



Haircuts for Children with Sensory Processing Issues

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and [sensory processing issues](#) may react negatively to [personal hygiene and grooming routines](#) because they become overwhelmed by certain types of touch, smell, etc. Although kids with sensory challenges are often upset by day-to-day tasks such as brushing teeth, many parents report that one of the *most* distressing activities is going for a haircut.

“Imagine,” writes Bethany Reynolds in a [column](#) for *The Mighty*, “The water spray, the noise, the people, the chair, the mirror, the noise, the clippers, the comb in the hair, the people, the hair dryer, the water, the talking, the mirror. You can imagine how this could be a nightmare for a child on the autism spectrum.”



Kerry Magro, another contributor for *The Mighty*, echoes this sentiment with [firsthand experience](#):

“For so long growing up, I could *never* get my hair cut in a barbershop. Crowded places like that made me feel uneasy, the sound of scissors made me cringe and when hair fell after being cut, I’d shiver like thousands of little pins were stabbing me in the back of my



neck.”

Bringing children with sensory issues to get their hair cut can also be very frustrating for parents. Reynolds notes that, “...you struggle to cope with staring eyes, apologizing to the hairdresser as your child freaks out, screams, cries...” and that after all of this, they may leave with a very unfinished haircut.

Hairdressers and Barbers Work to Make the Experience Less Frightening

Fortunately, some hairdressers and barbers are taking steps to make haircuts less stressful for children with autism and sensory issues. CNN [recently reported](#) on a barber named Lisa Ann McKenzie, who went to great lengths to help a young client tolerate haircuts. Jordie Rowland, age 11, has autism and hypersensitivity, and is also nonverbal. McKenzie told CNN that, “At the very start, we would be lucky to get a half haircut done.” But then she started reading about autism and sensory issues, and learned about how establishing a routine can help children with these conditions to stay calm.

She started having Jordie and his parents visit every two weeks near closing time, when she could dim the lights and turn down the music. She would cut his hair for as long as he tolerated it, which at first was about a quarter of a haircut. McKenzie didn’t ask them to pay for this; as she put it, “I wouldn’t charge because it wasn’t a haircut.”

Her bosses were unhappy about this, and about the amount of time she dedicated to this one client. So McKenzie opened her own shop, with Jordie as one of her first clients. In the new shop, with McKenzie more able to control the amount of sensory stimulation, Jordie was calmer. In his first visit, they got three-quarters of the way through a haircut.

Then, one day, as she was using the clippers, McKenzie began singing “The Wheels on the Bus.” Jordie not only allowed her to finish the haircut, but gave her a hug at the end of it. Now, she offers “Sensory Sensitive Sunday Sessions,” just for children with disabilities. She encourages her employees to try to connect with the children and consider what will make



each individual client most comfortable.

James Williams, a barber in the UK, also emphasizes the importance of connection and flexibility. The BBC wrote an [article](#) about Williams after a picture of him lying on the floor to cut a client's hair went viral.

"I'll cut a child's hair anywhere," he told the BBC. "Lying on the floor, sitting on the sofa, sitting on the reception desk, on the windowsill, even in a car. I've learnt to listen to the child as well, if the child wants to go in the car I'll say 'let's go to the car then.'"

The BBC also spoke with Claire Prosser, the mother of one of his young clients. In addition to explaining how Williams gently helped her son overcome his fear of haircuts, she also explained how his lack of judgment makes the process more comfortable for her.

"He has provided a safe space for parents to go with their autistic children," she said. "You can go there without fear if your child is screaming and shouting because it is safe, because in a normal setting it is not socially acceptable if there are other people there."

Williams would like to change this - to make autistic children and their families feel at ease in *many* barber shops, and not just a select few. Toward this goal, he's started a charity called [Autism Barbers Assemble](#), to educate hairdressers and barbers on how to work with clients on the autism spectrum.

"I eventually want to build a map on a website of hairdressers where autistic children are actively welcomed so parents know where they can go and not get turned away," he said.

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Tips for Parents

There are many things that parents can do to mitigate their children's fear of haircuts, including:

- Visit the salon/barber shop in advance and have your child meet the person who will be cutting their hair.
- Talk to the hairdresser/barber and try to come up with a “game plan” that will work for your child.
- Write a [social story](#) with pictures of what the haircut will be like. Go through steps such as arriving at the salon, sitting down, putting on the bib, etc.
- Consider hiring a mobile hairdresser/barber who can cut your child's hair in your own home - a familiar environment. Alternatively, you may also want to learn to cut their hair yourself.
- Use [safety scissors](#) and pretend to cut your child's hair prior to their actual haircut. You can also allow them to do this to you.
- Look into purchasing quiet clippers, or asking your hairdresser/barber to use the least noisy equipment they have.
- Give your child something to play with during the haircut, such as an iPad or fidget toy. You could also talk to them about something they are interested in.
- Plan something fun after the haircut, so that they have something to look forward to.

Of course, different strategies work with different children. How do you help your child cope with haircuts? Let us know in the comments!

Sources

- [The Mighty](#) - Tips to Help Your Son on the Autism Spectrum Cope With Haircuts
- [The Mighty](#) - 5 Ways to Help a Child With Autism Have a Great Haircut Experience
- [CNN](#) - A barber soothes a child with autism by singing - and finds a new purpose
- [BBC](#) - Autism: The children who find haircuts painful
- [North Shore Pediatric Therapy](#) - Tackling Haircuts with Sensory Sensitivities



Related Reading

- [Care Considerations: Personal Hygiene and Grooming](#)
- [Sensory Processing Issues](#)
- [Social Stories: What Are They and How Are They Used?](#)
- [What Improv Comedy Can Teach Us About Autism](#)
- [New Research Links Birth Complications \(Including HIE\) to Increased Autism Risk of Up to 44%](#)

TACKLING HAIRCUTS:

TIPS FOR KIDS WITH

SENSORY PROCESSING DISORDERS

