

YOUR BABY'S EYES

Vision is one of your baby's most precious senses. Babies will learn more about the world through their sight than through all their other senses combined. As a parent you can do much to aid your child's visual development and growth.

Your child's eyes are generally examined at birth for signs of major defects. This examination is extremely important because the earlier any defects are detected, the greater the likelihood of effective treatment. Although your child may have no signs of eye or vision problems initially, there is no guarantee that vision difficulties will not occur later. A child should be examined by an optometrist before reaching school age. Watching your child's vision progress will be a fascinating study and will provide important clues in the detection of vision deficiencies. It will also give you ideas on how best to help your baby's visual development.

Birth to four months

At birth a baby sees patterns of light and dark but specific objects are probably blurred. During the first four months your baby should begin to follow slowly moving objects and to direct his or her hand movements. The two sides of the body are developed alternately. The baby will use his or her right hand, foot and eye for a few days or weeks, then use the left side for a time.

At this stage of your child's development some of the following ideas could be helpful.

- Change the location of the bassinet and your infant's position in it so that neither eye is favoured. Gazing constantly at a blank wall is not interesting.
- Hang a mobile above the bassinet to provide movement. Babies will learn to control eye movements by watching gentle movement.

Provide a variety of safe objects within baby's focus, about 200–300 mm away, for the baby to touch.

Talk to your baby as you move about the room. The baby will learn to associate movements, distances and directions with vision and hearing.

Four to six months

At four to six months a baby learns to turn from side to side and use his or her arms and legs. Control of eye movement is further developed. You might notice that one eye is sometimes turned toward the nose or to the outside, giving the baby a cross-eyed appearance. When this happens the baby is using only the other eye. Within a few days or weeks the other eye will be used while the first will wander. This is part of the development of binocularity—the use of two eyes together—and is normal in the first six months.

You can help the baby's development during this period by:

- Allowing your baby to explore different shapes and textures.
- Handing your child small objects so that his or her co-ordination is improved.

Six to eight months

Both eyes should focus equally by six to eight months. Should your infant fail to use both eyes together after the age of six months, he or she should receive prompt professional advice. A child will not outgrow crossed eyes; the earlier the treatment is started the better are the chances of correcting the problem.

During this period allow the child freedom to explore, provide interesting stuffed toys and participate in games such as hide and seek.

Eight to 12 months

Babies are generally more mobile now and begin to use both eyes to judge distances. They can grasp and throw objects with greater accuracy.

You can help their progress by:

- Allowing the child to develop at his or her own pace. Walking too early may deprive the infant of co-ordination skills acquired during crawling.

- Letting the baby investigate the kitchen cup boards—he or she will learn much about the relative sizes of objects and improve control in hand movements.

One to two years

Co-ordination of eyes and hands is now well developed and your child will probably begin walking.

Activities to be encouraged include:

- Playing with small objects like building blocks and simple puzzles to improve precision in movement and aid small muscle development.
- Providing opportunities for climbing and activities such as the use of a tricycle or rocking horse to increase co-ordination of the eyes, hands, and feet.

Two to three years

The child now speaks in sentences and useful activities are:

- Reading or telling stories to improve the child's ability to understand visual information and prepare for learning to read.
- Drawing, painting and colouring for development of accurate hand movements.

- Encourage your child to have a break from close work every 20 minutes, to move about and relax the eyes.

By the age of three years a thorough optometric examination will reveal any tendency toward squint (crossed eyes), shortsightedness or longsightedness. It will also check that your child is acquiring the many visual skills necessary for complete development. This examination provides an important record with which to compare later performance and enables better evaluation of any symptoms which might occur as the child grows older.

Watching your child's development is one of the joys of parenthood. The optometrist's professional skills linked with your own active participation will ensure that your child realises his or her full visual potential.

Ask your optometrist for these related brochures

- Myopia (shortsightedness)
- Hyperopia (longsightedness)
- Vision and school achievement
- Visual skills of special importance to children
- Parents' guide to children's vision Spectacle corrections for children

This brochure is produced by the Australian Optometrical Association
in the interest of the visual welfare of the Australian people.

ACN 004 622 431

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