

Crossing the Hurdles of Haircuts

*Aspie insights and approaches
to a critical personal grooming issue*

Introduction

Getting one's hair cut can be a traumatic experience for individuals with Asperger's Syndrome ("AS") who have extreme physical sensitivities. The result is often tears and trauma for AS children, as well as social embarrassment for them and their parents. These problems may even persist into adulthood, resulting in an unkempt appearance which may ultimately limit the interpersonal and professional prospects of AS adults in subtle but undeniable ways. This book explores the inner workings of haircutting difficulties as experienced by an individual with AS, so that we can better understand and overcome the social, interpersonal, and professional hurdles of a poor first impression that has its origins in an unkempt appearance.

An All-Too-Common Issue

When it comes to getting haircuts, individuals with heightened physical sensitivities, especially those on the Autistic Spectrum (“AS”), can face particular challenges. Parents of “sensory kids” often lament that they are unable to take their sons and daughters to get their hair cut by others, or even give them a trim at home, without enduring puzzling and sometimes embarrassing levels of drama. Tantrums and tears and other behavioral issues often result, which can be confusing, frustrating, and downright maddening for parents.

Why does something *so simple* have to be *so hard*?

Now, kids do need to get their hair cut. Having an unkempt appearance can make one vulnerable to teasing and/or ostracism by other kids. Especially as kids get older, a slovenly appearance can be socially isolating and alienating and can sometimes mark a child as a *weirdo* or an outsider. What’s more, with hair so long that it obstructs their vision, some kids may even have social logistical issues; they may not be able to see well enough to participate in games), or they may not interpret social cues and clues as well as other kids. Just try catching a ball or detecting subtle social hints when your hair is in your face. And, as I’ll describe later, long hair may actually complicate existing sensory issues, just by being long.

But not just Aspie kids can have trouble with haircuts. Even in adulthood, Autistic Spectrum Individuals (“ASI’s”) may have continued issues with getting their hair cut, causing them to delay the dreaded ritual past reasonable timeframes. Some ASI’s will literally wait until the last possible moment, until they can no longer afford (professionally and personally) to have an unkempt appearance, before dragging themselves off to the hairstylist or barber. They may

appear neat and well-groomed some of the time, but not nearly as often as would be optimal.

For example, an acquaintance of mine (I'll call her "Abby") who is as "classic Aspie" as they come, waits until her main client's quarterly business meetings to get her hair cut. They're the Big Cheeses in the client group, the ones who contribute well over 2/3 of her employer's income. Between quarterly meetings, she lets her hair grow, and although her hairstyle is on the long side, to begin with, it still starts to look increasingly ragged every couple of months. Since Abby works in client services and has regular contact and in-depth interaction with *all* of her employer's bread-and-butter customers, this means that the others she serves (between overdue haircuts) are forced to deal with an unkempt, shaggy-headed point person for much of the year. One can well imagine the impression this must make on those "lesser" clients, not to mention the ability of her employer to present the best possible appearance to customers other than the so-called Big Cheese -- and so expand their client base.

This bad-hair habit of Abby's can't be good for business.

Now, it goes without saying that reluctance to tend to one's personal appearance can have a negative impact on one's social and professional relationships, even career aspirations. Personal grooming and appearance is a critical part of any professional's strategy for success, and neglecting one's hairstyle because of unrecognized and unaddressed sensory issues can do unintended damage to future professional and financial prospects, not to mention one's personal life.

Certainly, nobody *wants* to look their worst at all times. In this often superficial and impersonal world of ours, where first impressions often set the stage for future interactions, having a bad hair day can sometimes mean the

difference between success and failure. Nobody likes to think that the only thing that counts is how they look, but the fact of the matter is that many people don't look past a first impression in their dealings with us. So, having a neat and tidy appearance is essential for those who wish to fully participate in the mainstream.* I firmly believe it's in the best interests of young ASI's and their parents to overcome the hurdle of haircuts, to give AS kids the best start possible in an already challenging world.

I have written this work in hopes of shedding some light on the ubiquitous and mysterious conundrum of ASI's and their haircut hurdles. The coming pages explore this issue through the lens of my own personal sensory and social experiences. As a 43 year-old woman (as of July, 2008) on the Asperger's end of the Autistic Spectrum, who has both experienced and overcome lifelong difficulties with haircuts (and is able to describe my difficulties and coping mechanisms to others in considerable detail), I'm in a unique position to explain inner workings of circumstances that puzzle, confound, embarrass, and enrage countless parents of AS kids, not to mention obstruct the social and professional success of full-grown ASI's.

Herein, I describe my own childhood experiences with haircutting rituals, I detail my sensory drama(s), I extend the descriptions into my current adult life, and I show how I cope with the stresses associated with getting my hair cut on a regular basis. I also offer some suggestions at the end for how parents of AS kids

* Of course, there's always the option of retreating to the margins of society, and many AS people do -- and enjoy great success in the process. But this should be a conscious choice one makes, not a "default state" that's imposed by something as avoidable as a bad haircut. And it should not be something a young child needs to be forced into, because they can't abide the experience of having their hair trimmed.

and/or full-grown ASI's may constructively and pro-actively approach the virtual minefield of haircuts.

It is my hope that this work may shed light on common (but often unrecognized) sensory issues which are often particular to the Autistic Spectrum and illustrate the vital part these play in further complicating what is not typically considered an insurmountable obstacle -- getting your hair cut. I also hope that this paper may offer encouragement and useful suggestions to parents and ASI's alike, who struggle regularly with a necessary aspect of life, which "should" -- according to many -- be "no big deal." Believe me, you/we are not alone! And we're not freaks -- we're just very special people with extreme sensitivities which aren't (yet) particularly well understood.

Personal Background

I am a 43-year-old Aspie woman with lifelong, chronic sensory issues, whose mother gave up taking me to the other people to get my hair cut when I was pretty young -- probably around age 4 or 5 -- because I could not sit still for the hairdresser, and I would "run amok" after each dreaded session in the chair, acting out, shrieking, being hyper, and throwing temper tantrums. Even after my mother started cutting my hair at home, it continued to be a trying ordeal for everyone involved. I have very few good recollections of having my hair cut by my mother (or anyone else, for that matter) -- not because they were bad people or were abusive to me, but because my sensitivities were so profound, so misunderstood, so undetected, and so unaddressed, that I could not physically, mentally, or emotionally tolerate having my hair cut without considerable distress.

My mother prevailed valiantly with grooming me herself, until my inability to sit still for her nearly resulted in disaster. On one fateful Saturday evening before Easter Sunday, I was particularly ill-behaved and antsy, and she ended up giving me crooked bangs that were beyond amateur repair. I squirmed so much when she was trying to cut my hair, that she couldn't have cut straight, if she'd tried! Now to others, this mess would have been an aggravation or an inconvenience, but my dad was the pastor of the church we attended, and the preacher's kid **couldn't** show up at church looking like a bedraggled ragamuffin!

So, bright and early the next morning, I was marched off to the home of a hairdresser who went to our church. I remember being urged to sit still "just a little longer" about 20 times in the course of the process. And I remember making the hairdresser absolutely nuts with my restless, anxious fidgeting. But an hour before we were supposed to be in the front pew for the morning service, I had a stylish new shag haircut, and my mother was off the hook. Mission accomplished — my family's honor was preserved! But not without great emotional upheaval and anxiety.

I actually started to refuse to get my hair cut when I was about 7, and I didn't go back to the hairdresser till I was 13. I wore my hair in pigtails, which simplified everything, and I refused to change to any other hairstyle. I tried wearing my hair down, briefly, but for reasons I'll describe later, I opted for pigtails.* All protests by neighbor women, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and female classmates that I would look better with another hairstyle fell on deaf ears. I didn't **care** if I would look prettier with a different hairstyle. I *wasn't* getting my hair cut!

* I still have one of the elastic bands with the green balls on them that I used to gather my hair together; it's a potent reminder of the difficulties I had.

Eventually, I did go back to the hairdresser when I decided I needed to have a more “mature” hairstyle. Somehow, being 13 and having the same pigtailed hairstyle as when you were 7 doesn’t feel quite right. In fact, it was getting pretty embarrassing. So I bit the bullet and went back to The Chair, but it was *very* difficult to do!

Over the years, I’ve had continued issues with getting my hair cut. I’ve tried salons, I’ve tried barbers, I’ve even tried letting my hair grow longer. But it’s never been easy, and the best I can hope for is to get in and out of The Chair as quickly -- and with the least amount of damage -- as possible. As in childhood, the very idea of devoting a lot of time to a hairstyle still puts my teeth on edge. And I know I’m not alone in this regard, in the AS world.

The Explanation

As you read this, you may wonder at all the drama involved in something as simple as getting your hair trimmed. You may also be interested to know **why** some of us cannot abide having our hair cut... and sometimes have a full-on meltdown as a result. I can assure you, there are very good reasons for all of this. Here’s my experience and the explanation behind it.

I couldn’t stand getting my hair cut when I was a kid because:

The sound of my hair being cut was deafening. It may sound unlikely, but my hearing has always been so sensitive, I hear even the finest vibrations far more acutely than most people, so the physical experience

of getting my hair cut was audibly traumatic. I could hear the scissors blades cutting through my hair in *loud* rasping sounds.

To give you an idea of what it's like*, put your fingers in your ears, plug them in tight, and then clear your throat with a raspy, non-vocal rush of air through your constricted throat -- like you're clearing sinus drainage from just behind your tongue at the back of your mouth. That's roughly what it was like for me, every time a clump of hair was snipped. The sound was sharp — *sharp!!!* And **loud**. It was a loud, sharp, raspy, thundering crunch that reverberated through my head.

Now, not *all* loud crunching sounds were unpleasant to me, when I was little. In fact, some of them could be quite soothing. The little bits of celery my mother put in the tuna salad sandwiches she packed for me for lunch helped me feel centered in the school cafeteria. There were literally hundreds of kids in that cafeteria at one time -- I went to an "early childhood center" that housed thousands of kids from K4 through second grade for all-day school (even in kindergarten), and the vast, cavernous cafeteria was always teeming with what seemed like wild, unbridled activity to me. In the midst of what felt like total chaos and traumatic sensory overload to my already taxed system**, the crunching of celery bits in my ears blocked out all the other sounds and gave me something immediate to focus on. The coarse texture and sound of celery thundering in my ears literally helped me keep my sanity in the midst of that mid-day sensory onslaught.

* My sensitivity has decreased considerably over time, but it's still there.

** I was usually tired, as I was bused an hour each way, through some pretty rough parts of the little city where we lived, in a school bus filled with rambunctious, screaming, fighting, jumping, jostling kids. I also attended all-day school from kindergarten, on.

Unfortunately, though, the “crunch” of getting my hair cut was *not* like that of chewing celery. It was not a sound that kept me sane in the midst of chaos. Quite the contrary -- it added to my sense of overwhelm. The worst thing was, I didn’t understand why it did. I felt terribly self-conscious at the same time that I was auditorily uncomfortable.

The sound of the scissor blades that were cutting my hair also put me on edge. It’s hard to explain to someone who doesn’t have sensory and/or audible pitch issues, but the sound of scissors blades rubbing together was very disorienting -- and disconcerting. It’s not that the sound was unpleasant -- far from it. There was actually something soothing about the sound -- soft and quiet and steady.

But the pitch range of the blades sliding across each other was one that was hard for me to physically locate. I couldn’t tell *where the sound was coming from*, if it was close or far. And that frightened me. The scissors were razor sharp, after all, and I was dreadfully afraid that I might move in the wrong direction or bump into them, and be cut. Because the sound of the scissors blades was so “feathering” and high-pitched, and because the scissors moved around a lot while I was having my hair cut, I was constantly on edge, trying to “track” the location of those sharp (and deadly -- or so it felt) cutting blades.

Try as I might to ignore the sound of the hair-cutting, when I was a kid, it was audibly troubling for me. What’s more, I couldn’t get away from it. I couldn’t stop it. I was stuck in place, while that awful sound was just grinding into my ears. It might seem a bit extreme, but as a kid, that’s how I auditorily experienced having my hair cut. I’m just glad no one used a clipper on my hair. The sound of small motors was even more

difficult for me to handle, than the sound of scissors blades. It might have driven me over the edge!

The physical sensation of getting my hair cut was disturbing. A lot of Aspie folks talk about how light touch is very uncomfortable, while firm touch is tolerable, and the touch involved in hair-cutting is usually quite light -- which makes it hard for someone like me to take. The sensation of my hair being lifted away from my head and then cut off was so distracting for me, it was physically disorienting. On the one hand, feeling the hair lifted away from my head felt good. It actually felt soothing to have the weight lifted from my scalp, which has always been very sensitive. I could actually feel the movement of each hair.* In fact, my hair helped me sense the world around me, much like a cat's whiskers help it to feel its way through the dark. And feeling the weight of my hair helped me to keep my balance (I say more about that later on). The subtle sensation of shifting hair helped me to orient myself physically in my immediate surroundings, which was so important for me -- and is for many other Aspie kids and adults.

So, when the hair was snipped from my head, and I lost contact with the immediate space around me, it was hard to adjust. I couldn't feel my surroundings in quite the same way any more. I didn't have my same hair weight and sensation to help me orient. When the hair was cut off, I lost that type of contact, and I felt like I'd lost my direct connection with the physical world around me. This was -- and still is -- physically

* I still can, to this day, and I can find gray hairs in the midst of my very thick and fine hair with a speed and accuracy that surprises even me

distressing for my very fine sensitivities. I tried to not let it bother me when I was younger, but it was hard. It still is.

Another problem I had was with the physical contact. I could never tell exactly where the person cutting my hair was going to touch me next, what part of my head would be pushed this way or that, forward or back or to the side, or what hair would be lifted and snipped. I couldn't have my eyes open (or I might get *snipples* in them), so I was constantly braced for contact, which stressed me even more. The hairdresser sensed it and this made her very uncomfortable. She ended up walking on eggshells, not sure how to adjust me properly, so she could get a good cut. This problem persisted with hairdressers well into my adulthood.

My mom had less of a ginger approach. She was my mom, after all, and she didn't have to be quite as dainty with me, with concerns about upsetting customers or their parents. Whenever my mother cut my hair, she would move me around or pull me back into the chair or touch me on the arm or shoulder or head, and I experienced most of that contact as pain. A significant number of folks on the Autistic Spectrum have this condition of experiencing simple touch as pain, and I've got that, too. Even today, with 43 years of life experience behind me, some days (especially when I'm tired or my system is overtaxed) I'm as sensitive as ever; the simplest of contacts feels like being slammed with a hot poker.

When I was was a kid and I was stressed or ultra-sensitive (usually whenever I was getting my hair cut), even a light touch felt like a blow. Now, for the record, my mother did **not** intentionally hit me or deliberately physically abuse me when she cut my hair. But the experience was physically very painful for me. It really *hurt* to be touched,

when I was in a “bad space”, so being moved and positioned was like being hit over and over again -- from all directions and without warning. I knew that I needed to sit still and behave. But sometimes I literally could not. I was just beside myself with anxiety and actual physical pain, and I squirmed and fidgeted till she was beside herself with frustration -- which didn't make her any more gentle.

I didn't have much time to focus on the pain, though, because the feel of the little pieces of hair on my face tickling me drove me nuts! They got in my nose, in my mouth, in my eyes. That really frightened me -- they were fine and prickly and felt sharp to me. But I couldn't brush them off -- I kept trying to, but they were stuck to me. Plus, I kept getting in the way of whoever was cutting my hair, which irritated and frustrated them and prolonged the agony for everyone involved -- me, the hairdresser and/or my mother. To this day, I cannot stand the feel of those little pieces of cut hair on my face and neck. And when the clippings get under my collar and into my clothing and rub me, it distracts me from whatever I'm doing and puts me on edge because I can't get away from it. Even when I shower after a haircut, I sometimes can't get it all off.

The feel of wet hair and skin agitated me. It always has. Ever since I was a very young girl, having wet skin -- especially my face -- has made me uncomfortable and agitated. The feel of wetness "hijacks" my senses and I find myself expending a lot of extra energy, sorting through all the sensory experiences around me, through the "sensory haze" that wet skin produces. To this day, I have a very hard time tolerating the feel of water on my face. Even when I go

swimming, which I love to do, I need to dry off my face as soon as I get out of the water.

I've always had sensitivity issues around water. It makes me uncomfortable and nervous to have damp skin. In fact, it's harder for me to have damp skin, than wet. There's something about having a thin film of water that's just barely moist that's distracting for me and puts me on edge. And having damp clothing, especially cuffs and collars, is distressing for me, as well. It just chafes and irritates me to no end, and I cannot escape it.

When I was little and my mother cut my hair at home, sensitivity to dampness wasn't much of an issue for me. She didn't wet my hair when she cut it, but trimmed it when it was completely dry. But when I eventually went back to salons, I found that having my hair shampooed -- or even just wetted down from a spray bottle -- agitated me. Now, having my hair washed by another person was very pleasurable for me. The problems started if the shampoo girl got water on my face or was clumsy with the spray hose.

And my discomfort only got worse when the shampoo was over, and I was dispatched to the chair with a towel around my head. The feel of water running down my neck made me itch and squirm, and the sensation of a damp collar was very distracting. So getting a shampoo at the hair salon and then sitting still in a chair while the water dripped down my neck onto my collar bothered me intensely. It was bad enough that the little *snipples* of hair were

stuck all over me, but damp skin and clothing aggravated me even more.

I still have issues with having my hair wetted down with a spray bottle. The sudden blast of droplets of water takes me by surprise, and the feel of damp skin at the back of my neck puts me on edge. I do pity the barber I go to now -- he probably has no idea why I jump and get tense when he wets down my hair, and I think he's getting a complex, thinking he's done something wrong. But we both survive each haircut I get. Maybe I'll explain this all to him, someday. He'd probably appreciate it.

I constantly felt like I was going to lose my balance. Sitting absolutely still in the chair was hard for me. The longer I was in the chair and the longer the haircut lasted, the harder it got. I felt like I was going to fall over, and I was afraid I'd be cut by the scissors. I was intent on holding still, but I was so distracted by the feel of my hair being cut and falling on my face and neck and the sound of the scissors cutting my hair and the sensation of my hair being cut away from my head, that I usually felt nauseous. I literally felt sick, whenever I got my hair cut. When I'm off balance, to this day, I have to hold my head a certain way in order to feel right again — but moving my head this way and that was definitely *not* what the person cutting my hair wanted me to do. I remember many an exclamation of frustration and consternation, when I would move at just the wrong time, and the hairdresser would either cut my hair wrong, or lose her grip on the hair she held between her fingers.

Nobody seemed to understand what I was going through. Indeed, if you don't have balance and/or sensory issues, it's probably next to impossible to grasp the impact that such instability has on your head, your attention, your stomach. Just imagine what it would be like to ride a tilt-a-whirl for three hours, then get off and have someone tell you that you have to sit up straight and hold absolutely still for half an hour, or you'll be cut with sharp scissors and/or end up looking really awful. That's what it was like for me. But whenever I tried to adjust my head to regain my balance, I'd get out of position, and whoever was cutting my hair would get very upset with me. I couldn't help it — I was just trying to stay upright. And not throw up.

All the talking in hair salons made me crazy. For some reason, everyone wanted me to talk to them when I was getting my hair cut, which made me deeply uncomfortable and upset. I wasn't much good at small talk conversation to begin with (I still have difficulties, though I'm getting better with practice), but adding an unfamiliar hairdresser's shop to the mix was even worse. There were always lots of strangers who wanted to talk to me, or who were talking loudly in the background (over the sound of the hairdryers and other equipment). I couldn't interact very well with anyone -- the hairdresser(s) were always so verbal and moved quickly from one topic to another, and I had a hard time keeping up with what they were saying. I've always been a very visual thinker, and I process information in conversations by using visual images rather than words to understand concepts. That means I have to see what people are talking about in order to understand -- and respond. But so much of what was discussed at the hairdresser's was unfamiliar to me, I didn't have

“visuals” of the things these women were discussing -- acquaintances I’d never met and interpersonal scenarios I wasn’t familiar with and “girl” things that always baffled me, to begin with. I didn’t understand what the women around me were saying when they talked about people I didn’t know and places I’d never seen, so I just got left behind. I was trying to process/calm all the sensory input and keep my balance, after all.

And because I couldn’t talk to them, the women at the hairdresser’s thought I was being difficult and stubborn and “stuck up,” and they were uncomfortable with me, which agitated me even more. They became increasingly chatty (nervous chatter), and I had to work harder to understand what they were saying, which just made my self-consciousness worse.

The smells of the hair styling products drove me to distraction. The smells were all *too strong!* There were too many different scents, from the smell of hair styling gel... to hairspray... to shampoo... to conditioners... to permanent wave solution... to perfumes the women wore... even the scent of hair singed by the curling irons... The sum total was an overwhelming olfactory assault. The hair salon smelled of metallic chemicals and sickly-sweet plastic gunk. The women smelled of body odor and deodorant and nail polish and nail polish remover and mascara and blush and lipstick. And it all made me feel ill.

The worst part was, I was supposed to *like* all those smells -- everyone else in the salon seemed to enjoy them, and they encouraged me to smell the perfumes and shampoos along with them, which made my head whirl. I developed such a complex over it all. *What was wrong with me?* I wondered. I was having such a hard time sorting out all the

sensations — the feel of the hair being cut and falling on me, the sounds of everyone talking, the presence of many strangers I didn't know (and who I was afraid I'd act stupid in front of), the sound of the scissors on my hair, the need to keep balanced, so I wouldn't get cut... Having to smell hair products on top of it, added olfactory insult to sensory injury.

The salon was always too bright. Of course, people who cut hair have to have enough light to see what they're doing, but for me, it was too much light. Fluorescent too — *very glaring!* I can get sensorily overwhelmed even more quickly, if bright light is combined with loud sounds and strong smells, so the hairdresser salon was not a friendly place for me. It was just so overwhelming. There was no escaping it... Bright lights overhead and the sudden flash of scissors reflecting colors and bright flashes...

I think my mother realized that the lights were too much for me, as I recall her cutting my hair in near darkness, at times. She would draw the blinds around the dining room and sit me down and work in shadows, snipping as quickly as she could, while I held still for as long as I could. She may have drawn the blinds because she wanted to block out any distractions from the street outside (I was very easily distracted), but the darkness calmed me, as well as not having a clear view to any outdoor activity within my immediate range of vision.

The salon was always too loud. As I said above, all the talking made me crazy, but the sound of the machinery was even worse. I had a hard time with appliance motor sounds when I was a kid; I couldn't tolerate the vacuum cleaner or my mother's blender for the

longest time, and my dad's circular saw sent me over the edge. But in a hair salon, it was the worst of all worlds. There was the sudden turning on and off of hair dryers without warning, the roar of the large over-the-head dryers that howled and growled for an indefinite amount of time.

Besides the the machines, there were plenty of other sounds to process: the sudden *hisssss* of hairspray shooting out of the can (the cloud of intense odor didn't help either)... the soft sweeping of the broom that collected fallen hair... the sharp *hisssss* of water rushing from the ends of shampoo sprayers, cascading over heads, and splashing into the shampoo sinks... the crack of gum chewed by hairstylists... the rustling of turning pages in magazines read by women whose heads were covered by plastic and/or towels and/or hair dryers... and the sudden yelling back and forth between women who had to make themselves heard over the din of the salon.

And it wasn't just the noise that bothered me, but also how the noise was managed. Unexpected, arbitrary lengths of time to run machines was an issue, I specifically remember. I recall asking my hairdresser if she couldn't just turn the large dryers on and off on a schedule, and she laughed and told me she never knew how long she'd need them on. It could be a few minutes, it could be an hour. I never knew when someone was going to turn on a hair dryer or some other machine, and the pitch of the hairdryers was so

loud and shrill, it pierced my ears. I get tense just thinking about it now.

And that, dear reader, is a relatively brief overview of the sensory challenges this Aspie kid had with getting my hair cut. When I think back, I almost wish I'd given up haircuts for all time. But as I discuss a little later, that wasn't an option for me.

What It Means for Me

Now, when I was a little girl, I wasn't allowed to act out, (or else!) so I can't remember having any full-on meltdowns while getting my hair cut around other people. Then again, I may have just blocked out the experience(s). I do recall, however, that my mother dreaded taking me to the salon when I was a teenager, and I dreaded going -- and if I recall correctly, my mother actually told me once that our hairdresser dreaded cutting my hair as much as I dreaded her cutting it. But specific incidents aside, I do remember haircuts being very hard for me, and afterwards I was usually reeling from the experience, so I often acted out at home with wild behavior, racing around the house, jumping on furniture, beating up my younger brother, yelling and screaming and acting very "unladylike" I can assure you! Nobody around me understood what I was going through. All they knew was that I looked nice, and that's what mattered. And the fact that I now looked so pretty and acted so ugly was difficult for

my parents and people close to me to handle. Believe me, it was just as confusing and frustrating for me!

I still don't get my hair cut as often as I probably should — but I'm aware of it, so I make a point of taking steps to get myself to the barber before I start to look like my friend Abby. It won't help my career any, to look like I've been living on a desert island. And it doesn't do much for my social life, either -- and I need all the help I can get, with that part of my life!

I currently go to a small barber shop where there aren't a lot of hair products around, and I go in off hours so I don't have to interact with a lot of people. I don't mind waiting in line among men with their Popular Mechanics, Scientific American, and Sports Illustrated magazines. It's a small price to pay for sensory relief. A regular women's salon is too overpowering for me, in just about every physical way.

Now, I've often thought about letting my hair grow long and not even bothering with haircuts, but it's not an option. I actually tried it a few times, when I was 13, before I got it cut. As I mentioned, I wore the same pig tails from when I was 7 till I was about 13, and the other kids at school started telling me how I could change my hairstyle. I took them seriously, and I decided to try to wear my hair long. I learned some important things in the process, however.

First, *there's too much friggin' hair!* It was all over the place. I have very fine, thick hair, and I found the little strands getting stuck all over the place -- in my eyes, in my mouth... It drove me crazy! I tried pulling it back in a single ponytail, but that was still out of control. I just wasn't well-coordinated enough to keep my ponytail in place. I kept bumping

into things and knocking the hair loose and having it flying all over the place. And I would also end up catching my hair on things, or getting snagged. I'd be walking past something -- a cupboard, for example -- and I'd get snagged on the handle or a corner or something, and my hair would fly all over.

Also, when my hair was longer, my sensory issues were actually worse than when I would intermittent haircuts. It's still the case -- I feel everything through my hair, and I find myself having to hold my head more still, in order to keep my balance. The weight of the heavy hair (and I have a lot of it) throws me off, and puts me off balance. And I'm not dainty and coordinated enough to hold my head just-so, and keep my hairstyle in place. Of course, I could have just tied my hair back in a bun, but that would have made me look like a little old lady, and anyway, I didn't want to have to keep that tightly-fitted bun in place. I was such an active -- and often uncoordinated -- kid, that any attempts I made at keeping a lot of hair neatly in place, went the way of the dinosaurs -- but much quicker than their demise, I can assure you.

So, as much as I wanted to avoid having to get constant haircuts, not getting haircuts proved to be more of a challenge than I wanted to deal with each day. I just gave it up. I sometimes think about doing it again, and dispensing with haircuts completely. But then I remember my past experiences, and I head for the barbershop.

Yes, haircuts can still be a challenge for me, but they're things I need to "tough out" on a regular basis, so I've developed some pretty

effective coping mechanism. While I'm in the barber chair, I find that if my senses are directed somewhere other than the haircut, I can actually do it. I still tend to get agitated by the whole experience; I'm keyed up and distracted by all the sensory input, so I concentrate deliberately on my breathing. And I consciously relax. Sometimes I can't even feel my arms and legs. So, for the relatively short time I'm in the barber chair (my haircuts usually take only 15 minutes or so), I concentrate really hard on my breathing... I count my breaths -- 1-2-3-4... 1-2-3-4... I do this thing I call "nasal breathing" (which I also do at the dentist), where I focus on breathing heavily through my nose, so that my breath echoes throughout my head and ears, and it distracts me from what's going on around me. Sometimes it sounds odd (which makes it a better coping mechanism for the dentist's office, which is way too loud, to begin with), but it's a useful last resort.

I also deliberately put my attention on my arms and legs, relaxing them and tightening them and wiggling my toes and fingers. I deliberately, consciously try to relax.... I fiddle with my eyeglasses under the sheet... while I keep my eyes closed until the hair stops falling... and when I can open my eyes (which makes it easier to keep my balance), I focus on the glass cylinder with the blue sanitizing solution sitting on the barber's work counter — the one that has all the long thin combs in it — I count the combs and try to imagine what ingredients are in the solution... all the while trying to maintain polite conversation and act like a regular, neurotypical person.

At times, it's an effort, just to interact normally and not withdraw and act autistic and make everyone in the place really nervous, but I can do it.

What It Might Mean for You - Other Coping Ideas from Aspie-Land

If you're the parent of an Aspie/sensory kid, and your child is having trouble with haircuts, you may want to pay close attention to the physical environment in which they get their hair cut. Is it loud? Is it bright? Are there lots of smells? Are there sudden sounds? Is s/he wearing clothing that's comfortable for them? Are they well-supported where they sit?

If your kid is anything like me, having a quiet, evenly lighted (not fluorescent — those bulbs make me crazy!), non-smelly (including no plug-in "air fresheners" or other perfumes) environment, where there aren't a lot of people, and the ones who are talk quietly and calmly and don't demand constant interaction... that's the ideal place to have a haircut.

If you cut their hair at home, how about if you have your child watch a video while you cut their hair? (I've actually heard of salons/hair stylists offering that for kids who come to them.) Give them something to occupy their senses, so they're not overwhelmed by the grooming experience. If your kid is utterly fixated on Thomas the Tank Engine, they

might not even notice the haircut while you're giving it to them, if they're watching a video of Thomas.

Or give them something to hold... something that has a sensation they like. When I was a kid, silky fabric soothed me like nothing else*, so being able to rub something satiny chilled me right out. Nowadays, when I need to just bite the bullet and get through a tough situation, I'll sometimes hold a piece of Velcro (the sharp side) firmly between my fingers to focus my sensory, physical attention and get my mind off everything else around me. Or I'll (secretly) carry around a rough piece of napkin or fabric to rub between my fingers -- the rougher, the better (although I have to be careful, as I've sometimes actually worn down my finger pads with too much intense rubbing on rough surfaces!). I hold the wad of coarse paper in my pocket, out of sight of everyone, and chafe away. It saves my nerves, and it saves everyone around me from being vexed by my issues.

Does your child have a favorite toy or object that they refuse to part with under regular circumstances? Maybe they could hold that while they get a trim.

Maybe you can give your child something to hold *and* a video to watch.

I think it's also brilliant to give kids fair warning about them getting a haircut ahead of time, and let them prepare for it mentally and

* I couldn't fall asleep, if I didn't have my blanket with the satin edge to rub.

emotionally. We Aspies tend to do better, if we have advance warning. Something as simple as a hug can be very uncomfortable (even painful) for us, if we don't have a chance to prepare for it. But if we know we're about to get a hug from someone, we can sometimes "brace for contact" and then reciprocate without looking and/or feeling uncomfortable to others.

Same thing with larger-scale unpleasant experiences -- like haircuts, and more. My nephew — who is about as textbook Aspie as they come — refused to take medicine to bring down a fever... until, that is, we explained to him what was going to happen, the steps we were going to go through, what the nasty-tasting syrup was for, and we did a few "trial runs" of taking it, using some juice in a teaspoon for practice. We told him up front that the medicine tasted awful, but that's because it's very powerful and that's how it needs to taste to do its important work. (My nephew actually developed an instant respect for the medicine *because* it was so powerful -- it was something he could appreciate.) We did not sugar-coat the process or play it down, but gave him all the information he needed to prepare mentally for the experience of taking it. When the time came for his dose, he didn't like it, but *he did take it*, and he started to get better. We praised him a great deal afterwards, which just made his day. He's such a perfectionist that hearing praise for even the smallest thing really brightened him up. After that, he knew what to expect from the experience, *and* he knew he could succeed at it. There were no more issues around him taking his medicine, which was a very good thing.

The same sort of practice may help your Aspie kid to prepare for the inevitable discomfort and agitation of a haircut. You can tell them what it's all for, why it's necessary, and offer a reward afterwards. The more information we Aspies can get so we feel in control of a situation, the better. It's not logistical difficulties that causes us distress, like with NT kids, it's the unknown. Preparation on all levels helps us Aspies more than I can say.

In Conclusion

For some folks on the Autistic Spectrum, few experiences are as anxiety-producing as having one's hair cut. Unfortunately, still fewer experiences are as necessary and as unavoidable. One's personal appearance, in some circles, can mean the difference between acceptance and ostracism.* Whether you're an adult or a child, first impressions often count far more than most of us would like. Indeed, in the impersonal world of everyday interaction with complete strangers, something as basic as "bad hair" can subtly disqualify both casual social butterflies and highly trained professionals from the kinds of connections and advancement that will keep their interpersonal lives and their careers afloat.

But the routine experience of having one's hair styled is not without complications for individuals on the Autistic Spectrum. In ASD kids, the

* This is not to excuse the behavior of superficial, judgmental individuals who can be cruel in their treatment of those marked as "other." But it's just an unfortunate and often unavoidable fact of human social life.

very thought of the ritual can bring on tears, tantrums, and meltdowns. And the actual experience itself can result in humiliation for parents, frustration for hairstylists, and the start of a string of “bad days” for AS kids. Even some AS adults may have such intense sensory issues during hair cutting and styling that they avoid getting a simple trim until they are all but unpresentable.

But this is not without cause. For those of us with physical sensory issues, a simple haircut can be an assault on all the senses.

One’s sense of sight can be assaulted by a salon’s fluorescent lights and distracted by the flashing of metal scissors.

One’s hearing can be thrown off by something as simple as the sound of a scissors slicing through hair, or the rapid-fire on-off switching of a hand-held hairdryer during styling. Sudden loud sounds like hairspray shooting out of a can, or the loud hiss of water in a shampoo sink can startle us. And the constant verbal banter between hairdressers and customers can be overwhelming and disorienting for non-verbal or visual thinkers.

One’s sense of smell can be overwhelmed by countless complimentary and conflicting scents of hair products and other cosmetics.

One’s sense of touch can be put on edge by the feel of hair “snipples” landing on and sticking to one’s skin, and water from a shampoo or spray bottle dampening one’s neck, face, or the edge(s) of

clothing can be very disturbing and distracting. Even the sensation of hair being cut, can be disorienting.

And one's sense of balance can be thrown off by the need to sit absolutely still, while a scissors comes dangerously close to one's ears, nose, and eyes. The feeling that you're falling can cause all the senses to be further heightened, thus exacerbating the stressful effect of all the other overloaded senses, combined.

Thankfully, in some cases, simple accommodations and preparation may help integrate this important activity into the flow of one's life in ways that enhance not only one's appearance, but one's ability to interact with the the NT world at large. Finding a relatively quiet time to visit the hairdresser, or taking steps to lessen the physical stimuli around the one getting their hair cut, can head problems off at the pass. "Stimming" or making focused contact with certain textures or sensations, to bring one's physical attention to a single point (instead of "flying" all around the hair-cutting space) can help, too. Every AS person is unique, and what works for one may not work for others, so some experimentation is in order. But with time and patience and persistent attention to the physical environment and the AS individual's responses to the environment, it is possible to turn haircuts from impossible ordeals into a task that may be unpleasant, but is at least tolerable.

I hope this brief work has given you a sense of what some of us Aspies go through with haircuts. And I hope it heightens your sensitivity around what conditions can spell trouble, and what may help you or your

Aspie kid to have successful haircuts. It might sound pretty bad, the way I describe the haircut experience, and you may feel a bit overwhelmed and discouraged by it, but remember that I've had years of intentional practice, and I've learned to adapt.

In the end, I believe that we all have our "stuff" we need to get through... our challenges, our shortcomings, our foibles, our hurdles. Just because not everyone has difficulties with haircuts doesn't mean they're any less important or less serious — they're just different and require different strategies.

With time, and the right mix of sensitivity, imagination, practical coping skills, and determination, I'm convinced that even the most intransigent case of haircut-phobia can be overcome.

It just takes time.

And love.

Note: *This paper was begun in a reply I made to a post over at [Aspergers World](http://www.aspergersworld.com) (www.aspergersworld.com). It turned out to be a lot longer than I originally intended to write, but I think it may help shed additional light on the dreaded issue of Aspie kids getting haircuts.*

This work also is in plain, letter-size electronic document format and is freely available for download at visualvox.wordpress.com. No payment is required. But if you'd like to support this work and further research and writing about dealing effectively with ASD issues, you can purchase a printed copy of this book at www.lulu.com/visualvox.

