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Parents Need to Focus on Vision as Key to Learning

Nearly 25 Percent of School-Age Children May Have Vision Problems that Can Interfere with Learning

ST. LOUIS, MO. - Word is quickly spreading that certain types of vision problems can undermine even the brightest student's ability to succeed in school. This September could be a particularly trying time for these children as recent research from Johns Hopkins' Center for Summer Learning shows kids normally lose 1-2 months of their prior school year's education over the summer months. Children, who are already behind due to hidden vision problems, could be at an even greater disadvantage when school starts again.

Unfortunately, children with vision problems are often misdiagnosed as being lazy, or having learning disabilities, dyslexia, and even AD(H)D. As a result, many students are unnecessarily prescribed drugs for attention problems or placed in resource rooms where they continue to have trouble learning. According to the July 2005 issue of Scientific American, "Studies increasingly show that while medication may calm a child's behavior, it does not improve grades, peer relationships or defiant behavior over the long term." This was not a surprise to Dr. Lynn Hellerstein, a developmental optometrist and President of the College of Optometrists in Vision Development (COVD). "When an underlying vision problem is at the root of a child's difficulties, you really won't notice much improvement until the vision problem is treated."

August is National Children's Vision and Learning Month, a prime time for parents and teachers to take a moment to learn more about the critical link between vision and learning. "Vision problems (like convergence insufficiency) can contribute to attention problems. So parents need to rule out the possibility of a vision problem as their first course of action," says Hellerstein.

The Myth of 20/20

Just because a child has 20/20 eyesight doesn't mean he or she has perfect vision. The term 20/20 comes from the famous eye chart which was developed in the 1800's. The eye chart only tests how well you can see a certain size letter from 20 feet. The vision skills needed for successful reading and learning are much more complex.

Vision is a process that involves over 20 visual abilities and more than 65% of all the nerve pathways to the brain. One in four children has an undiagnosed vision problem which can interfere with learning and lead to academic and/or behavioral problems.

The good news is, when found these hidden vision problems are fully correctable. The symptoms, though often overlooked or mislabeled, are usually *very* visible. The following is a list of some of the more obvious symptoms parents should keep an eye out for:

- Frequent loss of place when reading
- Confuses similar looking words
- Poor reading comprehension
- Sloppy handwriting
- Failure to recognize the same word in next sentence
- Complains of eyes hurting or headaches after reading

- Avoidance of close work (such as reading)
- Attention problems

What happens when a vision problem is found? Depending on the extent of the problem, the child may need vision therapy. Vision therapy has developed into an optometric specialty, and involves a prescribed program of visually-directed procedures to eliminate faulty vision skill patterns and rebuild them correctly.

“Vision therapy doesn’t treat learning disabilities,” according to Hellerstein. “Vision therapy treats vision problems which interfere with reading and learning. Once the vision problem is corrected, tutoring and other remedies become much more effective.”

Parents Take Action

Unfortunately, vision problems are often caught only after a child has struggled for years. Many parents across the country have decided to do what they can to help spread the word so others won’t have to struggle the way their child did.

“Good vision is key to learning,” says Shama Albright, Mrs. Washington USA and mother of 3 from Washington. “There are an appalling number of children going back to school again this year with undetected vision problems and this affects them in sports, in learning and ultimately, in life.” One of Albright’s children had a vision problem that was missed and it took years for her to find the solution. It was her experience with her son that motivated her to run for, and win the title of, Mrs. Washington USA. She has launched a campaign to help parents and teachers become aware of the critical link between vision and learning.

In Illinois, Mrs. Janet V. Hughes, a mother of five and PTA member had a similar experience. This motivated her to work with the National PTA to amend their Position Statement “Elements of Comprehensive Health Programs” at their annual convention this past June to include: “National PTA recognizes that... Early diagnosis and treatment of children’s vision problems is a necessary component to school readiness and academic learning; and that vision screening is not a substitute for a complete eye and vision evaluation by an eye doctor. Comprehensive eye and vision examinations ... are important for all children first entering school and regularly throughout their school-aged years.”

“Good vision is essential for effective learning,” says Hellerstein. “Children often do not know that they are not seeing as well as they should, so they are unable to voice their frustrations to an adult. Even parents and teachers can often overlook the sometimes subtle symptoms of learning-related vision problems.”

“Vision problems can also go undetected because the child may have passed the standard ‘20/20’ eye chart test,” says Hellerstein. “But this test does not measure how well a child can see at near distances, nor does it evaluate other visual skills necessary for learning such as eye coordination, tracking, eye focusing, or depth perception. This is why it is so important to have the child undergo a comprehensive vision exam by a qualified eye care professional.”

Dr. Hellerstein urges parents and teachers to take the time to learn more about the critical link between vision and learning. If reading and learning is a struggle for your child, schedule a comprehensive vision exam with a developmental optometrist.

For an in-depth symptom checklist, more information on the critical link between vision and learning, and a list of doctors who can provide a comprehensive developmental vision examination, please visit the College of Optometrists in Vision Development’s special website in honor of August being National Children’s Vision and Learning Month: **www.visionforlearning.org**.

The College of Optometrists in Vision Development is an international non-profit optometric membership organization that provides a certification program in vision development and vision therapy for doctors of optometry and vision therapists. Their main website is: www.covd.org.