

Hair Washing Advice Sheet

For a Child with Sensory Differences

Hair washing can be a tricky experience for some children, young people and adults alike. If your child has sensory differences they may find it hard to have their hair washed or to wash it.

Possible Sensory Differences

A child may be over-responsive to tactile input and may experience touch as overwhelming or even painful, or they may be under-responsive to touch and not register the tactile (touch) information making hair washing a confusing experience. If another person is washing your hair, then it is not possible to control how much pressure is being used to make it more tolerable, you also can't see them as they will be out of the line of sight. This means that another person may be rubbing your head in an unexpected way or place, or that they are touching your head in an uncomfortable way.

If someone experiences movement difficulties then they may find it difficult to maintain a good sitting posture in the bath or find it hard to stand in the shower. They may find it difficult to step in and out of the shower or bath, tilt their head for the shampoo to be washed out, or they may find it hard to sit still for long enough to have a wash or wash their hair.

If a child has proprioceptive difficulties they may struggle to get their hands to their head or to move around all of their head to wash their hair. They might find it hard to rinse their hair.

Preparation Ideas

- Think about the environment- remove clutter, dim the lighting, use calming (slow, rhythmical) music during bath time.
- Role play using dolls or other toys to wash their hair or get them to wash mum, dad, or sibling's hair first and then it is their turn.
- Use a picture schedule to show the sequence of hair washing. You may want to add a reward at the end (a learning disability nurse may be able to help you with this or here is one from online <http://connectability.ca/2010/10/29/bathshower-sequence/>).
- Keep hair short. Long hair takes more washing time than your child may be able to give, and combing time is likely a nightmare as well.
- Use earplugs to protect ears and the noise of rushing water if your child will leave them in.
- Apply deep pressure before bath time. Give a massage or hand hugs up and down arms and legs. Try the use of a heavier blanket or vibrating toy 10 minutes before bath time.
- You can also use this method in the bath by placing a folded towel across their lap. As it becomes wet it obviously becomes heavier and may provide the sensory input and pressure needed during a time of stress.
- If your child appears to struggle or have difficulties with getting in or out of the shower/ bath then see if a small step might help them to reach the side of the bath easier. If this does not help then speak with your OT team to see if any equipment is indicated.
- Ensure your child is able to maintain balance in sitting or standing and no additional support or equipment is indicated to help them in the bath or shower.

Hair Washing- The Task

- Sing a song so the child knows what is coming next: “This is the way we scrub your hair, scrub your hair, scrub your hair, this is the way we scrub your hair, when we have bath time. This is the way we rinse your hair...”
- Make it a fun game. A water pistol, spray bottle, or squirt bottle can do the trick of wetting and rinsing.
- Try either unscented or strongly scented soaps and shower gels. For example some children with sensitive sense of smell and taste may find ‘normal’ soap or shampoo unpleasant. Other children (often those who smell or taste everything) may prefer strongly scented soaps and shampoos.
- Pour it on. Instead of bringing the head to the water, bring the water to the head in a jug or container, or try a showerhead that can be pulled away from the wall and used as a sprayer.
- A solid shampoo bar would enable a child to control the tactile input and give themselves deep pressure while applying shampoo.
- Place the shampoo in your hand before rubbing into their scalp, as the trickle of shampoo being poured onto their head can be too stimulating.
- A thinner baby shampoo is better as it rinses out more easily than a thicker shampoo.
- Try a pump bottle and get them to pump out shampoo, it will keep their hands busy and gets them involved. It will also measure out the right amount of shampoo.
- Try just shampooing and rinsing the ends of your child’s hair at first and slowly work up to the whole head. If it is a particularly tough week, sensory and behaviour-wise, then try a no rinse/dry shampoo.
- If possible encourage your child to lather their own hair so that they can control the amount of pressure applied.
- Try a shampoo brush. This may give your child more feedback and enable them to better tolerate hair washing.
- Go face-first. Leaning forwards may not be as threatening to your child as leaning backward, since he/she can see where she's going.
- Try different methods of rinsing off. Some children may like the deep pressure of a large jug of water being poured or a hand-held shower hose. Others may like more control and a different pressure, and prefer to trickle water themselves; offer a small watering can, hand-held shower hose, cup, or jug for them to try rinsing.
- Count the number of rinses.
- To keep soap out of the eyes purchase a visor, wear swimming goggles or hold a flannel to cover their face and eyes to prevent soap irritation.

References for Activity Ideas

- <http://specialchildren.about.com/od/specialsituation1/qt/hairwashing.htm>
- <https://sites.google.com/a/medford.k12.wi.us/occupational-therapy/home/sensory-strategies/hair-washing>
- <http://www.whattoexpect.com/wom/toddler/15-strategies-to-conquer-your-next-toddler-hair-wash.aspx>