



## What is the importance of back to school eye exams?

By Carolyn LoBocchiaro O.D.

A child needs many abilities to be successful in school. Good vision is a key factor in the majority of these skills. As much as 80 percent of a child's learning occurs through the eyes. Reading, writing, chalkboard copying, and computer work are among the many visual tasks a student performs on a daily basis. A child's eyes are constantly in use in the classroom and at play. When a child's visual system is not functioning properly, learning can suffer. Studies indicate that 60 percent of "problem learners" suffer from undetected vision problems.

The school years are a very important time in a child's life. During this time, a child grows intellectually, socially and physically. Success in school determines a child's self esteem and feeling of self worth. All parents want their children to do well in school and do their best to provide them with the best educational opportunities. They make sure they have all necessary school supplies — notebooks, folders, pencils, pens, backpacks, etc. Unfortunately, very often, one important learning tool is overlooked — a child's vision.

As children progress in school, the vi-

sual system faces increasing demands. The size of print in books becomes smaller as the children transition from learning to read and reading to learn. Children are expected to copy from the chalkboard quickly and correctly. The allotted time for assignments decreases and the amount of time spent reading and studying at home and at school increases. Sometimes, when put under all this stress, the visual system is not able to perform up to task.

Vision is more than just the ability to see clearly. Many parents and teachers often assume that if a child passes a vision test at school or at their pediatrician's office, then there is no vision problem. The visual skills needed for successful reading and learning are much more complex than just reading a chart.

Every child needs to have the following visual skills for efficient reading and learning:

**1. Visual acuity:** This is the ability to see clearly in the distance for viewing the chalkboard, at an intermediate distance for the computer, and up close for reading a book. Distance visual acuity is typically all that is tested at screenings.

**2. Eye focusing:** This allows the child to sustain clear, close vision over

time like when reading a book or writing a report. Eye focusing flexibility is the ability to quickly and accurately maintain clear vision as the distance between objects change. This skill is very important when copying from the chalkboard.

**3. Eye tracking or eye movement skills:** This is the ability to keep the eyes accurately on a target when looking from one object to another, moving the eyes along a printed page, or following a moving object, like a thrown ball.

**4. Eye teaming:** This is the ability to use both eyes together when converging or pointing them at a printed page, and to be able to judge distances and see depth for class work and sports.

**5. Eye-hand coordination:** This is the ability to use vision to direct the hands when drawing a picture or trying to hit a ball.

**6. Visual perception:** This is the ability to organize figures on a page into letters, words and ideas and to understand and remember what is read.

If any one of these visual skills is not functioning properly, a child will have to work harder to complete a task. They may not be able to achieve up to their potential or they will need excessive time and effort to do so. Sometimes, vi-

sual deficiencies cause headaches, fatigue and other eyestrain problems. They may also cause poor reading comprehension and avoidance of near tasks and many times, they result in a short attention span. Sadly, many children are mislabeled as having ADHD, (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) when all they actually have is an undetected vision problem.

Changes in vision can occur without you or your child noticing them. A child may not tell you they are having a vision problem because they may think everyone sees like they do. That is why it is so important for the child to have regular comprehensive eye examinations. The earlier a problem is detected, the easier it is to treat and the fewer possible negative academic consequences.

The first comprehensive eye exam is recommended at 6 months of age, followed by age 3 and before kindergarten. After that, an eye exam is recommended every year.

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