trip to the hairdresser to ‘debrief’ with your child. Use whatever method of preparation you used prior to the haircut (teddy, photos, video etc) to go over the experience with the child.
- ☺ Any aspects of the experience your child found particularly difficult will need attention and discussion.



These steps can be used for other “firsts” like a trip to a dentist or first day at school or kindy.

Do you have any topic you would like ‘Tip of the Issue’ to cover? Please write in and let us know.