

Sensory strategies for self-care activities

Activities that have a calming effect on the nervous system tend to be heavy work activities (such as those included in the hand out) or provide deep/firm pressure to the skin (such as a massage). Providing opportunity for your child to participate in heavy work or deep pressure activities before or adapting the self-care activity so it includes an element of calming sensory input may enable your child to complete activities which are normally unbearable. However, be aware that preferences are different for each individual and can be different on each day, so follow your child's lead.

Bath time

- Bathrooms are rooms which are naturally bright and cause sounds to echo which can be sensory challenging before your child even begins the self-care activity. Try changing lighting to lower wattage bulbs (for example over the bath), limiting sounds (for example, run the water before the child enters the room), and ensure that the room is not too cold.
- Use unscented toiletries.
- Baths are generally easier to tolerate, but if possible, allow your child to choose whether they have a bath or shower.
- If showering, detach the 'nozzle' and let your child control (direction and water speed)
- Before undressing for the bath, provide deep pressure such as a bear hug or press firmly on your child's shoulders.
- Get undressed next to the bath and get in immediately.
- Self-initiated touch tends to produce a less defensive reaction so allow your child to wash themselves or lather their own shampoo.
- Use firm pressure to massage in shampoo.
- Provide a facecloth, large sponge or loafer and rub firmly to decrease sensitivity.
- Try using a facecloth to wash hair.
- Allow your child to use goggles to cover eyes when rinsing.
- Comb hair when conditioner is on and before rinsing.
- Be aware that the sensation of tipping head back for rinsing head may not be tolerated well.
- Try different containers when rinsing hair to find one that is more acceptable to your child (e.g. a spray bottle, jug, or plastic teapot).
- Make bath time fun with bubbles and bath toys!
- Explain what you are going to do before you do it and count, or encourage the child to count, so they know how long it will last for.
- Use a big towel and wrap your child firmly in it as soon as they are out the bath.
- Use firm pressure to dry.

Hair care

Ideas to help with hair brushing and cutting.

- Use a doll and have your child brush, wash, and cut the doll's hair.

- Encourage your child to participate in proprioceptive activities prior to hair care.
- Use an inflatable cushion or deflated beach ball for sensory support while sitting.
- Use a snug cap, sweatband, or headband 15 minutes before hair care to provide firm, maintained pressure which can be calming for children with tactile issues.
- Massage your child's head and give downward pressure on shoulders prior to hair care.
- Offer "fidget toys" during hair care.
- Arrange to have the child's hair cut at home rather than at a salon.
- Give the child warning when they are being approached and try to approach from in front rather than out of the child's vision.
- Practise without scissors. Pick up sections of the hair and tug slightly to mimic the sensation of having haircut.
- Play slow rhythmic music during hair care.
- Try 'Tangle teezer' brush, tangle angel/cherub (see images) and detangling spray when brushing hair.



Brushing teeth

- Establish a routine and use reminders such as alarms on phone.
- Consider brushing teeth earlier in the evening once the evening meal and sugary drinks are finished.
- Sit down whilst brushing and use a mirror to help guide movements.
- Try using a non-flavoured/non foaming toothpaste (such as Oranurse), gel or fruit flavoured. The dentist may advise regarding suitable alternatives.
- Disclosing tablets can be used occasionally to ascertain your brushing effectiveness.
- Try using an electric toothbrush.
- Allow your child to spit the toothpaste out when they choose to.
- Use the slightest smear of toothpaste/gel initially and increase to the recommended amount gradually.
- Clean small areas at a time. Intersperse with heavy work activity.
- Use ice or pressure to the mouth before brushing to reduce hypersensitivity.
- Let the child brush their own teeth with you modelling where to brush and for how long. It is less 'stressful' and 'painful' if they do it themselves; less 'invasive'.
- A poor sense of time can lead to too little or too much toothbrushing.
 - A visual sand timer would be helpful
 - Some electric toothbrushes have time vibration features
- Supervision and instruction of the toothbrushing may be required, even into their early teens.
- Adding sponge tubing to the toothbrush handle might improve dexterity

Dentist

- Complete a whole body 'heavy work' activity before appointment
- Oral sensitivity can make slight touch feel painful (especially when completed by someone else). Massage gums prior to appointment or complete chewing or blowing activity.
- Arrive in plenty of time to reduce rushing
- Ask if can have appointment at quieter time when waiting area not busy.
- Work up to sitting on chair. If less threatening, ask to sit on normal chair. Either use dental chair in upright position or recline before entering room (rather than when seated on it).
- Use a weighted shoulder pad for use during the appointment. Reducing noise, lowering the lights or where possible use natural lighting. Alternatively wear tinted or sun glasses.
- Tell the dentist if you have a strong gag reflex
- Ask for water instead of mouth rinse
- Ask the dentist to approach from the front rather than side or behind
- Request that speak at a slow pace using simple words and short sentences and give longer times to respond to questions.
- Ask that told what will be done before it begins.
- Agree on a signal (e.g. raised hand) with the dentist to indicate that you need a break and want them to stop.
- Ear defenders or headphones may reduce impact of noise/echo of room
- Ask dentist to show instruments, introduce one at a time and where possible demonstrate on model.
- Use fidget objects ideally with a stretch or squeeze (such as ball of blue tack/stress ball, thick elastic band/strip of therapy band).

Nail care

- Cut nails when straight out of bath (or soak first) so softer and easier to cut.
- Give your child plenty of notice before clipping their nails. This will put them at ease and remove the element of surprise. Clipping nails on a regular schedule will help them cope as well.
- Press firmly down on the centre of each nail prior to cutting.
- Count (or encourage the child to count from 1-10) so there is a clear end to the task.
- Press gently down on the centre of each nail prior to clipping. This will temporarily cut off the nerve ending of the finger tips so the child will not feel anything.
- Use clippers rather than scissors.