



# Healthy Vision For Success In School

Ten-year-old Eric seemed to be in a world of his own. He had trouble concentrating, did not read as well as the other kids, and was not very good in softball. He felt like a failure. Neither Eric, his teachers nor his parents realized that what he needed for success was a pair of eyeglasses.

Children with untreated vision disorders have a difficult time succeeding in school. Healthy vision is critical for children's learning: Up to age 12, more than 80% of learning is through the eyes. Poor eyesight makes class work difficult. Sports and games are hard to enjoy if you can't see the ball or the game. It's not easy to make friends if an eyesight problem keeps you from recognizing faces.

Vision develops between birth and age 10 to 12. During that time, eye muscle coordination and focusing ability develop. The eye and brain learn to work together to interpret images from each eye. When a child has a vision problem, it should

be addressed as soon as possible so that normal development is not interrupted.

Almost one in four school-aged children have vision disorders that can affect learning. Elementary schools typically present 50% of the material visually. In higher grade levels, that increases to 75%.

A child who can't see well may believe that he is not smart enough to learn how to read. He might react by behaving inappropriately.

Studies show that 60% of children identified as "problem learners" actually suffer from undetected eye disorders. The child may be wrongly diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), or mislabeled as lazy, dyslectic, autistic, slow, or simply as a troublemaker.

One of the best ways to help ensure that your children can learn is to take them to an optometrist or ophthalmologist for regular, comprehensive eye exams.

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## Hidden Eyesight Problems

When a child has trouble reading, poor eyesight is sometimes overlooked as the possible root of the problem. Maybe the child appears to be able to see and does not complain about his eyes. He may have passed a school vision screening. A vision screening performed by a pediatrician or school nurse, however, usually checks only distance vision. It does not find vision disorders in one-third of children who actually have a vision problem.

Also, kids often don't realize that their vision is not normal because they don't know what they're supposed to be seeing. Even if they acknowledge a problem to

themselves, they may not tell their parents or teachers. And some eye problems, such as amblyopia (see sidebar), may not have symptoms.

## Eye Exam = Pathway to Success

Reading requires many different eye skills: coordinating both eyes as a team, tracking printed words across a page, and adjusting focus as you move toward or away from an object. During a comprehensive eye exam, all of your child's vision skills will be tested. If a problem is diagnosed, the doctor can prescribe eyeglasses, vision therapy or both.

The American Optometric Association recommends that children have an eye exam by the

age of 6 months, then again by age 3 and again just before starting school. After that, school-age children need an exam every two to three years if no vision disorder has been diagnosed. Those who require eyeglasses or contact lenses should get an exam every year.

Remember that one of the most important tools for success in school is healthy eyesight!



## Diagnosis...

**Farsightedness** (difficulty seeing close-up), **nearsightedness** (difficulty seeing at a distance) or **astigmatism** (blurry vision caused by abnormal eye curvature). **Treatment:** Prescription eyeglasses or contact lenses. **Symptoms:**

- Holds a book too close or too far away
- Squints or tilts the head to see better
- Loses his or her place while reading, or uses a finger to follow words on the page
- Avoids activities that require good vision, such as reading (if farsighted) or sports (if nearsighted)
- Closes or puts a hand over one eye in order to see better

**Convergence insufficiency.** A disorder that causes children to have trouble making their eyes turn toward each other in order to focus on words in a book or on near objects. **Treatment:** Vision therapy. **Symptoms:**

- Omits, inserts or rereads letters or words
- Fails to recognize the same word in the next sentence
- Blurry or double vision
- Sleepiness or difficulty concentrating
- Poor judgment of distances, as when catching a ball

**Strabismus.** A problem with eye muscle control prevents the eyes from working together as a team. Strabismus may lead to amblyopia. **Treatment:** vision therapy.

**Symptom:** One eye is turned outward or inward.

**Amblyopia (lazy eye).** A developmental disorder in which the quality of the two images from each eye is different. The brain learns to ignore the picture from the weaker eye. This disorder usually occurs only in one eye. **Treatment:** Encouraging use of the weaker eye by placing a patch on the stronger eye or using vision-blurring eye drops. **Symptoms:** None.

**Sources:** American Optometric Association, National Commission on Vision and Health, All About Vision, Optometrists Network

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