

# Hair Care & Sensory Regulation

## An Occupational Therapy Guide for Caregivers

Hair care is more than appearance - it is a daily living skill (ADL) that supports independence, participation, self-esteem, and regulation.

For many children, especially those with sensory processing differences, grooming routines such as brushing, washing, or styling hair can feel overwhelming, painful, or unpredictable. When we understand why hair care is challenging, we can adapt routines to promote success rather than distress.

### Why Hair Care Can Be Difficult

Hair grooming requires the integration of multiple sensory systems:

#### Tactile Processing

The scalp contains a high concentration of nerve endings. Children with tactile defensiveness may experience light touch, pulling, or water contact as uncomfortable or even painful.

Children may:

- Avoid brushing or washing hair
- Cry, scream, or flee during grooming
- Refuse haircuts or styling
- Become emotionally dysregulated quickly

Research shows children with sensory modulation differences often demonstrate heightened responses to touch stimuli, resulting in avoidance behaviors and anxiety during grooming tasks (Dunn, 1997; Schaaf & Lane, 2015).



## Proprioceptive Processing (Body Awareness)

Proprioceptive input helps organize the nervous system and improve tolerance for touch. Without adequate body awareness input, grooming sensations may feel unexpected or threatening.

## Emotional Regulation & Anxiety

- Hair care combines:
- Physical sensations
- Loss of control
- Anticipation of discomfort
- Time pressure

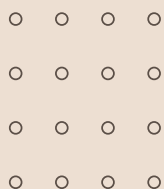
This can activate a child's fight-or-flight response, leading to behavioral resistance that is neurological - not behavioral defiance.

Studies demonstrate strong relationships between sensory over-responsivity and anxiety regulation challenges in children (Ben-Sasson et al., 2009).

## Signs Your Child May Benefit From Occupational Therapy

### Consider an OT referral if your child:

- Has extreme distress during grooming
- Avoids bathing or haircuts
- Shows strong reactions to touch or textures
- Demonstrates daily self-care challenges
- Experiences frequent emotional dysregulation during routines



# Evidenced-Based Strategies

## 1 Section the Hair

- Divide hair into small sections using clips
- Tell the child what comes next ("One section done, two more!")
- Use visual schedules or mirrors for predictability

**Breaks the task into predictable steps and reduces pulling from multiple directions**



## 2 Brush From the Ends First

- Hold hair above the tangle to stabilize the scalp while brushing.

**Prevents tugging at the scalp, reduces nociceptive (pain) input, and improves trust and tolerance**

## 3 Use Detangling Spray or Conditioner

- Reduces friction and pulling forces
- Shortens grooming duration
- Minimizes sensory overload

**Shorter, successful experiences help build gradual sensory tolerance.**



## 4 Provide Sensory Input Before Hair Care

Try before brushing:

- Wall push-ups
- Bear crawls
- Carrying laundry or books
- Therapy putty or squeezing activities
- Deep pressure hugs (if preferred)

**Research supports the use of proprioceptive input to regulate sensory responses prior to challenging tasks (Schaaf & Mailloux, 2015).**

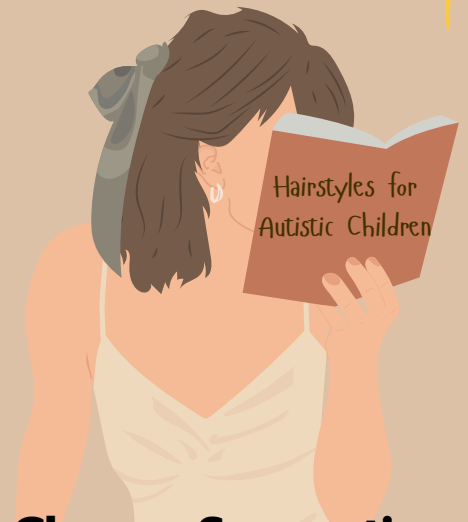
# 5

## Offer Choice & Control

Let the child choose:

- Brush color
- Hair accessories
- Sitting vs standing
- Music or video during brushing
- Who brushes first (parent or child)

**Choice supports motivation and emotional regulation.**



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## Modify the Environment

Consider:

- Quiet room
- Soft lighting
- Warm water temperature
- Detangle during preferred activities (movie, story, music)
- Weighted lap pad or towel for calming input

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## Gradual Desensitization (Tolerance Building)

Start with:

1. Touching brush to hair briefly
2. One stroke only
3. Increase duration slowly
4. End on success

**Hair care tolerance develops over time, not overnight. Consistency builds neural adaptation.**



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## Choose Supportive Hairstyles

- Braids or loose buns
- Protective styles for textured hair
- Headbands or clips to keep hair out of eyes
- Silk pillowcases to reduce tangles overnight

**This facilitates improved visual attention, lessens need for brushing, and reduced sensory exposure throughout the day**

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## Use Transitional Cues

- Timer countdown
- First-Then language ("First brush, then tablet time")
- Consistent routine each day
- Same location for grooming

**Predictability reduces anxiety.**

When we adapt grooming routines to meet a child's sensory needs, hair care becomes more than hygiene - it becomes an opportunity to build

We are not teaching children to tolerate discomfort.

We are helping their nervous systems feel safe enough to participate.

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## Co-Regulation First, Independence Second

- Calm voice tone
- Slow pacing
- Validate feelings ("I know brushing feels hard.")
- Model deep breathing together

**Children regulate through relationships before self-regulating.**



## References

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