



VISION CARE FOR KIDS ACT OF 2009

One Step Closer to Becoming Law

Years of effort on the part of lawmakers and vision health advocates has resulted in passage of the Vision Care for Kids Act of 2009 (H.R. 577) on March 31, 2009, by the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill, which now awaits a similar vote in the U.S. Senate, would allocate federal grants to states for providing vision testing and eye care for children without vision health coverage or the financial means to pay for it. A 2007 version of the bill passed in the House but died in the Senate.

This ground breaking legislation has drawn national attention to an essential truth that eye care professionals have long recognized: Healthy vision is crucial for classroom learning and success. Because 80% of learning is visual for children until age 12, a child's intellectual, social and emotional development depends on having adequate eyesight.

The Vision Care for Kids Act was developed by leading vision care organizations, including Prevent Blindness America, the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the American Optometric Association and the Vision Council of America.

If the Act is passed, it would authorize \$65 million in grants to be awarded over a period of five years to states through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with a state-matching requirement of at least 25%. These funds would provide comprehensive eye examinations for low-income children who do not pass vision screening tests, giving priority to those under age 9. They would also pay for treatment and eyewear to correct diagnosed vision problems.

Up to 10% of the grant is to be used for eye health education. States, in partnership with non-profit advocacy groups, will develop materials showing how to recognize signs of visual impairment in children. The educational materials will be distributed to parents, teachers and health care professionals.

Spotlight on All Children's Eye Health

Undetected vision problems can take a huge toll on children. Impaired vision can affect childhood development by limiting both the information a child is exposed to and his or her range of experiences. Early discovery and correction can significantly prevent a visual handicap from interfering with a child's intellectual, social and emotional development.

Students with vision problems will often avoid work that requires them to concentrate, focus and keep their eyes on the page. As a result, they may appear to be lazy, daydreaming or acting out. Parents or teachers may mistakenly believe the child has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), a learning disability or an emotional problem, when all the student needs is an eye examination and corrective eyewear.

Parents should not depend on their children to inform them of vision problems, which often have no symptoms. On the other hand, a child with symptoms might assume that what he or she is seeing is normal. Regular comprehensive eye examinations will uncover problems that are not apparent to the child, teacher or parent.

One in four children between the ages of 5 and 12 has a vision problem that can affect educational performance. The earlier a child's vision problems are detected, the more effective treatment is. Yet only one-third of children in the U.S. receive any eye care services before their sixth birthday.

Screenings: Only a First Step

Once in school, children may receive a visual screening by the school nurse. Thirty-six states mandate these screenings, but 26 of them do not require children who fail the screenings to undergo follow-up eye examinations. Nearly two-thirds of children identified by the screenings as needing follow-up care do not comply with the recommended treatment, often because families find vision care to be financially out of reach.

Because screenings are used only to identify major vision problems, even children who pass this brief test may still have undetected vision disorders. According to the National Institutes of Health, vision screenings miss as many as 60% of eye problems.

A screening is no substitute for a comprehensive eye examination performed by an eye doctor. For example, a child with farsightedness may go undiagnosed for years because the standard vision screening performed in the doctor's office during an annual physical (e.g., reading the eye chart) often does not detect this kind of problem.

Many children attend school with uncorrected vision, putting them at a distinct academic and social disadvantage. The Vision Care for Kids Act would remove the financial barriers for families who cannot afford eye care for their children.



Uncovering Eye Problems

A complete vision check-up with dilation allows the doctor to examine the back of your child's eye to look for signs of eye disease or other disorders. Through this painless examination, vision problems can be detected in children as young as six months. An eye health exam can help diagnose or prevent the following problems:

- **Refractive Errors.** A child with myopia (nearsightedness) may not be able to see the classroom blackboard clearly. Hyperopia (farsightedness) causes difficulty in seeing up close, which hampers development of reading skills. Refractive errors are the most common and easily correctible eye disorders.
- **Amblyopia.** This disease, also called "lazy eye," usually develops before the age of 6. It occurs when a child's eye and brain are not working together, causing reduced visual ability in one or both eyes. Amblyopia is treatable and preventable if it is detected early in a child's life, but it remains the leading cause of vision loss in children under age four.
- **Strabismus.** The eyes of a child with strabismus are either turned in, turned out or not working as a team. This condition affects up to 5% of all children to some degree, and can begin during infancy.
- **Computer Eye Strain.** The average child spends one to three hours per day on a computer, which demands fine eye-muscle coordination skills in order to focus. Young eyes that are not yet fully developed can easily become strained after hours spent staring at a computer monitor. An eye exam can determine if a child needs special eyeglasses to prevent eye strain.
- **Eye Injuries.** Thousands of serious eye injuries are sustained each year by children 14 years old and younger. In addition to correcting a child's visual acuity (which will make injury less likely), a vision care professional can also provide children with a sturdy frame and the most impact-resistant polycarbonate lenses to ensure protection against both eye injury and eyeglass breakage during sports and rough play.
- **UV Damage.** Most people are aware of the damage that exposure to the sun can cause to the skin, but only a small percentage know that this exposure also puts eyes at risk. Children are especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of ultraviolet (UV) rays from the sun, as their eyes do not have the same protective ability as adults' eyes. Children also usually spend more time in the sun than adults. Excessive exposure to UV rays over time may contribute to a number of adulthood eye problems, including cataracts and macular degeneration. Sunglasses with UV protection are invaluable for children of all ages.

Vision disorders are the fourth most common disability in the United States. As the most vulnerable members of our society, children depend on us to act for them. We require children to be inoculated against childhood diseases; it is at least as important for them to have a regular comprehensive eye examination to identify and treat vision problems before they become serious. With the help of your eye care provider, you can brighten the future of your children by ensuring that their precious eye sight remains protected.



Sources: *Open Congress.org, Vision Monday, American Optometric Association, Prevent Blindness America*

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