

# SENSORY SMART SELF-CARE

*Kids, teens and young adults can all increase independence with some investigation and strategizing...*

BY LINDSEY BIEL, M.A., OTR/L

**W**hen it comes to self-care tasks, as with everything sensory, you'll need to analyze the underlying sensory challenges, determine what can and needs to be changed, and increase the ability to handle a wide variety of experiences. Self-care tasks such as brushing teeth, washing hair, shaving, and applying makeup can be profoundly difficult or even painful if your child—or you—have sensory issues, but fortunately you can usually change some of the variables to make the experience much more “sensory smart.”

Let's consider brushing teeth, a problematic self-care task for many people with SPD. Ask yourself:

► ***What are the specific sensory demands of the task that my child has trouble with?***

Do an activity analysis of the task, breaking it down into its sensory components. Does the toothbrush hurt his gums? Does the taste or smell of the minty toothpaste with artificial sweeteners gross your kid out? Does the foam make her gag? There are different kinds of toothbrushes: ones with soft, medium and hard bristles as well as vibrating toothbrushes and even finger brushes. There are many types



*Sometimes this takes a bit of trial and error but once you realize how many variables you can change, your sensory experiences will change.*



of toothpaste: ones that do not foam, ones that taste and smell like chocolate, strawberry, mango or cinnamon. You've got lots of choices to make this required task more tolerable.

► ***Does the environment play a role?***

Is the bathroom light—typically fluorescent—too bright, flickering, or buzzing? Does sound bounce around the tiled room? Is the room too hot or too cold? A fluorescent light fixture can be replaced with an LED or incandescent light with a dimmer switch, or you can turn off the overhead light and

use a floor lamp or indirect light from the hallway. You can add fluffy towels, a rug, or even a terrycloth outer shower curtain to help absorb echoes. You can play music or a video while your child is brushing her teeth. You can warm up the bathroom by running a hot shower for a few minutes.

► ***Does your child feel safe and secure?***

Rather than standing at a sink while dealing with the challenge of brushing teeth, it may be more comfortable to sit at a table with a spitting bowl and a cup of water and perhaps wearing a weighted vest or compression garment. Whatever works! Sometimes this takes a bit of trial and error but once you realize how many variables you *can* change, your sensory experiences will change.

## 6 QUICK SELF-CARE TIPS



**1 DOES YOUR CHILD HATE WASHING AND BRUSHING HER HAIR?**

Start by desensitizing her head with a deep pressure massage on her scalp, ears, neck, and face. An oral vibrator on her cheeks, jaws, and lips may also be helpful. You can also try a vibrating hairbrush. After shampooing (possibly with an unscented shampoo), be

**LINDSEY BIEL, MA, OTR/L ...**



... a pediatric occupational therapist based in Manhattan, where she evaluates and treats children, adolescents, and young adults with sensory processing challenges, autism, and other issues. Lindsey is coauthor of *Raising a Sensory Smart Child*, with a foreword by Temple Grandin, and author of *Sensory Processing Challenges: Effective Clinical Work with Kids & Teens*. She is a popular speaker, teaching parents, therapists, teachers and others real-life “sensory smart” strategies for challenges at home, school, and in the community. Please visit her website at [www.sensorysmarts.com](http://www.sensorysmarts.com) ◀

sure to use conditioner on her hair, again firmly massaging her scalp. The conditioner will coat the hair strands to make it easier to manage. When grooming her hair afterward try a wide-toothed detangling comb rather than a prickly brush.

**2 DOES YOUR CHILD FEEL OFF-KILTER WHEN HE TILTS HIS HEAD BACK TO RINSE HIS HAIR?** Trying tilting it forward, helping him to hold a washcloth over his eyes with one hand as he uses the other to help rinse his hair. This can really help if he hates the feeling of water on his face, and if closing his eyes decreases body awareness. If he is still miserable try a no-rinse shampoo.

**3 DREAD GETTING HAIRCUTS?** Go to the haircutter first thing in the day so there is less likelihood of lingering

odors from hair dye and other stinky salon products. Consider bringing an old, soft shirt to wear over your child's clothes so she doesn't have to wear the haircutting smock. Bring earplugs or sound-canceling headphones to block out noisy hairdryers and blasting music. Also, some haircutters make home visits.



first to soften up the hairs. Again, desensitize skin using deep pressure to massage in the shaving cream. If your child can't stand touching the shaving cream, teach him to use cake shaving soap and a brush.

**6 CONSIDERING MAKE-UP?** Less is more. A dash of lip gloss and a coat of mascara are often the best way to gild the lily and feel less mask-like than a layer of foundation, eyeshadow, eyeliner, blusher, and lipstick. There is a huge difference in the texture and smell of different make-up brands and you will definitely need to experiment here to find what works best. You can most easily find unscented make-up and other beauty products with fewer irritating chemicals at health food stores. Remember to teach that no make-up is absolutely okay. True beauty comes from within!



For more sensory smart self-care strategies, please read *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and *Sensory Processing Challenges: Effective Clinical Work with Kids & Teens*. ◀



Since 1999, the *Autism File* has been bringing help and support from professionals — and parents in the trenches — to families affected by autism around the globe.

**We've made the magazine free to our subscribers** as we understand first-hand how expensive having a child on the spectrum can be.

Please help us continue to publish the *File* at no cost to our readers and make a contribution by clicking on the button below. Donations of any size really do help and are greatly appreciated!



**4 IS DRESSING A PROBLEM?** Engage in tactile desensitization techniques such as deep pressure brushing prior to dressing. Exfoliate and massage in high-quality moisturizer or coconut oil to manage itchy flaky skin. Carefully cut out clothing tags and labels and look for seamless clothing including socks and underwear. If you find a clothing item your child loves, buy several right away before they run out of the size or discontinue the style. She can always wear her favorite soft shirt or leggings underneath her outfit for increased comfort. Wash clothing several times before wearing and consider buying “pre-conditioned” clothing from a consignment or thrift shop.

**5 HATE TO SHAVE?** There are many different types of razors and shaving creams to choose from. Remember that cheap disposable razors are more likely to irritate and nick skin so your best bet is to invest in a good razor (an electric razor if you or your child like vibration) and a nice shaving cream (lots of different textures and scents to choose from). Take a hot shower