



ABA Haircut Strategies

for Special Needs Kids

BEFORE THE HAIRCUT

Goal: Familiarize + desensitize before the appointment to reduce fear and sensory overload.



Desensitization (Sound & Vibration)

- Show clippers when they are off
- Turn clippers on across the room
- Move clippers closer over time
- Allow vibration on arm or hand before head
- Pair exposure with preferred items (tablet, snack, praise)

Gradual Exposure

- Practice short "haircut routines" at home
- Sit in a chair for increasing durations (10 sec → 30 sec → 1 min)
- Use a timer so the child knows when it ends

Visual Supports

- Use a simple visual schedule:
- Sit → Clippers → Break → Done
- Review photos or videos of haircuts
- Read a short social story before the appointment

Skill Building

- Teach functional communication ("break," "all done," "wait")
- Practice requesting breaks during non-stressful activities

DURING THE HAIRCUT

Goal: Build tolerance in small steps while preventing escalation.



Shaping Tolerance

- Start with easiest steps (cape on, sitting briefly)
- Increase exposure gradually (seconds at a time)
- Reinforce calm behavior immediately

Systematic Desensitization

- Clippers on near the child before touching
- Brief contact with clippers, then remove
- Gradually increase duration as tolerated

Choice & Control

- Offer choices when possible (music, order of steps)
- Allow planned breaks before distress increases

Functional Communication Training (FCT)

- Prompt the child to request a break instead of escaping
- Reinforce communication attempts immediately

AFTER THE HAIRCUT

Goal: Reinforce success so tolerance increases for future haircuts.



Positive Reinforcement

- Deliver a high-value reward immediately after
- Reserve the reward specifically for haircuts
- Reinforce effort, not just completion

Specific Praise

- Label exactly what the child did well:
 - "You sat in the chair."
 - "You tolerated the clippers."
 - "You asked for a break."

Reinforcement of Partial Success

- Even brief tolerance counts
- Ending on success builds future cooperation
- Leaving early after success is still progress

Carryover

- Review photos or visuals from the haircut later
- Talk about what went well before the next appointment

KEY CLINICAL POINT

Haircut tolerance is a learned skill.
Progress is built through repeated, reinforced exposure, not force or rushing.