

Tips for visiting the hairdressers

For some autistic people a trip to the hairdressers can cause a lot of anxiety and be a very distressing experience. We have put together some top tips for hair cutting trips:

Before

- Is it necessary? For some autistic people the experience can be too much, it may be better to remove the pressure and cut the person's hair yourself, for some this could be done in their sleep or when it's wet in the bath. Some people may prefer to have long hair.
- Consider the environment: It may help you to visit the hairdressers alone first to be able to closely look at the environment. Think about the environment in relation to the person for example will the lights be a trigger? Could the person wear sunglasses for their visit? Make some notes whilst you are there to plan ahead.
- Preparation: This can be particularly important especially if it is the person's first visit. You may use visual stories to prepare the person or go on walks past the hairdressers. Where possible arrange to watch another person getting their haircut, this could be on YouTube, or they could attend one of your haircuts with you.
- Role play: Could you act out the hair cutting process? You could set up your own hairdressers and practice haircuts on dolls to help the person become familiar with the tools used during the process.
- Use visuals: These can help to break down the hair cutting process. You may use visual stories which talk about why we have our haircut and what happens during a haircut. You could take along a visual timeline to the appointment.
- Consider the time of the appointment: There may be a time of day that works better for the person or there may be a time of day when the hairdressers is quieter.
- Speak to the hairdressers ahead of the appointment: Let them know about any anxieties, they may be able to make some adjustments. If the person becomes anxious when waiting could you wait in the car and the hairdresser call you when they are ready?
- Find an autism friendly hairdresser/barbers and check what adjustments they can make.

- Support the person to feel calm before their appointment: This may be achieved through proprioceptive input like rolling on a gym ball.
- Pack a toolkit: It may be useful to pack things that help keep the person calm or distract them. Examples include ear defenders, a music player, or sensory toys.

During

- Sensory considerations: A haircut involves a lot of the sensory systems, touching, hair falling onto the person's body, the smell of hair products, the sounds and vibrations of the tools used. Consider the person's sensory needs and which parts of the process the person will find difficult. Is it necessary to use shears could scissors be used instead? Or if the sound of scissors is too much, specialist scissors are available online which make no noise. Could the person wear an umbrella cape? - this catches the hair in it.
- For some seeing their hair cut off in front of them can be really distressing: Removing the mirror may help or for some watching what is happening in the mirror can decrease anxiety so they can see what the hairdresser is doing.
- Hair washing: If the person is having their washed you may need to take your own unscented hair products with you. If hair washing is going to be too much for the person, it may be better to ask for a dry cut or to just dampen the hair with a spray bottle.
- Give the person some control over the cut: The person may like to be involved. Could they spray water onto their hair themselves or brush their hair themselves? Could they hold the mirror?
- Use a timer: This can be useful for highlighting how long the haircut will take. When using a timer always consider adding extra time on than anticipated in case it is not finished on time.
- Consider seating: Would a cuddle help them during this time, this will provide a chance for calming proprioceptive input.