ABCs of Children's Hair Health

Nurture those precious strands on their heads, but also teach kids that hair does not measure a human being's value.

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In the African-American community, commonplace childhood anxieties about hair can easily evolve into more deeply rooted neuroses. Negative feedback from parents about their hair's texture, length, look and style can drastically influence children's perception of beauty and self-image well into adulthood.

Here, *Real Health* explores how you can help your children maintain both a healthy head of hair and a mind-set to match.

Help your child see what you see.
Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable to psychological issues that create hair insecurities, so parents should foster relationships with their kids that promote open communication and self-confidence. "Really sit down and ask them what they think is pretty," says Sheryl Neverson, PhD, LCSW, and owner of the private practice Transitions Therapeutic Services in Washington, DC. "I would show them images of celebrities or role models who have hair like them—someone who rocks their hair style with confidence."

Know what your child faces.
Today, hair concerns seem to weigh heavier than ever on children—and affect them at earlier ages. "Increasingly younger kids are getting extensions and hair weaves," Neverson says. She recalls a fifth-grader who told the school counselor she hated her own hair because it was kinky. (The young girl's parent didn't allow her child to use relaxers.)

Such distorted perceptions of self, Neverson says, can cause some girls to act out sexually and to accept whatever form of attention they can get.

Furthermore, young girls aren't the only ones with hair insecurities. One sixth-grade boy diagnosed with alopecia, the medical term for hair loss, became almost bald. Later, his hair grew back—but in patches. The traumatic experience affected his behavior. "When the teachers tell him to take [his cap] off he gets angry," Neverson says. "He even got into a couple of fights because people talked about his hair."

Reflect on your own hair experiences.
Remember that most hair anxieties faced by children are universal. In fact, when parents recall their own hair stories and challenges, they can better empathize with their children's issues and needs.

"In the sixth grade, I wanted my hair to be curly, so I got a Jheri curl," Neverson recalls. Her relaxed shoulder-length hair became over-processed, however, leaving her with a "short Afro" as the result. "[Until the age of] 36, I never cut my hair short again," Neverson says. "It took me that long to feel confident about cutting my hair."

Head's Up: Major Childhood Hair Concerns

Lice Infestation
Despite the belief that head lice are a Caucasian hair concern, the parasitic insects affect a rising number of African-American children. A 2004 symposium sponsored by the L'Oreal Institute for Ethnic Hair and Skin Research revealed that new hair products, styles and accessories might be causing the increased cases of lice infestation among black children.

Additional findings presented by Andrea Beth Trowers, MD, showed that lice might have adapted their claws to grab onto the curlier/kinkier hair of black children. So while cases of head lice among African-American children appear less often than in Caucasians, parents should take the necessary precautions to avoid spreading this condition: regularly check kids and treat cases of head lice, and teach children not to share any personal or hair care items.

Chemical Relaxers
Pros. Relaxers do make hair more manageable. If you prefer to keep your child's hair in straight styles, then relaxing might offer longer-lasting sleekness and convenience.

Cons. The chemicals in relaxers break down the structural bonds of the hair shaft. This weakens the hair, making it more prone to damage. Parents should also remember that relaxed hair requires more moisture and protection. Be extra cautious of applying excessive heat and other chemicals.

No-lye vs. lye relaxers. People with sensitive scalps are often encouraged to use no-lye products. Although no-lye relaxers are touted as being less harsh on the scalp, they are more caustic to the hair.

Research both types of relaxers and use with care. If you opt for no-lye relaxers, consider having your child's hair professionally done. While many individuals prefer do-it-yourself hair care methods, to save money, it might be worth it to shell out the extra bucks in this case.

Pamela Mills, owner of Hair Designs by Pam in Virginia Beach, Virginia, cautions parents about store-bought no-lye relaxers. "They put so much calcium in them because it keeps people from

over-processing the hair. It makes it easier for consumers to use.” The high level of calcium hydroxide, however, often “throws the [hair’s] pH balance off” and “causes swelling, dryness and breakage” of the hair.

But parents should take precautions no matter what product is used.

Dryness and Breakage
Since African-American hair is prone to dryness, many parents make the mistake of not washing their child’s hair and scalp enough. Inadequate washing can actually lead to more hair damage or even alopecia.

“Because of the dryness, we put a lot of stuff on children’s hair,” says Iqbal Kalla, president and owner of M&M Products, makers of Sofn’free n’pretty, a new therapeutic line of children’s hair care products.

“But just as important as applying is removing, like when you wash your face then put on a moisturizer,” Kalla adds.

To avoid breakage, parents should employ a number of safety measures when grooming children’s hair

- Section then detangle the hair when wet, using a wide-tooth comb. Black hair is more elastic in this state.
- Avoid tension-causing hair accessories, such as metal clips, hair barrettes and non-silicone rubber bands.
- Use moisturizing shampoos, conditioners and oils to nourish the hair.

And observe these winter rules to protect hair:

- Avoid rough, damage-causing materials, such as wool hats and scarves.
- Clean and moisturize the hair and scalp at least once a week and deep condition to strengthen and moisturize locks.

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