

Is your child seeing clearly?

By Jane Whiting

Did you know that classroom learning is 80% visual and that almost 25% of children today have undetected vision problems that are holding them back? You may also not be aware of the fact that 80 percent of all babies are born farsighted, approximately five percent are born near-sighted (or unable to see objects at a distance clearly), and only about 15 percent are born with nothing wrong with the refractive parts of the eye.

This important information was reported recently by the Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) during an awareness campaign “Be Kind to your Eyes.” The main message to parents and families on the health of children’s vision, is how vital it is to have a professional eye examination performed every year. Early detection of any vision-related problems allows a range of treatment plans which can reverse, prevent, relieve or correct many conditions.

According to the CAO, you should not assume that just because your child can see every bird in the sky or has passed a school vision screening test, that his or her vision skills are adequately developed. It could be an assumption that affects how well they are able to learn, and a 20/20 score on a vision test means only that they can see what they should be able to see at a distance of 20 feet. It does not measure any of the other vision skills needed for learning, which involve many different skills working together to enable children to not only see clearly but also to understand what they see.

The first step to ensure that children have all the vision skills they need is to arrange for a thorough (and painless) eye health examination. This should be performed every year because a change in vision can occur without a child or his or her parents realizing it. A proper eye health examination should include a review of the child’s health and vision history as well as tests for: nearsightedness; farsightedness; astigmatism; color perception; lazy eye; crossed-eyes; eye coordination; depth perception and focusing ability.

When children lack certain vision skills, or they are not functioning properly, their eyes have to work harder and this can lead to blurred vision, headaches, fatigue and other eyestrain symptoms. The CAO offers the following guide to optimum vision skills for school-aged children:

- **Near Vision** – the ability to see clearly and comfortably at 25 - 30 cms.
- **Distance Vision** – the ability to see well beyond arm's reach.
- **Binocular Coordination** – the ability of the eyes to work together.
- **Eye Movement Skills** – which enable the eyes to aim accurately, move smoothly across a page and shift quickly from one object to another.
- **Focusing Skills** – which enable both eyes to accurately focus at the proper distance and to see clearly and to change focus quickly (example, from desk to chalkboard and back).
- **Peripheral Awareness** – or the ability to be aware of things located to the side while looking straight ahead.
- **Eye/Hand Coordination** – or the ability to use the eyes and hands together.

The CAO states that children rarely complain of vision problems, or are even aware of them. They may appear to see perfectly well, but the CAO warns that this doesn't mean everything is okay and advises parents to look for the following everyday signs that their child may need help:

- performs below his or her school potential
- avoids close work or dislikes reading
- loses his or her place while reading
- omits or confuses small words when reading
- uses finger to maintain place while reading
- makes frequent reversals when reading or writing
- holds reading material closer than usual
- turns or tilts head to use only one eye
- has red, itchy or watery eyes

- has frequent headaches

Parents can also help to reduce the visual stress of schoolwork and eye-strain for kids at home in number of ways:

- Make sure the homework area is evenly lighted and free from glare. Furniture should be the right size for proper posture.
- During periods of close concentration, children should take periodic breaks. Rest breaks are also recommended when a child is using a computer or playing video games.
- Place the TV set at a viewing distance at least five times the width of the screen. Be sure the viewing room has overall soft lighting and avoid glare and reflections on the TV screen.
- Be sure your child's hours away from school include time for exercise and creative play. Both can help keep his or her vision skills functioning properly.

According to the City of Ottawa Public Health Department, routine visual assessments should be done at birth, and then with each visit for immunizations at two, four, six, 12 and 18 months, then again at around age three or four years. Any concerns during or after this time should be reported to the child's doctor who should perform a complete visual assessment. If testing shows a possible abnormality, the child will be referred to an eye specialist, or ophthalmologist, for a more detailed examination.

For further information on children's vision contact Ottawa Public Health at 613-580-6744 or the Low Vision Program at Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre at 613-820-4922.

This article originally appeared in the November 2009 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.