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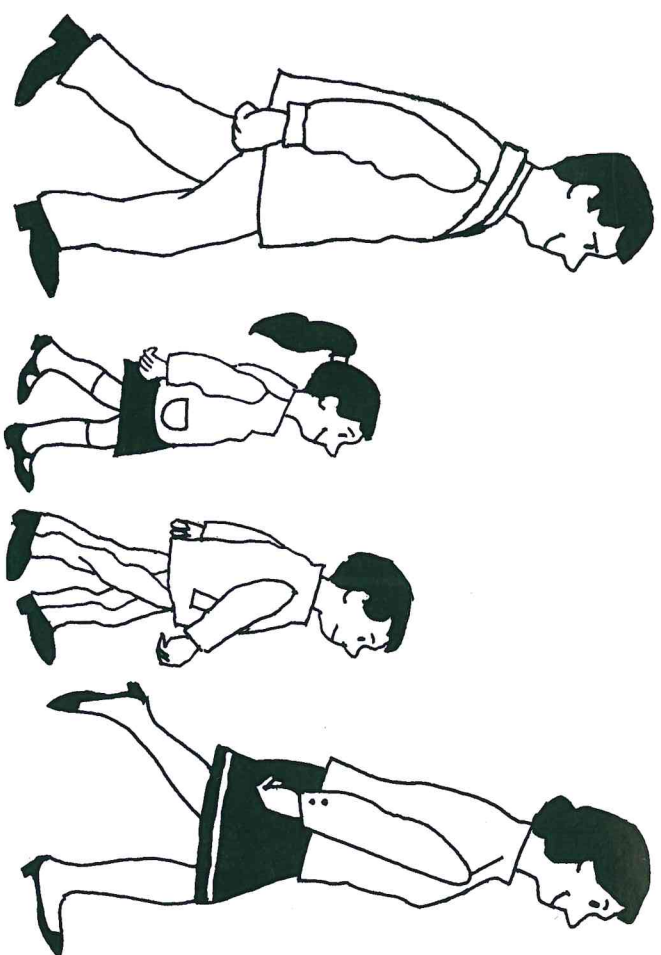
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Going to the hairdressers: a guide for parents of children with autism and Asperger syndrome

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Introduction

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 haircut, but for a child with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) the visit to a hairdresser may be particularly upsetting.

This booklet explains briefly why a child may become distressed when having a haircut and also suggests some strategies to help.

Sensory difficulties

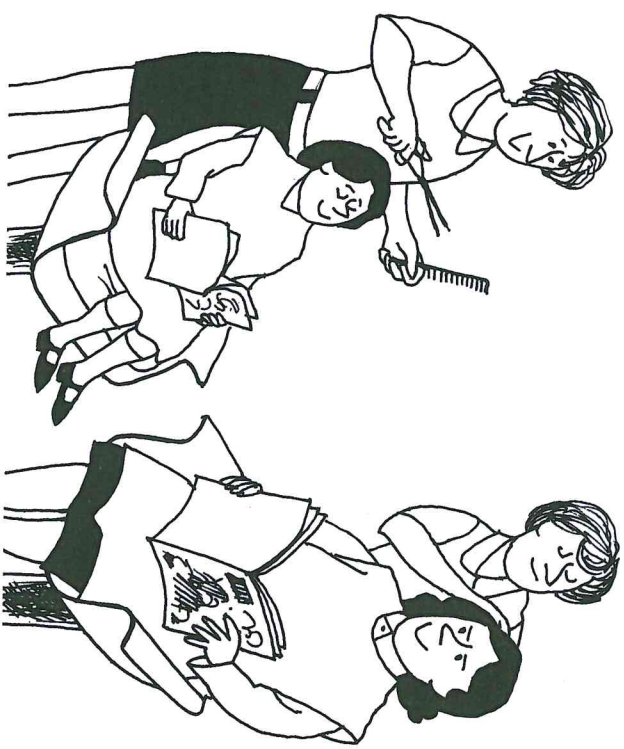
Individuals who have an ASD frequently experience sensory difficulties. This is often overlooked as a possible trigger for distress and therefore needs to be considered when having a haircut.

It is important to look at the environment of the salon and to examine in detail the process of having a haircut to see why this experience may cause distress or anxiety.

Touch

Many people with an ASD experience difficulties with touch. Touch can be very painful for someone with an ASD which can make having a haircut very difficult.

Myles et al (2000) suggest reasons why a child may not like having a haircut. A child



may not like a hairdresser brushing and washing their hair or 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, which again may cause discomfort. The hairdresser or barber will also need to stand near the person and may brush against them, which may be distressing.

It can be uncomfortable for a child with an ASD to tilt their head 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 (Myles et al 2000).

Noise

If the person with an ASD is sensitive to noise, the implications need to be considered. Hairdressers can be noisy places with the sound of hairdryers, hair clippers and background noise.

Visual problems

Most hairdressers tend to have powerful lighting and the bright lights may reflect from the mirrors, causing discomfort.

Smell

Some individuals may also find the strong smell of hair products very unpleasant.

Body awareness and balance

This may be an issue for some children with ASD if the hairdresser's chair is too high and the child's feet may not be touching the ground.

The NAS Autism Helpline has an information sheet, *The sensory world of the autistic spectrum*, that offers guidance on this area; this is also available as a booklet from NAS Publications. Please see the recommended reading list for details.

Other problems

If it is your child's first visit to the hairdressers, then not knowing what to expect may cause high levels of anxiety. If there has been no preparation for what is to come, then the sight of an unknown person holding a pair of scissors near to the child's head may 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.'

The child may not understand why a haircut is needed 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 a haircut. Here are suggestions that you may wish to try.

Videos

Many parents have found that it can help for a child to watch another person having a haircut to see what to expect. It could help to make a video, perhaps of a sibling going to the same hairdressers. This could include videoing the haircut, leaving the hairdressers and then going home afterwards. It may also help if the video included the child getting a reward afterwards.

Acting it out

Some younger children may benefit from play-acting, such as pretending to cut the hair of a doll. It is important to make this as real as possible and emphasise the sensory aspects that are a part of the process (Myles et al 2000).

You could also try using child-friendly scissors with your child, perhaps 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 the hairdresser holding a pair of scissors.

Social Stories™

Social Stories™ were developed by Carol Gray to help individuals with an ASD develop a greater social understanding. Social Stories can be a very useful resource to help explain why we have our hair cut and 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 for help with writing your own, please see the following website: www.thegraycenter.org

Alternatively, contact the Autism Helpline for a Social Stories information sheet.

Calendars

There are other ways in which using visual support can be useful. Rather than surprising the child when the haircut is happening, it may help to use a haircut symbol on a calendar, so that the child is aware of when it will be taking place.

MONDAY		7 ✓	14 ✓	21	28
TUESDAY	1 ✓	8 ✓	15 ✓	22	
WEDNESDAY	2 ✓	9 ✓	16 ✓	23	
THURSDAY	3 ✓	10 ✓	17 ✓	24	
FRIDAY	4 ✓	11 ✓	18 ✂	25	
SATURDAY	5 ✓	12 ✓	19	26	
SUNDAY	6 ✓	13 ✓	20	27	

Calendars allow the person with ASD to mark off time either by ticking or covering up dates to show them the time left until they have their hair cut.

It may also help to choose a hair appointment near to the beginning or end of the day, when it is likely to be quieter. Inform the hairdresser that your child may become anxious if they have to wait for their appointment. This should make the hairdresser aware of the need to be prompt when you and your child enter the shop.

Visual supports

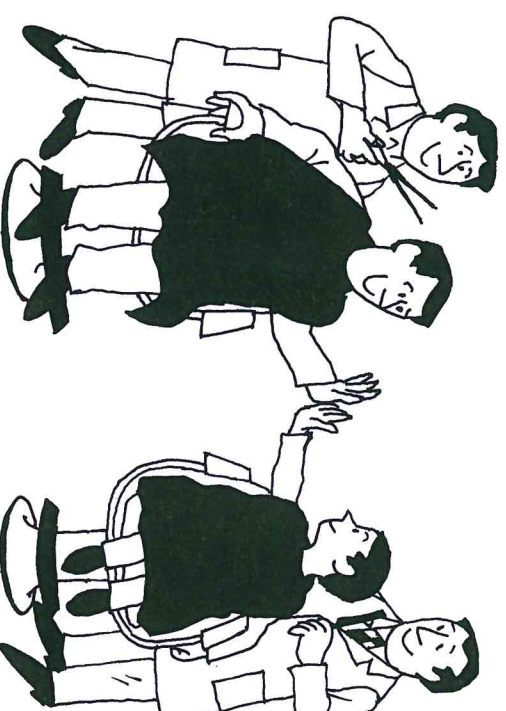
If you have booked an appointment, then it would be helpful to use a visual timetable for the day with perhaps a nicer activity planned for after the haircut. For further information about using visual support, please contact the Autism Helpline for a Visual support information sheet.

Your child may also like to know how long the haircut is going to last. With an egg timer or time 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. Time timers are available from NIAS Publications – see the end of the booklet for details of how to order.

Clear instructions

Like Social Stories, a simple flip chart or tick chart can be used during the haircut. A series of simple pictures can be used in sequence to warn the child of what is happening next.

These can be used 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 the hairdresser is made aware of the need to keep language clear and simple.



Tools of the trade

If the sound or feel of hair clippers causes too much distress, then it may be easier to use scissors instead. If clippers have to be used, then it is crucial to warn the child when they will be turned on. Perhaps the child could get used to the vibration of the clippers when the barber is holding them.

Seating arrangements

When sitting in the hairdresser's chair, some children find it more comfortable if their feet touch the ground. If the chair is too high then it may help to find a box or a step to rest their feet on. This may help issues with balance and the vestibular system. Please see sensory information sheet or booklet for further information.

Shutting out noise

Some parents find that providing the child with earphones and a personal stereo with their favourite music helps to keep the child calmer. This can help to shut out background noise which may annoy a child. If these are used, then clear visual prompts are needed to indicate when the hairdresser is going to touch the child.

Diversions

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. A hand-held computer game may also 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 (Myles et al 2000).

Shampoo solutions

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 used at home. If a hair wash is too much added pressure, then ask the hairdresser for a dry cut or to dampen the hair with a water spray. Some children may like to get involved with the cut by perhaps spraying the water themselves (Myles et al 2000).

Hair brushing

If a child resists having their hair brushed, then encouraging them to brush their own hair may help them to 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.

Home visits

Many parents find it easier for a hairdresser to come to the home to cut their child's hair. This avoids the issue of a new environment; however all the preparation mentioned above should still be considered.

A word of warning on home visits: 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 minor consideration when thinking of the practicalities of having the haircut at home.

If you choose to have the haircut at home, you may need a mirror to make the child aware of what is happening while the hairdresser is standing behind them. Any unexpected touch without warning or if the child cannot see when he is being touched may cause further anxiety.

Tender loving care

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.

Information for the hairdresser

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 before 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.

Parents know their own child best

These are only suggestions that parents may wish to try. As the parent you will know your child the best and why he may resist having a haircut. Some parents may find that all the strategies in this booklet have been tried but have not helped. Parents in this situation have found that they have to resort to cutting their child's hair while they are asleep as best they can.

Autism-friendly haircutting

The Autism Helpline is aware of one autism-friendly service for haircutting, called the Toby Henderson Trust. Every haircut given is tailored to the child's needs and they look at what motivates the individual child to help

make the experience easier. For further information please visit the following website: [www.tht.org/TheProject/HelpingYou/Current Services/](http://www.tht.org/TheProject/HelpingYou/CurrentServices/)

Parent groups

Talking to other parents and sharing your own experiences may provide you with other strategies to try. Some local support groups may have details of autism-friendly hairdressers known to them via other parents. For details of local support groups visit the Public Autism Resource and Information Service (PARIS) and search the online database: www.info.autism.org.uk

Useful fact sheets available from the NAS Autism Helpline

Blue Badge

Going to the shops*

The sensory world of the autistic spectrum – a greater understanding*

Social Stories TM

SPELL

TEACCH

Using visual supports

Available from the NAS Autism Helpline:
0845 070 4004
(Mon-Fri 10am-4pm)
Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk
www.autism.org.uk/infosheets

*Also available from NAS Publications:
Central Books Ltd
99 Wallis Road
London E9 5LN
Tel: 0845 458 9911 Fax: 0845 458 9912
nas@centralbooks.com
www.autism.org.uk/pubs

References and further reading

*Smith Myles, B., Tapscott Cook, K., Miller, N.E., Rinner, L., Robbins, L.A. (2000) *Asperger syndrome and sensory issues: practical solutions for making sense of the world*. Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

*Gray, C. (2002) *My social stories book*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

**Wilkes, K. (2005) *The sensory world of the autistic spectrum: a greater understanding*. London: The National Autistic Society

*Available from NAS Publications:
Central Books Ltd
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London E9 5LN
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Fax: 0845 459 9912
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Email: autismhelpline@nas.org.uk
www.autism.org.uk/infosheets

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Laura Slade, the author of this booklet, has many years experience working with children autism and Asperger syndrome. She has worked with children with autism in a school in south London and now works on The National Autistic Society's Autism Helpline.

The illustrator, Dennis Ayris, is a professional cartoonist who worked for many years on Punch magazine.