

# Having a Haircut



We go to the hairdresser so infrequently that the sensory challenges that this routine presents can become a big hurdle for many children. For some children with additional needs, a haircut or trip to the hairdressers/barber can be extremely challenging and not everyone likes to have a haircut. Preparing well for this routine can make a huge difference. Hopefully, the following tips will pave the way for a more enjoyable experience.

Start with the long-term goal in mind. Setting in place small steps might seem frustrating when your child is struggling to see past their locks, but it is helpful to work towards small goals when setting children up for success.

## Preparing

Play 'hairdressers' at home without the scissors. Sit on a chair, put on a cape (pink, blue, or Disney capes can be ordered online for only a few dollars), look at a mirror, and ask your child to spray water on their hair. If capes are an issue, use a favourite garment to protect against cut hair that you can later bring to the hairdressers. Or simply place an old sheet on the floor to help with clean ups – it is important your child's individual preferences are valued and respected, more so, the routine is a positive and enjoyable experience.

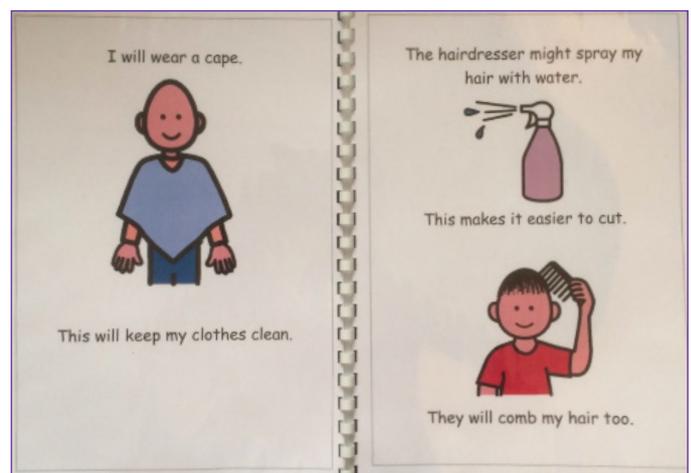


By playing these games together, you are empowering your child to be an active and involved learner and participant.

Your child can hold a fiddle toy and listen to music – this will reduce the sound of scissors cutting at the hairdressers.

Spray the hair and comb it. You can make crazy, spikey hairstyles just for fun. Then say, "Finished" and let the child get off the chair. Make it fun and swap roles.

Your Start Strong Pathways educator can help you to make a Social Story to prepare for the visit to the hairdresser. The story will help prepare your child for the visit by clearly identifying the steps involved. Here is a sample social story.





Read books about the experience such as *Getting My First Haircut* – a sticker book, or *The Haircut* by Theo Heras. Talk together about why we need a haircut, how it does not hurt the hair, and the hair will grow again.

Watch some YouTube videos of children having their hair cut.

### Haircutting at home or in the salon?

Sometimes it is best initially to cut the hair at home and just one snip at a time. The aim is to desensitise them to the sound of the scissors, with the ultimate goal of having the hair cut in a salon. Others in the family can have a snip at the same time to model the experience.

Don't surprise your child – forewarn them by saying, "It is time for one snip – then you can have your dessert/toy/show."

If scissors are too challenging now, you could start with a hair thinning comb to reduce the quantity of hair while you build up your child's skills.

### Choosing the hairdresser

If you are going to a salon, find an understanding hairdresser and talk to them about your child and how they may react. Discuss the seating options and the cape and bring your own if possible. If your child does not like mirrors, arrange for a drape to be placed over the mirror.

Talk with your child before the day to discover what they want and what part of their hair they want cut first. Promoting choice and control further motivates children to be active participants

of learning. You may also want to give the hairdresser some tips, for example speaking in simple sentences. Make a plan for what to do if the haircut cannot be completed i.e. what to cut first so this won't be a problem. Is it better to cut small snips at the side first so the child can see what is happening?

Introduce your child gradually to the hairdresser – just pop in to say, "Hi" when you are passing. Then visit the salon and watch someone they know (a sibling or a parent) having a haircut. Take photos of the haircut so this can be discussed at home. Prepare your child for the haircut by marking it on the calendar with a haircut symbol so they know when it is coming.

Choose a time of day when your child will be at their best – not straight after preschool.

Your therapist can help you to make up some visuals or pictures to show what will happen. Depending on how familiar your child is with visuals, you might use two pictures (haircut/park) or you may want a sequence showing scissors/ comb/spray bottle/hairdryer/finished/park. Use them in the hairdresser play before the visit, as well as in the salon.



## On the day

Bring your visuals and Social Story if you have one. Plan a treat after the cut such as going to the park and bring a photo to remind your child of this.

Bring a snack and a drink bottle. Crunching and sucking will help to calm and regulate your child. Your therapist will be able to help you to understand the best calming activities for your child if you are in any doubt.

Consider opportunities for your child to be an active participant, for example, you may like to ask your child if they want to sit or stand during the cut. It is important they feel comfortable and supported throughout this routine.

Many children are sensitive to the noise of clippers so you could ask the hairdresser to use scissors only. You may also like to consider using [Calming Clippers](#). Bring a personal music player/ iPod and speakers with some favourite music or stories to distract them and block out some of the background noise.

Bring a change of clothes in case some hair gets inside their clothes.

If your child is having their hair washed, take your own shampoo which will smell familiar. You may like to also consider if your child would benefit from wearing swimming goggles to reduce the risk of water going into their eyes – ear plugs may also reduce water going into your child's ears. You could ask the hairdresser to let the child use the water spray to dampen the hair, as a fun game.



Consider your child's sensory preferences. For some children having their hair brushed can be daunting so perhaps, your child would like to use a brush from home or a specific type of comb.

Where it is safe and appropriate to do so, ask your hairdresser if your child can explore some of the tools, such as the blow dryer or combs. This will help children to become familiar with such items and further support their sense of feeling safe and supported.

A weighted lap pad could be used to reduce anxiety whilst in the barber's chair. Your Occupational Therapist will be able to guide you to know if this will be suitable for your child. If your child is familiar with timers, use one to indicate how long the cut will take. Otherwise, ask the hairdresser to use the 'count to 10' and then a take a break method. When they start cutting, start counting from 1 to 10, and then take a break. This way, your child will know how long each session will be.

Use phrases like, "Almost there", or "Just this last bit" so that your child knows that the haircut will be over soon.

Speaking of breaks, take plenty of them. If necessary, have the hair cut in stages over several days.

A small reward like an activity or a lollipop at the end of the haircut works wonders and can be used as an incentive for the next visit.



## After the haircut

Take before and after photos of the child's hair, and the salon. Make a photo book to remind them of the experience, and to let them share what happened with special people.

Offer to play hairdresser again at home so they can recall what happened and include it in their play routine. Making it fun and enjoyable lays the foundation for future success.

Having a haircut is a routine with many elements and it will take time for your child to learn about the steps. Even if you only have success with a couple of these steps, that should make it easier next time. You are on your way.

Talk about preparing for the hairdresser with your Start Strong educator and they will be able to suggest the strategies that will suit your child.



## Resources

These links are to some more resources that may suit your child:

- [Noah's Turn - Watch a 3 Year Old Enjoy a #haircut - YouTube](#)
- Social Story - <https://www.autism.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Getting-my-hair-cut-Social-Story.pdf>
- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/autism/behaviour/common-concerns/appointments-asd>

## Books

- **Johnny Gets A Haircut**  
June 4, 2021. By Michael J Nesci  
<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B096LMS57T?ie=UTF8&tag=sensprocdisop-20&camp=1789&linkCode=xm2&creativeASIN=B096LMS57T>
- **Sprinkles' First Haircut**  
(25) (Blue's Clues) Paperback – May 6, 2008.  
By JC Schwanda  
[https://www.amazon.com/dp/1416954422/ref=as\\_sl\\_pc\\_tf\\_til?tag=sensprocdisop-20&linkCode=w00&linkId=66bf0c4defa300ff61ead1e5d147bd2d&creativeASIN=1416954422](https://www.amazon.com/dp/1416954422/ref=as_sl_pc_tf_til?tag=sensprocdisop-20&linkCode=w00&linkId=66bf0c4defa300ff61ead1e5d147bd2d&creativeASIN=1416954422)

Ask your Start Strong Pathways educator to help with ideas for this routine. They can help with making visuals and making a plan.

Does your child have an Occupational Therapist? Let them know you are working on making going to the hairdresser a more engaging time with your child. Check in with them about some calming strategies for your child or for other resources.

Does your child have a Speech Pathologist? They can help you with visuals as well as other resources to engage your child during salon visits.