



Envision a successful school year

The importance of eye exams for children

Is your child ready for school? You may have bought new clothes and school supplies, but what about an eye exam? Did you know that poor vision can lead to poor performance in school? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that only one out of three children in the U.S. receives a vision screening or eye exam before beginning kindergarten. One in four school-age children has an undiagnosed vision problem that interferes with learning. Poor vision can affect school performance, eye-hand coordination, social life, and can even lead to emotional problems.

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Eye exams vs. vision screenings



Comprehensive eye exams are especially important for children because 80 percent of all learning is a result of the visual process. A vision screening by the pediatrician or the school nurse is not a comprehensive exam. Parents of children who pass a vision screening may incorrectly assume that their children do not require professional care. The National Institutes of Health found that vision screenings catch only 37 to 68 percent of children with poor vision. Eye exams are just as important to young children as dental visits and annual physicals.

What the eye doctor sees

Because good vision is so essential to the learning process, it's important to take your child to the eye doctor to encourage success in school. If your regular eye doctor is not comfortable examining children, your child should be referred to someone who specializes in children's vision.

An optometrist or ophthalmologist will evaluate the following:

- **Visual acuity:** This testing checks that your child can clearly see the board, books and the computer. Glasses or contact lenses will be prescribed if necessary.
- **Health of the eyes:** This involves examination of all the ocular structures, including the retina and optic nerve.
- **Ability of the eyes to focus at different distances:** It is important for the eyes to be able to shift focus from one distance to the other so that your child can move his/her attention from the board to the notebook for taking notes.
- **Color vision:** The color vision test is very important because colors are used for maps and charts. If your child is color deficient, the school principal, teachers and the nurse need to be informed.
- **Ocular muscles, binocular vision and eye-tracking skills:** Evaluating these makes sure that both eyes are working together. It can be difficult for a child to read, study and pay attention in school if the eyes are not working as a team.

When to get an eye exam

The American Optometric Association recommends that the first eye exam should be at 6 months of age. The next routine exam should occur at age 3, followed by an exam before entering school. Your child should then receive a comprehensive eye exam at least once every two years thereafter, or sooner at the discretion of the eye doctor. Children can be prescribed glasses at any age. Early detection and treatment are essential to preventing vision conditions that have the potential to cause permanent vision loss.

Keeping an eye out for vision problems

It can be difficult to spot a child's vision problem because children do not know how they are supposed to see. If they see everything in the world as a blur, they may think everyone sees the world the same way. Like any other skill, seeing is something that is learned. Visual skills are taught and developed when children play with toys and games, follow moving objects, reach for objects, crawl and practice eye-hand coordination. If there is a problem with vision, children may ignore it until it is addressed by the parent. That's why it's important to know the symptoms of vision problems and keep an eye out for those.

A child with undetected vision problems may be frustrated and bored in school and show poor behavior. If a child is having a problem with their eyes, they may experience the following symptoms:

- Rubbing eyes or red, sore, itchy eyes
- Squinting
- Eyestrain
- Poor eye movement or one eye turning in or out
- Double vision
- Blurred vision
- Excessive blinking
- Avoidance of close work or holding reading material close to their eyes
- Headaches
- Reversing letters, numbers or words
- Delayed learning of the alphabet
- Trouble reading or poor reading comprehension
- Turning or tilting the head or moving the head excessively while reading
- Poor eye-hand coordination
- Poor performance in school
- Behavior problems

Types of vision problems

Any visual dysfunction can interfere with a child's performance in school or athletics. The most common problem we hear about is when someone does not have 20/20 vision. The term 20/20 is used to express normal visual acuity. It means that you can see at 20 feet what should be seen at 20 feet. A person with 20/100 vision must be at 20 feet to see what a normal person sees from 100 feet. If your child does not have 20/20 vision, the doctor can help your child achieve this with glasses or contact lenses.

It's important to remember that a child can have 20/20 vision, but still not have perfect vision. A child could have good vision at a distance with poor vision close-up (far-sighted), or could have good vision close-up and poor vision at a distance (near-sighted). There may be problems with amblyopia (lazy eye,) strabismus (crossed eyes,) side vision, eye coordination, depth perception, focusing, color vision, eye-hand coordination, dyslexia and difficulties with information processing.

Here is a summary of some common vision, and vision-related, problems:

- **Amblyopia or lazy eye:** This results from the lack of development of central vision in one eye that is not correctable with eyeglasses or contact lenses.
- **Dyslexia:** This is a neurocognitive deficit expressed by problems in reading, spelling, speaking or listening.
- **Strabismus:** This is a misalignment of the eyes that causes both eyes not to look at the same place at the same time. This occurs when one or both eyes turn in, out, up or down. This is caused by poor muscle control. It is called cross-eyed when the eyes turn inward. If you notice an unusual eye turn or a wandering eye in a child, you should contact an eye doctor.



Treating vision problems

When any of the above conditions are suspected, your primary eye doctor may refer your child to an optometrist or ophthalmologist who has advanced clinical experience in these areas. Treatment for amblyopia and strabismus may include eyeglasses, patching of an eye and vision therapy. Vision therapy is like physical therapy for the eyes. It is devoted to enhancing and improving visual performance. It helps develop the visual skills needed to achieve in school, work or athletics.

An eye doctor may also explain the importance of polycarbonate lenses and protection from the ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun. Polycarbonate lenses are impact-resistant lenses that are recommended for eyeglasses prescribed for children. These lenses, even when clear, block out 100% of the sun's UV rays.

All parents want their children to reach their full potential. A bright, intelligent child can do poorly in school and have low self-esteem due to poor vision. After all, it is difficult to learn to read if the words on a page seem jumbled. A comprehensive eye exam will help ensure your child's eyes are healthy and that they are seeing clearly.

Resources:

www.aoa.org

www.oepf.org

www.nei.nih.gov

www.preventblindness.org

www.cdc.gov

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