



TOUCH! DON'T TOUCH ME!

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Many children struggle to cope with the sensory bombardments that come with hair care. Some children as toddlers and pre-schoolers find this difficult. Some children continue to find these daily self-care tasks unbearable even into primary school age. So why is it that many children struggle with what appears to be such a simple task?

Many children are over-responsive to the feeling of light touch. The feeling of water on their head during bath time, the towel during hair drying, the brush for hair brushing, fingers for braiding or styling, the touch of scissors for cutting. All these sensory events can be very overwhelming for toddlers or older children who are over-responsive to screening out touch sensations. Actually, when the touch systems are over responsive, the above situations may be interpreted by the child as being painful or dangerous. It places their nervous system in a state of stress, or the fight/flight response.

As parents, we need to acknowledge and be respectful of how children are interpreting this information. It is a very real experience. We cannot and should not force children to do these things if they find them distressful. Just imagine if someone told you to just jump off a bridge or bungee jump and just 'get over' your feelings of fear. It probably wouldn't make you feel any better about things.

In this article, we will talk about strategies to help children cope better with:

- Hair care (brushing and styling)
- Hair cutting

When a child is feeling over responsive and in the stress or fight or flight response, we need to help calm and organise the child's body.

HERE ARE 3 TOP TIPS DOING HAIR CARE WITH LESS TEARS.

1. Using movement and muscle activities before hair care.

For example, before morning hair care, get your child to move and get the wiggles out. Get them to jump on the trampoline, ride a tricycle or scooter, bounce on a ball, or animal walk down the hallway. Once they have moved, their body will be calmer and it will be easier to manage the activity. Before a haircut, go to the park for half an hour or more before the hairdresser appointment. Encourage lots of active play using their muscles, resistance and climbing activities.

2. Use deep pressure touch strategies for before and during the activity.

Deep touch or firm touch pressure helps to override feelings of the stress and over responsive feeling. Some strategies include:

- Before hair brushing or cutting, press firmly on your child's shoulders or give them a really firm head massage.
- Use firm touch pressure when brushing or combing, or let the child brush their hair and show you what pressure they prefer.
- Use a weighted lap or shoulder blanket for some deep pressure calming input.

- Get your child to wear a firm cap for half an hour before the hair cut or hair brushing.
- On the way to the hair dresser, give them a weighted blanket or a heavy toy to cuddle in the car.

3. Be aware of auditory/sound issues that might impact on the stress response.

- At the hair dresser, be aware if the sound of the scissors or hair clippers is distressing. If it is, use headphones, or music to help block this out.
- Play calming music, or their favourite songs during hair cutting.
- Explain every step of what you or the hairdresser are going to do. For example, 'First I'm going to spray some water on

your hair. It might feel a bit tickly, but it's only for three sprays, then I'll stop.'

Hair care can be really tricky for lots of children. Use whatever strategies you can to have success. Other might include -

1. Using distraction - provide sultanas or finger foods as a diversion.
2. Using the TV during the activity.
3. Using conditioner regularly to reduce hair tangles (even if you have to use the shampoo and conditioner together if bath time is tricky too).

Please respect a child's feelings if they find these tasks difficult. It may be a real stress response that they are feeling and not just bad behaviour. If your child is continuing to struggle with these sensory issues, please talk about it to your family doctor, early childhood nurse or occupational therapist.

For more information, please refer to the *Tools for Tots Book: Sensory Strategies for Toddlers and Pre-schoolers*, by Diana Henry on our [website](#).

Deb Hopper is a practicing Occupational Therapist and an **Amazon #1 Best Seller author** for her book ***Reducing Meltdowns and Improving Concentration***. She is passionate about helping children achieve their potential. As a practicing Occupational Therapist at the Life Skills 4 Kids Clinic on the NSW Mid North Coast, Australia, she understands the day to day struggles that children, parents and teachers face. For a sample chapter of her upcoming new book, join her newsletter or visit her [website](#).

