

Children's Early Years Occupational Therapy Service



Hair washing and
hair care

Hair washing for children with sensory modulation difficulties

Children with sensory modulation difficulties often find hair washing and hair care a challenge to tolerate. The following strategies may support you and your child during these activities.

1) Consider the environment

Consider the bathroom environment and how this can be altered to provide a calming and relaxing experience. Dimming the bathroom lights, using calming scents and allowing your child to choose and use a fragrance they find acceptable can all reduce bath time challenges. Some children respond well to calming slow rhythmic music during bath time or singing bath time songs.

2) Sounds

Soften any sounds that bounce between hard surfaces by having plenty of sound reducing fabric such as towels and bathrobes in the bathroom. Calm or slow rhythmic music during haircare including songs such as 'this is the way we wash/brush out hair' can also calm your child during this time.

If your child goes for a haircut, consider the time of day you attend. Try to schedule your visits for when it is less busy.

3) Provide heavy work before haircare

Encourage your child to participate in some movement seeking or heavy work activities prior to hair washing or haircare. This can help regulate a child's sensory system prior to this activity. For further information and guidance on sensory modulation activities please see the handout titled 'making sense of sensory behaviour').

Ensure your child sits on a firm steady surface with their feet supported during haircare to help them feel safe and secure.

For children who fear the movement of tipping their head back during hair washing you could try using a spray bottle or flannel to wet/wash the hair instead.

**4) Routine**

It is important to prepare your child for haircare and what is to be expected. Social stories can help children understand the stages of the task and make it more predictable. Visual timers can be beneficial as they allow your child to know when the task will start and end.

5) The face

Consider using tear-free shampoo or try alternating wet hair washing with dry shampoo.

Consider swim goggles or a water visor to help reduce water going on the face or ears.

6. Textures

Consider deep maintained pressure on the shoulders prior to washing and during haircare which can help to calm the sensory system during haircare

Try placing a warm wet towel over your child shoulders during hair washing and keep pouring warm water over them to help them feel warm and safe.

Allow your child to brush their own hair using the pressure they prefer.

Experiment with a variety of hair brushes to see if your child has a preference

A tight fitting cap or hairband worn for 15 minutes before haircare can provide firm touch pressure that will be calming before haircare.

Try placing a weighted soft toy or lap pad on your child's lap during haircare to help them feel safe and secure.

After haircuts, consider your child having a change of clothes if they find loose hair irritating.