

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

# Grooming Battles: Hair, Nails, Shaving, and Personal Hygiene for Sensory-Defensive Adults

No service category exists for the invisible daily battle over a haircut. It still consumes more caregiver time and energy than most things that do have a formal name.

BY JIM PALASTY · 10 MIN READ · FIVE DAILY BATTLES WITH NO FORMAL SERVICE CATEGORY

5

GROOMING DOMAINS THIS GUIDE COVERS

Haircuts, nail care, bathing and showering, shaving, and oral hygiene. Five recurring battles that consume real caregiver time and have no dedicated waiver service anywhere.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

Sensory defensiveness makes grooming genuinely hard

Motor planning difficulties and sensory sensitivities combine to make ordinary grooming tasks feel intolerable, not merely inconvenient.



STEP 2

No formal service addresses this directly

Grooming struggles don't fit neatly into a CLS goal, a therapy referral, or a day program category.



STEP 3

Occupational therapy can genuinely help

An OT evaluation specifically for grooming difficulties often surfaces workable strategies nobody else has offered.

Strategies worth trying, by domain

|              |                                                                     |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Haircuts     | Sensory-friendly salons, desensitization, simplified tools          |
| Nail care    | Gradual exposure, timing, alternative tools                         |
| Bathing      | Water temperature/pressure adjustments, sensory-friendly products   |
| Shaving      | Electric razors, modified routine, gradual desensitization          |
| Oral hygiene | Sensory-friendly toothbrushes, flavor alternatives, visual routines |

THE HAIRCUT THAT FINALLY WORKED

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Vincent's mother had struggled through years of haircut appointments that ended in tears for both of them, eventually giving up and cutting his hair herself, badly, every few months. An OT evaluation, requested specifically for grooming difficulties, identified the exact sensory trigger: the sound of clippers near his ears, not the sensation of cutting itself. Noise-reducing headphones and a stylist willing to work slowly turned a battle into a manageable, even calm, monthly routine.

YEARS OF TEARS TURNED OUT TO TRACE BACK TO ONE SPECIFIC SOUND. NOBODY HAD ISOLATED IT UNTIL SOMEONE FINALLY LOOKED FOR IT DIRECTLY.

## What matters, at a glance

### Haircut strategies

Desensitization approaches, sensory-friendly salons, and simplified at-home options can all reduce the intensity of this specific battle.

### Nail care approaches

Gradual desensitization, timing around calmer moments, and alternative tools can make nail care more tolerable over time.

### Bathing and showering resistance is common

Water pressure, temperature sensitivity, and the sensation of being wet can all make this daily task a genuine daily struggle.

### Shaving for men

Electric razors, modified routines, and gradual desensitization all offer real alternatives to a standard shaving approach.

### Oral hygiene deserves its own strategy

Toothbrushing resistance is extremely common and connects directly to the dental care access issues covered elsewhere in this series.

### Occupational therapy is the underused resource

An OT evaluation focused specifically on grooming tasks often produces strategies families haven't tried yet.

#### BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

- |                                                                                              |                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Notes on which specific sensation seems to trigger resistance       | <input type="checkbox"/> Contact information for an OT experienced with sensory-based grooming issues    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A list of sensory-friendly providers (salons, barbers) in your area | <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative tools already tried (electric razors, different toothbrushes, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A visual schedule or routine for each grooming task, if useful      |                                                                                                          |

#### YOUR MOVE

### When grooming tasks become genuine battles, here is where to start

- 1 Identify the specific sensory trigger within the broader task, if possible.
- 2 Request an OT evaluation focused specifically on grooming difficulties.
- 3 Try gradual desensitization rather than forcing full completion immediately.
- 4 Explore sensory-friendly providers (salons, dental offices) in your area.
- 5 Build a predictable visual routine around each grooming task.
- 6 Revisit strategies periodically; what works can change over time.

*Nobody assigns a case manager to the haircut battle. It still deserves a real strategy, not just endurance.*

#### GROOMING AND SENSORY SUPPORT RESOURCES

Occupational therapy evaluation, requested specifically for grooming and personal care difficulties, is available through most CMH, waiver, or private insurance pathways.

Search for sensory-friendly salons and barbers in your area; a growing number of stylists now offer specific training in serving autistic clients.

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Jim Palasty is the founder of OASIS for Autism and a single father of an adult autistic daughter in Michigan.