

# Chapter 3

## The Interactive Stages of Hair Combing: Routines and Rituals



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*Let's see. First, I have to find something to sit her still with, be it a toy, or the television, or a book. And once we do that and get that established, she's fine to sit there for about 20 minutes and get her hair comb. And if I'm going to do something other than one ponytail, two ponytails, three ponytails I have to find a lot of things to keep her content. She is very, very busy. She just likes different things, different activities and stuff.* (Keisha<sup>1</sup>, mother of Rae Donna)

The above quote is from the mother of a 24-month-old toddler, Rae Donna, who participated in the African-American mother–daughter interaction research study at Tulane University (Lewis, 2000a). Her words illustrate how she perceives hair combing time as part of her daily caregiving routine with her young child. Hair combing time is conceptualized as a relationship-based ritual and a consistent, interactive routine. Observing hair combing interaction (HCI) offers social workers and early childhood practitioners an opportunity to observe and assess the socio-emotional quality of the parent–child relationship to support families of color.<sup>2</sup> The daily routine of HCI provides the parent or caregiver an opportunity to practice nurturing behaviors learned during the intervention. In addition, the positive behavioral changes made by the parent meet the professional's and parent's shared goal to sustain positive changes in the parent–child relationship.

Families from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, and cultural groups benefit from the psychological rewards of positive routines and rituals for mental health

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<sup>1</sup>All names and other personal identifiers included in clinical stories/vignettes in this chapter have been changed to protect privacy and confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout the chapter, there will be references to families of color as a general category of families. The terms African American or Black will be used for specific references to this group.

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(Butterfield, 2002; Fiese et al., 2006; Kubicek, 2002; see M. Warren's Chap. 5). For infant and early childhood clinicians and researchers, the routine of a mother, father, or primary caregiver combing a child's hair may serve as a clinical window into a family's intimate shared identity, providing an opportunity for a deeper understanding of behavioral and emotional characteristics of their relationship. Similarly, values associated with colorism, off-hand messages to children as "pretty and light-skinned" or with "good-hair" based on the straight or wavy texture of the child's hair, are reinforced during the routine of combing hair. As the child grows into adulthood, these values become part of the emotional quality of internal working models of attachment or relationship-based behaviors and the parenting role (Bowlby, 1979). This unconscious lens shapes the parent's perception of the task of hair combing and unwittingly transmits acceptance or rejection of the child.

***Talk, Touch, and Listen While Combing Hair!*** Hair combing time offers parents a relaxed context in which to practice language and listening skills, along with the interpretation and expression of emotions. Daily hair combing routines and rituals teach parents their child's emotional communication and teach children the expression of emotions (Ekman, 1999). Language socialization is accomplished through two primary means: the mechanism of ordinary, everyday talk, and the culturally organized features of social life of the family and cultural group (Miller & Goodnow, 1995). Everyday talk includes storytelling about incidents that occurred in the family's life or may be a response to the latest event in the media or environment. This storytelling reinforces cultural values held by the parent and family. For example, during a loud thunderclap of a sudden summer rainstorm, a caregiver may relate a childhood story of getting caught in a rainstorm on the way to school and describe with laughter the strong emotions of startle and fear as they saw a bolt of lightning strike a tree in the distance. These verbal interactions offer an example of what occurs during hair combing time that enriches the parent-child relationship.

Hair combing routines offer developing toddlers opportunities to learn from birth how to be a "standard normal person" (Ossorio, 2005) in their family and cultural group. The repetition of loving touch reinforces what is acceptable behavior in this family. Yet, the experience of harsh touch through hits to the legs with a hairbrush or minimal amount of touch during hair combing routines reinforces negative messages and emotions expressed by caregiving parents toward infants and young children (Duhn, 2010).

***Hair salons and Barbershops for Black Male Toddlers*** Participating in the rich and positive interactive rituals of hair combing time, young boys and girls learn ancient cultural standards of beauty represented in the amount of care and adornments given to this part of their body (Battle-Waters, 2004; Cowen et al., 1979; Mbilishaka et al., 2020). In the qualitative, semistructured interviews, African-American mothers in the AMDIS-1 study were asked, "At what age should an infant boy have his hair cut?" The responses ranged from 9 to 24 months with an average age of 12 months for infant boys' first haircut. In African-American communities, the ritual of the first trip to the local barbershop for a toddler boy's first haircut is

considered a ritual and rite of passage. The community acknowledges that the first haircut for a “baby boy” recognizes that he has become a “little man.” For example, clinical psychologist, Dr. Afiya Mbilishaka, (Chap. 13) obtained an additional cosmetology license to train beauticians in microcounseling skills to support their customers during their regular visits to the beauty salon. Another national initiative focuses on preparing professional barbers to creatively use their customers’ weekly trip to the barbershop as an opportunity to promote health and wellness, mental health, and general life skills for Black men and boys (The Confess Project, 2021). The vision of the Barber’s Coalition states, *“I am more than a pair of clippers; I am improving my community through the barber chair. one client at a time.”*

### **Stages of HCI as an Observational Tool for Assessment of the Quality of Relationship**

This chapter discusses how the routine of hair combing offers an opportunity for mother–daughter, father–daughter, or caregiver–child interaction. Based on research about the hair combing task, five observable stages of HCI were identified, including relationship-based interactions distinct to each stage (Lewis, 2015). These interactions included verbal interactions (e.g., family storytelling), nuanced communication and emotional attunement through physical touch, and caregiver listening with sensitivity. Each step that characterizes rituals and routines, as defined by anthropologists, was used to describe hair combing interaction. We then examined the potential psychological benefits of this daily interaction as a ritual and routine between a parent or primary caregiver and child during the critical developmental phase of cognitive, social, and emotional development. The intimate interactions during the stages of hair combing may contribute to a very young child’s developing self-concept, ethnic awareness, and gender identity formation.

### **The Power of Routines, Rituals, and Celebrations to Build Relationships in Families and Communities**

The celebrations, traditions, and patterned family interactions compose the powerful rituals that create a family’s identity, values, and traditions in cultural groups around the world (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Fiese et al., 2006). The repetitive nature of these routines establishes and preserves a family’s collective sense of identity or who we are in the world (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). The rituals of a cultural group serve as powerful organizers of family life (Fiese et al., 2006; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Rituals are defined as “a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time” (Wolin & Bennett, 1984, p. 402). Though they may

vary in significant ways across cultures, rituals serve several functions and provide meaning to our collective family life. Across the life course, beginning prenatally with baby showers and more recently, gender-reveal parties to celebrate the pending birth of a child, rituals provide a structure for emotionally satisfying connections among a network of family and friends. In times of collective trauma and stress, such as the events of the COVID-19 of the 2020 pandemic described in the preface of the book, familiar and predictable routines provide stability to young children.

### ***Rituals Connect Families, Culture, and Identity***

Rituals are composed of a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, actions, or objects performed in a sequestered place and according to a set series of stages (Wikipedia, 2021). Every member of the cultural group knows their role in the ritual, the behavioral rules, and precisely when and where they are supposed to carry out the ritual. The performance of what may be centuries old rituals emotionally satisfies all the participants. People who participate in cultural rituals follow a prescribed set of steps identified as *separation*, *transitional*, and *reintegration* (Fiese et al., 2002). The enactment of the cultural ritual begins a *separation* of the individual or family for special preparations for the event. Next people who participate in the ritual experience *transition* themselves in new, transformative ways and take on new roles. The symbolic hairstyle or freshly cut hair of a young child may symbolize the child as a “big girl” or a “big boy” who is now ready for school. The cultural ritual ends with the *reintegration* of the members with newly transformed identities to assume their new roles into the family, community, and society.

### ***Hair as a Symbol of Social Identity, Acceptance, and Belonging***

Each step in the process of hair combing routine represents a psychological process of identity consolidation, commitment to a moral standard, and ceremonial acknowledgement by the broader social groups. The structure of the stages of hair combing time provides guidelines for the developing toddler, family, and community with a prescribed set of expectations and cultural rules for behavior (*‘I said, sit still while I comb your hair!’*). By successfully accomplishing the task, the parent or caregiver reinforces the child’s identity, new status, and connection to their cultural group. Participation by the child in these ritual ends with an emotional experience of satisfaction, strengthened identity, and acceptance by their family and community (Lewis, 2013).

## **The Socioemotional Benefits of Routines and Children's Development**

Routines differ from rituals in that they are practiced everyday by families or groups. Defined as observable practices, daily and weekly routines include bedtime stories, mealtime, bathing routines, chores, or simply watching favorite television shows together (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Families' unique routines teach children behaviors based on each family's values. The way the family meal is prepared, who sits next to whom at the dining room table, reflects a unique practice of the family.

These everyday routines provide the opportunity for young children to experience parent-child or caregiver-child interactions that provide meaning to their collective identity as a member of a family group (Fiese et al., 2002). For example, the narrative talk during mealtime routines helps children with literacy skills needed to complete school tasks (Snow & Beals, 2006). There are other cognitive benefits to some routines carried out by families. For example, research demonstrates the benefits of a bedtime routine that includes reading to young children can improve their cognitive skills, along with an increase in their emotional vocabulary to label their feelings. Children with regular bedtime routines show more adaptability and resilience (Fiese et al., 2002). These same benefits may be experienced by children during the hair combing routine.

## **Hair Combing Interaction and the Development of the Child's Sense of Self**

Developmental theorists offer additional complexity to our understanding of the relationship evolving between mother and child or caregiving parent and child during hair combing interaction (HCI) with the concept of "sensitive" periods (Stern, 1985). Stern (1985) proposes that there are "epochs of change" that define different domains of self-experience and social relatedness. They are the sense of an "emergent self," which forms from birth to age 2 months, the sense of a "core self," which forms between 7 and 15 months, and finally, the formation of a "verbal self" (Stern, 1985, p. 8). The sense of self that emerges at about 15-18 months can now create shared meaning about the self and the world with the new capacity for symbolization as evidenced by language.

African-American mothers begin combing the infant's hair from birth due to the rich texture of the infants' hair, ranging from bald, or wavy or very tightly curled. This process may be a few gentle strokes with the hand or a soft baby brush, or in the case of bald infants, an adornment with a festive headband. Thus, hair combing interaction with an infant may contribute to the significant cognitive and emotional dynamics of Stern's epochs of change. Stern (1985) notes that during this period, there is now the possibility for shared meaning and the capacity to engage in symbolic action such as play.

During this period, there is now a shift in the dominant type of interaction between parent and child, that is, from concrete physical interaction to abstract mental events and the meaning of the events (Garner, 2006; Garner & Spears, 2000). For developmental researchers or clinical practitioners, analyzing videotaped hair combing interactions may offer an ideal opportunity to empirically evaluate this shift. This theory suggests that during hair combing time, there may be higher levels of physical directing, prompting, and less verbal exchange at earlier periods (12–13 months), as well as an increase in verbal exchanges at the 15- to 18-month shift. The young child will have an increased ability to verbally make wishes known and better respond to the caregiver’s directions. For example, during earlier preverbal stages, the infant and toddler may simply scrunch up their face to show hurt or pull away to express their opposition as the mother attempts to brush or comb their hair.

The various physical positions of proximity may provide the opportunity for affect sharing between caregiver and infant. Stern’s theory suggests there should be greater affect attunement and increased capacity for shared meaning between synchronous dyads during HCI. These growing socioemotional skills during the 15- to 18-month shift may be observed during each of the discrete stages of hair combing interaction. For example, in the final stage of HCT, “the closing ritual,” a three-year-old’s growing cognitive capacity of “mentalizing” (Stern, 1985), may be evidenced by behavior in front of the mirror and the expression of clear preferences for hair-styles. Developmental milestones that might be evident during HCI may be the use of verbal labels, names, and pronouns to designate self. For example, 18-month-old Rae donna might declare, ‘*Ow! comb hurts Rae-Rae.*’

Multiple social identities that are objective categorizations of the self, with the establishment of core gender, ethnic, and racial identities, may emerge during this sensitive period (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Spencer et al. 2019) Experiences of healthy caregiver–child interaction may help consolidate these developing socioemotional skills during each interactive stage during the routine of hair combing.

## The Routine and Rituals of the Five Stages of Hair Combing Interaction

The findings from the analyses of videotapes of African-American mothers<sup>3</sup> combing their daughter’s hair provides support for Stern’s description of the epochs of change over the early months of infant and toddler development (Stern, 1985). The study used qualitative methods to provide mothers with the opportunity to describe their daily routine of combing their child’s hair. For example:

Interviewer: *Describe a typical hair combing session, at home, with you and your daughter. Is there a routine that you go through?*

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<sup>3</sup>See the African American Interaction Study (Lewis, 2000b) for description of the research study.

Keisha: *Like, I get up in the morning, wash her face, brush her teeth, she eat her breakfast, then I do her hair. . . Every day she has to get her hair combed. Sometimes I comb her hair two times a day, sometimes once.*

The analyses of the videotaped interaction revealed five stages of interaction that occur during the hair combing task. The average amount of time spent combing hair was approximately 10 minutes 29 seconds. In this period, there were distinct observable stages in the type of mother–daughter interaction. These stages, *preparation, negotiation, combing hair, play, and closing rituals*, reflect a synchrony of interactive relationship dynamics distinct to each stage (Lewis, 2015). The interaction may be directed primarily by the mother or the daughter. Fathers also participate in caregiving routines developing their specific father–daughter dynamics (Bocknek, 2018). Infants and toddlers may practice and strengthen socioemotional skills during each of these stages.

Social and psychological factors stemming from the parent’s or primary caregiver’s individual *ethnobiography* discussed earlier (Lewis, Chap. 4) may shape their behaviors during the interactive stages of hair combing. At the same time, these daily interactions may reinforce powerful messages of respect, love, acceptance or rejection, shared affect, and socialization into family values.

A researcher might study the interactive stages of HCI asking questions such as *What are the normative developmental processes that occur between a caregiver and child during hair combing time? Do these processes change over time as a child reaches cognitive, social, emotional, or physical developmental milestones?* A service provider, therapist, or clinician might observe or wonder, *“Does the parent or primary caregiver use active listening skills during hair combing time?”* Both the researcher and helper might keep these questions in mind or ask the caregiver directly and sensitively about the developing attachment relationship during the interactive stages of hair combing time:

1. How much talk (verbal exchanges) occurs during the HCI?
2. What are the topics of talk during the HCI?
3. How does the caregiver interpret and respond to the cues of the child?
4. Who initiates the conversation during HCI?
5. How much time is spent in each of the stages?

### **Stage 1 of Hair Combing Interactions – Preparation**

In the first stage of HCI, the parent caregiver prepares to comb the child’s hair. During this stage, the parent caregiver will likely be dominant in the observable interactive dynamics. The clinician or therapist might observe and empathize that it takes a lot of time to stop whatever they are doing or other distractions in order to fully focus attention on the child.

The parent then selects the hair combing tools, the combs, brushes, hair picks, sprays, ointments, or hair pomades, for example, she may use to comb through the child’s hair. In some cases, there may be several versions of the same tool: for

example, a wide-tooth comb for initial combing through tight curls, and a fine-tooth comb to make precise parts at the scalp to separate the hair for styling. She may carefully organize the tools in the sequence that she will use the tools. With the tools now ready and close by, she positions the chair that the child will sit in to have her hair combed.

Some parents may prepare children verbally and/or physically to engage in the task. They may begin by calling the child's name or use a favorite nickname. The pattern or style of the parent's or primary caregiver's invitation to have the child sit in the designated place where she combs hair – her lap, in a chair, or on the floor sitting between her legs – may become the coordinated interaction that forms the relationship.

The parent verbally announces the task of combing hair is about to begin. For example, she may ask the child, “*Do you want to get your hair combed?*” Or she may look directly at the child and state in a no nonsense voice, “*Come here right now to get your hair combed.*” Her voice may be loud, soft, or firm to make the announcement. She may give a warning, threat, or other form of enticement during this first stage of preparation.

Some parents or primary caregivers may skip this stage of preparation and dive right into the task, ignoring their child's emotional readiness. The mother's steps in preparation may model how the daughter, as an adult, prepares for work or to study.

An example of the steps taken to prepare for the task is illustrated in one mother's response to the research interviewer's question, “*Describe a typical hair combing session at home with you and your daughter.*”

*Mother: Let's see. First, I have to find something to sit her still with; be it a toy, or the television or a book. And once we do that and get that established, she's fine to sit there for about 20 minutes and get her hair combed. And if I am going to do something other than one ponytail, two ponytails, three ponytails, I have to find a lot of things to keep her content. She is very, very busy. She just likes different things, different activities, and stuff like that. Interviewer: Is there a routine you go through?*

*Mother: I'm . . . like I get up in the morning, wash her face, brush her teeth, she eats her breakfast, then I do her hair. After she eats, she might be a little more content 'cuz she is full, so she might sit still for a little while.*

*Interviewer: How long does it usually take?*

*Mother: Well, it depends on how she feels, so if this is an everyday day, she has to get her hair combed. Sometimes I comb her hair two times a day, sometimes once.*

### **A Case Example of Preparation to Comb Hair**

The parent or caregiver begins to mentally plan the type of hairstyle she will create for the child in preparation for the hair combing time. Particular hairstyles will require more or less time and may be influenced by where the child may be going, for example, outside to play versus to church. The parent or primary caregiver may ask, “*Will I create a regular everyday hair style, or a special occasion hair style, such as one for the first day of school or for a family photo?*”

The community recognizes the mother or primary caregiver as meeting the community's standards of a “good mother” based on the demonstrated care given in



combing the child's hair. In the AMDIS-1 interviews, an African-American mother<sup>4</sup> was asked about the meaning of combing her daughter's hair:

Interviewer: *What would it mean if you did not comb your children's hair?*

Mother: *It would mean that I didn't have time to comb their hair or sometimes on the weekends or Saturdays if we don't comb their hair for that day, I may let it go unless we go somewhere I may not comb their hair that day. But . . . ummm it doesn't mean anything to me."*

Another mother's response to the same question in the study reflects a community standard:

Interviewer: *What does combing her hair mean to you?*

Mother: *Neatness. Like, if I let her hair go, and I don't clean her, then, I mean, I feel like I am not doing my job as a parent because she can't keep up with herself. So, I have to do that for her until she is old enough to do it for herself. . . . but now I have to do it because if I don't, it make me, you know, it reflects badness on me in a way and I don't care, so I have to make sure everybody, you know, everybody know I care enough about her to comb her hair and to go the extra length to keep her clean and neat."*

At the societal level, a parent's attention or lack of attention given to groom a child's hair may lead to legal action. Matted, dirty, and unkempt hair may call attention to the physical neglect of a child resulting in a parent being reported to Child Protective Services. Once the first step is completed, the individual is ready to move through the final two steps of the cultural ritual.

## Stage II of Hair Combing Interactions – *Negotiation*

Now that the parent or primary caregiver has prepared the utensils and tools needed to accomplish the task of combing hair, engaging the child becomes the next task. The second interactive stage identified in the research is labeled *Negotiation*, to describe the type of caregiver–child interaction that may be observed.

Typically, the most emotionally challenging times of parent–child relationships are the onset of walking at about age 9 months–12 months (Emde, 1989). Selma Fraiberg (1959) used the term “infant scientist” to describe the 12- to 24-month-old infant's increased cognitive and verbal skills (p. 23). The toddler's increasing demands for autonomy and independence at 24–36 months also present challenges to parents (Bowlby, 1973; Mahler, 1975). Attachment theory suggests that the caregiver's recognition of the infant's growing social and esteem needs for autonomy and exploration may influence how she responds to the infant during the hair combing task.

During this stage of *Negotiation*, caregivers may use voice commands, verbal repetition, promises, play, or physical touch to engage reluctant young children in

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<sup>4</sup>All names and other personal identifiers included in clinical stories/vignettes in this chapter have been changed to protect privacy and confidentiality.

the task of hair combing. A caregiver might use a variety of approaches to entice a rambunctious 15-month-old child into the task. As a well-practiced routine, the caregiver may have established physical cues, such as pulling out the hair combing paraphernalia in full view of the child. An active twenty-month-old “scientist,” with well-consolidated walking skills, may be interested in everything but sitting still for hair combing. This stage may require the skills of a wartime Ambassador negotiating peace in the Middle East.

The interaction during this second stage presents the caregiver with the rich opportunity to build verbal skills in the developing child. The simplified speech used by the caregiver to refer to various characteristics of the child’s hair, appearance, personality, or behaviors during this interactive stage of hair combing time supports the child’s social construction of the self and autonomy (Mahler et al, 1964; Miller & Goodnow, 1995).

The life lessons learned with this type of interaction between the mother and daughter might teach the child tactics for future life skills of negotiation on the playground or the bedroom with their romantic partner (Barbarin, 1993; Coard, 2004). During HCI Stage II, some parents or caregivers may state family rules and expectations of behavior. By incorporating cultural or gendered themed storytelling and vocabulary words during this phase of negotiation, the caregiver enhances the social group connection of family and ethnicity.

### *Negotiating the Hair Combing ask with a Tender-Headed Child*

Crystal, an older mother who participated in the AMDIS study, used a carefully worded series of questions to engage her 36-month-old daughter, Adrian who was extremely tender headed with medium curly hair, into the process of having her hair combed. In preparation, Crystal positioned Adrian gently across her lap and in a very soft and soothing voice announced:

*Crystal: ‘Ok, I’m going to comb your hair now. I know that it hurts, but I’ve got to comb your hair. Be sure to tell me if it hurts, OK?’*

Crystal very slowly and gently touches the wide-tooth comb to Adrian’s scalp carefully and watches her reaction. With her eyes closed, Adrian, with a pacifier in her mouth, lets out a scream of anticipation of a familiar searing pain to the scalp, she reaches her small hand up and pulls the comb away from her head.

*Crystal: Ok, I know it hurts. How about I just part your hair with my hands. OK? I’m putting the comb down and I will just use my hands. OK?’*

Crystal then takes a few strands of hair, separates it from the other hairs, and slowly plaits the strands together, winding one strand over the other. She went through this process for the next fifteen minutes as Adrian drifted off to sleep in or on her lap. Yet, Adrian visibly reacted to touch, even in her sleep as Crystal began to brush through the curls with a baby brush.

The developmental lesson learned by Adrian during this interaction included the communication skill of nonverbal interaction. Though equipped by an outstanding vocabulary of words evidenced at the outset of the interaction, when Adrian defiantly answered “No, I don’t want to get my hair combed!” she understood that if she communicates nonverbally, with a pained look on her face, her mom will respond sensitively with understanding, “*I know it hurts.*”

During this second interactive stage, in varying degrees, children very clearly participate in a negotiation process with their parent or primary caregiver. Based on the analysis of the videotaped interactions from the AMDIS-1 study, the following sequence of interactions occurred during this stage of negotiation that describe the relationship dynamics:

- a. *The parent or caregiver’s statement of intent.* The parent verbally announces to the child a sequence of events and what is about to happen. They may describe what is they will do, what they may do together, or use neutral terms that describe what the activity will be. For example, they may say, “*I’m about to comb your hair now.*” Or “*You’re going to get your hair combed now.*” Or “*We’ve got to comb your hair now.*” Or “*Combing your hair is next on the agenda.*”
- b. *The parent or caregiver extends the invitation.* The parent may sit or stand in a place where hair combing will take place and then invite the child to participate. The parent or caregiver may look at the child with a comb or brush in hand and smile invitingly, saying calmly, “*Come on and get your hair combed.*” Or using a more authoritarian parenting style, the caregiver may not smile but look grim and issue a command or directive to the child, “*Get over here and get your hair combed!*”
- c. *The child responds.* The child shows a response to the parent’s words. This response may be verbal or nonverbal. A smile, grimace, tears, fear or anger, or a playful challenge may be part of the child’s response.
- d. *The parent or caregiver approaches.* The parent may physically approach the child, stoop down, and talk to the child with a hand touching part of the child’s body. They may also join in or acknowledge the child’s activity before directing the child to the hair combing task. They either allow time for the child to respond or physically takes the child to the chair or place to get her hair combed.
- e. *The child responds.* This primary action during his stage ends when the parent and child are in the position to complete the task of combing hair. This stage ends as the caregiver begins to comb the child’s hair.

### **Stage III of Hair Combing Interactions – *Combing Hair***

The actual task of combing hair occurs during this stage. The child is placed in a primary position of proximity to the caregiver. The parent may first offer soothing words of praise or comfort to the child for complying. She may offer the child a toy

or bottle as they settle into the task. The caregiver chooses an implement, ointments, or spray bottle. She then positions the child and proceeds to comb the child's hair.

The parent or caregiver brushes, combs, parts, plaits, braids, and generally manipulates the child's hair. She may use her hands or fingers to smooth the hair in addition to using the comb and brush. The child's position may change periodically, but the parent or caregiver returns a child to the primary position throughout the task. The caregiver or child may dominate in directing or using physical behavior during this stage.

### ***The Synchrony of Hair Combing Interaction***

Emotional attunement or synchrony between an infant and parent or primary caregiver begins at about age two to three months. Synchrony is the coordinated interaction between a growing infant and parent in which each responds to and influences the other. This coordinated relationship-based experience helps the infant learn to express and read emotions (Stern, 1985). There may be reciprocal interactions where the child directs the caregiver's attention to something that is going on in the environment. The caregiver continues combing hair but responds to the child.

### **Stage IV of Hair Combing Interactions – *Play***

The relationship dynamics during this stage are very interactive; either the child or parent caregiver may initiate the type of actual or symbolic play during this stage. During this stage, both the parent and child are relaxed, fully committed, and engaged in accomplishing the task of combing hair. The strong message of relationship and attachment is communicated to the child during this relaxed exchange (Stifter et al. 2020). Together, they are empowered, sharing in an activity, and emotionally attuned to each other. This stage is characterized by playful talk and chatter between the parent and child. There may be a pleasurable give and take, verbal exchange, singing, humming together, or storytelling. There may be joint laughter and joking, and shared facial expressions by parent or caregiver and child during this fourth interactive stage of the hair combing.

Symbolic play (Orr & Geva, 2015) may be acted out by the child when she picks up a doll and begins to brush the doll's hair in the same manner her hair is being combed. There is shared affect, loving touch directed by the mother toward the child or by the child toward the mother. The mother may include instructive play during this time using a counting game by clapping hands with her 11-month-old son as she gently brushes his hair.

## Stage V of Hair Combing Interactions – *Closing Rituals*

A ritual, defined as a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, actions, or objects, is performed according to a set sequence (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). The parent or caregiver signals to the child that the task is now completed and ends. The parent or caregiver may express praise, reinforcing specific behaviors about gender, ethnicity, racial identity, or sexual training. In a balanced routine or ritual, both the parent and child participate (Lewis, 2013). The parent may gently pat the child's hair and ceremoniously pronounce, "*There, now we are all finished.*" The child may respond by looking in a mirror or affirming the parent's work. Perhaps, the child quietly says, "*Thank you.*" The quality of the ending of the session may be abrupt, happy, relieved, or angry. It may be a helpless giving up on the part of the caregiver. The caregiver may make a comment such as "*good girl,*" which may reflect gender socialization, obedience, or respect. Moreover, there may be a comment such as, "*You are such a pretty Black girl!*" providing racial socialization. The caregiver may praise, hug, or kiss the child and express a warm or nurturing touch at the end.

### The Cultural Significance of the Stages of Hair Combing Interaction

Anthropologists have determined the universal symbolism of hair (Firth, 1973). Yet, there are individual differences in how caregivers carry out the everyday routine of combing a child's hair that reflect their cultural values and goals for socialization. In homes around the world, cultural rituals and familiar routines define family identity and serve as a core determinant of their everyday behaviors (Minturn & Lambert, 1964, p. 2; Spencer et al. 2019).

The following dialog captures one mother's response to the research interviewer's questions about what goes on during the hair combing routine at home and what she does to prepare to comb her daughter's hair.

Interviewer: *What normally goes on at home when your daughter – when your children get their hair combed?*

Mom: *Meaning . . .*

Interviewer: *What other activities are you doing. . . what else is going on at your house?*

Mom: *Sometimes the television is on and they are looking at TV while I'm combing their hair. She's oh, I don't know. I guess she and her sister are playing with or trying to comb their baby doll hair or something or they want to read a book or something like that, that's what usually goes on.*

Interviewer: *Okay, what do you do next, what is your routine when you are doing their hair?*

Mom: *First, I did all the . . . I have a little box with all their barrettes, and comb and brush. I go get that. Then I umm, tell them to go get their chair. When they get their hair combed, they will go get their chair, a little red chair, then they'll go sit in it and I'll . . . you know take their hair off loose, take the plait a' loose, and then I'll put grease on it... and you want everything?*

Interviewer: *Yes, yes, yes!*

Mom: *I'll grease it and then I'll you know, part, and brush it and then plait<sup>5</sup> put the barrettes on it and sometimes I play with the braid, they want to pick out the barrettes and*

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<sup>5</sup> *Plait*, means to braid.

*I let them know to choose their barrette even though it doesn't match, I'll let them choose it sometimes. Then after that I'll put the barrettes up and just tell them how pretty they look and they'll model turn around and "go show your daddy how pretty you look" and they'll do that and that's it interviewer: okay [why do you why do you do it that way] you said that you have them model and go see their daddy why do you do that Mom: because I'm just to let them know they are pretty you know that when they get their hair done you know they should want their hair to be neat that their hair being combed and neat is nice and they're pretty it makes them pretty when they get their hair combed.*

This mother describes each of the stages of combing hair with her two daughters aged 18 months and 48 months. She creates a routine with preparing her combing utensils, having a special place to store the adornments for the hair. She involves the children by issuing directions to them to "go get their little red chair" that they learn is the designated place for the hair combing to take place. This mother spends little time in the *negotiation stage* with her daughters. Although she does indicate some flexibility and allows them the option of "looking at TV," or playing with their doll and trying to comb their doll's hair or reading a book. She moves through the hair combing process to Stage five, the "closing ritual" phase with the adornments of ribbons, and barrettes. She engages the father in the hair combing time by instructing the children to "go show your daddy" and he verbally acknowledges them at the conclusion by saying, "How pretty you look!"

## **Jaia and Jalisha: Mother–Child Interaction During the Stages of Hair Combing Time**

The following interaction was recorded in the university laboratory through a one-way mirror as part of the *African-American Mother–Daughter Interaction* study described earlier. The mother, Jalisha, and daughter, Jaia were in a playroom setting. The researcher instructed the mother to "*Comb your child's hair as you do at home.*" The researcher then left the room and remained behind the one-way mirror until the mother signaled, she had completed the task.

1. *Preparation.* The mother brings a colorful cloth bag of hair combing tools over to where she will sit. She carefully holds on to a nearby chair as she kneels onto the floor. She methodically organizes the combs and brushes and makes sure they are within her reach. She happily announces to Jaia, "*Mommy's going to comb my girl's hair.*"
2. *Negotiation.* Jaia whimpers and reaches her arms out toward the bottle of milk that sits on the table across the room. Jalisha firmly states, "*After we finish your hair.*" There is no negotiation with this 11-month-old toddler. There is no transition. The mother commences to comb her hair.
3. *Combing hair & Stage 4 Play.* A few minutes into the combing, Jalisha hands Jaia a bottle of bubbles to distract her while she does her hair. A couple of times,

Jaia moves from left to right and wiggles. The Mother follows her physically and keeps brushing her hair. Jaia flips over her mother's leg as Jalisha steadily holds Jaia's hand, and quietly laughs. She playfully acts as if she was going to "get" Jaia and then pulls her to her lap to finish combing her hair.

4. *5. Closing ritual* When the task is complete, Jalisha puts down the brush, and claps her hands. In a high, singsong voice, she expresses praise for Jaia for sitting still throughout the session. She pronounces with much flair, "*Look how pretty you are.*"

## *Conclusions*

Throughout each of these stages, the task of hair combing offers the clinician, counselor, or social worker an opportunity to understand the quality of the developing parent-child or caregiver-child relationship through a strengths-based lens of attachment (Anderson, 2019). Analyzing videotapes of hair combing interaction with either the hair comber or alone, the practitioner can assess the parent's reflective capacity to nurture the child through gentle touch, to soothe the preverbal toddler's distress, and to engage the child (Butler Byrd et al. 2019). The practitioner may observe the parent respond sensitively to the child's smile as they gently smooth the child's fine hairs – known as "baby hair" – around the hairline that surrounds their chubby-cheeked face during the closing ritual stage.

The practitioner may also observe the growing child's ability for self-regulation during HCI. As the caregiver pulls the comb through a curly tangle that may hurt, the infant may reach for a bottle or pacifier to withstand the discomfort. During the preparation stage, the caregiver may position the bottle or pacifier in anticipation of the needs of the infant during the time that the hair is brushed and combed.

During the time spent in any of the five stages, the quality of verbal interaction, responsiveness, listening, and physical touch varies from dyad to dyad. Further, who dominates or leads the interaction varies from dyad to dyad. The quality of interaction during the HCT may parallel the consolidation of the attachment relationship during these socioemotional shifts in the toddler. Thus, the observed individual differences may be an important area for further assessment and basis for further research.

The social worker or infant and early childhood provider, in partnership with the parent or researcher in the laboratory, may view videotaped hair combing interaction to assess what goes on between a parent or primary caregiver and young child. The time spent, the type of interaction, and the quality of the interaction between a caregiver combing a young child's hair and the child's response may reveal both the areas that may need further assessment and understanding, as well as the strengths on which to build and support.

### Reflective Questions

1. Think about a child and parent or primary caregiver you have observed while they were carrying out the ritual of hair combing. What did their interactions with each other during hair combing tell you about their relationship? What did the impact of the parent's touch, conversation, and ability to listen have on the young child's experience of loving acceptance or rejection?
2. More personally, how have hair combing routines or rituals contributed to who you are, affected significant relationships with those who cared for you, and influenced core values and beliefs that you carry with you.
3. As you review this chapter about the rituals and routines of daily hair combing interaction (HCI), reflect on how you can use these observations as a tool to provide support for parents and primary caregivers to understand the significance of these cultural practices as they interact and connect with their young children.
4. How might HCI inform your own understanding of culture, ethnicity, racial trauma, and injustice?

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