

Children's vision needs are special

Many adults think they have perfect vision and do not know otherwise until they have their eyes examined. They then discover how much they have been missing. Children have an even more difficult time assessing their own vision. They lack the benefits of adults' experience and just assume that the way they see things is the same as everybody else does. If the blackboard or a page in a book seems a blur, they think everyone sees it that way, so they do not worry.

Vision is especially important to a child. More than 80 per cent of the information children receive about the world comes through their eyes. Poor vision can affect the child's development in many ways. It can make learning more difficult, it can make the child clumsy and uncoordinated, and it can even affect the child's personality development.

The most common vision problems in children

The most common children's vision problems are those affecting the ability to see clearly and sharply. Myopia (shortsightedness) causes difficulty seeing distant objects clearly. Hyperopia (farsightedness) makes it difficult for a person to focus on close objects. Astigmatism causes objects to appear distorted and not sharply in focus.

These problems are well known and parents and teachers are often on the lookout for them. Once recognised they are usually easy to correct. However, there are some special problems that children have especially pre-school and early school age children – which are not easily recognised.

Other common problems

The other group of vision problems among children – the ones affecting younger children – involves what is known as visual performance. The problems frequently escape detection in school vision tests and other vision screenings. They can disguise themselves in a way which can annoy the unsuspecting adult.

Things such as not paying attention in class, being slow in learning to read, being withdrawn and not getting along with other children or poor sporting ability may be signs that a child needs vision care.

The following five conditions are among this group of vision problems.

**Poor co-ordination of the eyes** – Both eyes must work as a team. If there are some problems in getting the eyes to work together efficiently the child will subconsciously have to work hard to force them to act as one. In severe cases double vision occurs and the brain eventually shuts off the message it receives from one eye. If this happens the child may develop a 'lazy eye'.

**Turned eye** – For normal vision both eyes need to look at the same object at the same time. When they point in different directions, the brain ignores the message it receives from one eye. Vision does not develop properly in the eye not being used.

In many instances eye exercises alone will be able to correct the eye. In other cases surgery, followed by an intensive series of eye exercises, is necessary.

**Eye movement defects** – To see normally children need to have efficient eye movements. If, for example, such movements are slow or clumsy or unsteady, children will find reading more difficult. They will miss words or lose their place on the page.

**Poor eye-hand co-ordination** – Eyehand co-ordination is necessary for easy handling of objects within arm's reach. Crooked writing, with poor spacing between the letters and words, and difficulty in staying on the lines may indicate a child's eyes and hands are not working together well. Special exercises can be prescribed to help overcome eye-hand co-ordination problems.

**Difficulties of focusing control** – Some children have difficulties with focusing accurately. Objects may change

from being clear to blurry and the child will exert a considerable effort in trying to keep them in focus. Some children will be unable to quickly move their focus from distance to near. This poses a particular problem in copying from the distant blackboard into a close-up book.

### **How to be a vision detective**

There are many clues to a vision problem in a child. Blinking, rubbing the eyes, holding a book very close to read, closing one eye to look at things are just some of them. The checklist below gives a more complete guide. You should remember that there is no substitute for a proper examination. The Australian Optometrical Association recommends that all children be given a comprehensive optometric examination before entering school.

### **Regular examinations**

Everyone has come to understand that teeth need to be checked regularly for signs of decay, yet few people are aware that eyes also need to be examined regularly.

Ideally, all children should be examined before they are three years old and again before starting school.

During the school years vision may change rapidly. Your optometrist will advise you on how often your child's eyes need to be examined.

You should keep in mind that quick screenings, such as those conducted in many schools throughout Australia, are no substitute for an optometric examination. A thorough initial examination takes 30 minutes or more. There are no short cuts.

### **Checklist**

An observant parent can be the first person to pick up signs of a vision problem in a child. Things to watch for are listed below. Any one of them could mean that a child has a vision problem.

#### **Appearance of the eyes**

One eye turns in or out while the other points straight ahead

Eyes blinking frequently

Eyes frequently red

Eyes water

Eyes very sensitive to light

Eyes screwed up while the child is watching television.

#### **Behavioural signs**

Holds a book very close while reading

Loses the place while reading

Cannot concentrate for any length of time

Positions head strangely when reading

Rubs eyes frequently

Sits very close to the television set

Writes crookedly with poor spacing

Leaves out or confuses words when reading

Tilts head noticeably when looking at things

Covers or closes one eye when reading

Complains of headaches

Does not recognise familiar people in the distance

Complains of blurred vision

Complains of seeing double

Complains of eyes burning or itching after doing close work.

### **Rules for reading**

- Read in a room with bright and even lighting,
- Sit up straight and angle the book toward you.
- Do not lie on the floor and read.
- Take a break from reading every 15 or 20 minutes and look about the room or out the window.

### **Hints on television watching**

Parents often worry about their children's television viewing habits. Here are some hints for comfortable viewing:

Have a small light on in the room when the television is on. The room should not be totally dark.

Place the television so that there is no glare or reflection from lights or windows.

Sit at least two and a half metres away from the screen.

Frequently look away from the set around the room or out the window.

Have the set approximately at eye level. Try to avoid having to look up or down at the picture.

This brochure is produced by the Australian Optometrical Association  
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