

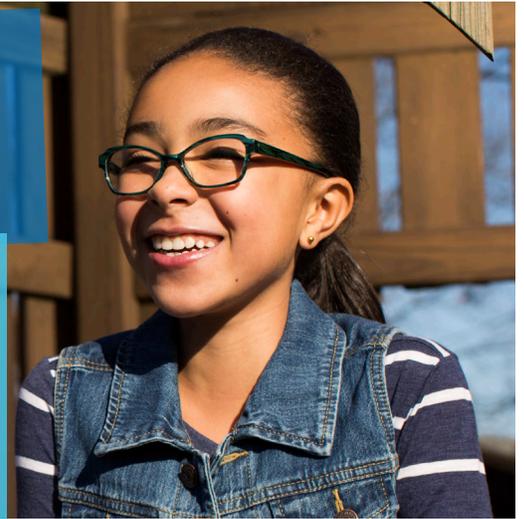
EYE EXAMS FOR CHILDREN – WHY, HOW SOON AND HOW OFTEN

BY GARY HEITING, OD

Children's vision problems are common — probably more common than you think. Researchers say up to 10 percent of preschoolers and up to 25 percent of school-age children have vision disorders, and many of these problems can affect learning.

Unfortunately, many children's vision problems don't have obvious signs and symptoms and aren't detected in school vision screenings.

The only way to know for sure if your children have the visual skills they need in school is to make sure they have routine comprehensive eye exams performed by an optometrist or ophthalmologist.



WHY CHILDREN'S EYE EXAMS ARE SO IMPORTANT

Early childhood eye exams are essential to insure normal visual development and confirm there are no vision problems that might affect academic performance when a child reaches school age.

Experts say roughly 80 percent of what a child learns prior to age 13 is presented visually, so it's not surprising that good vision is necessary for optimal learning. And, given that even preschoolers these days routinely use computers and portable electronic devices, it's reasonable to assume that detecting vision problems early is more important than ever.

Pay close attention to your child's eyes beginning in infancy. Some children are born with eye alignment problems — called strabismus — that can cause incomplete visual development (amblyopia or "lazy eye"). If not detected and treated early, strabismus and amblyopia can cause permanent visual disability.

Some cases of strabismus are obvious, with one eye being noticeably "crossed" (turned inward) or "wall-eyed" (turned outward). If you suspect your infant has misaligned eyes, be sure to mention this to your pediatrician during routine wellness visits. To completely rule out strabismus, amblyopia and other vision problems, however, take your child to an eye doctor.

Many infants and toddlers are affected by common refractive errors such as farsightedness and astigmatism, which can cause eye strain, headaches, blurred vision and avoidance of reading. These vision problems pose a greater risk for learning problems than strabismus.

The most common children's vision problem is myopia (nearsightedness). Though myopia typically doesn't affect reading, it causes blurred distance vision.

A CHILD'S FIRST EYE EXAM

The American Optometric Association (AOA) recommends children have their first eye exam at six months of age.

Though the scope of this exam is not as extensive as the comprehensive exams older children and adults receive, the eye doctor will perform tests to make sure your child's eyes are healthy and that there are no problems that might interfere with normal visual development.

ROUTINE EXAMS THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL YEARS

According to the AOA, a child's next eye exams should take place:

- At age 3
- Prior to kindergarten or first grade (age 5-6)
- Every 1-2 years thereafter

Children who are diagnosed with vision problems and prescribed corrective eyewear should have annual eye exams, especially if they wear contact lenses. If your child has special risk factors for eye problems, the eye doctor might recommend more frequent exams.

ASK YOUR EYE CARE PROVIDER ABOUT VISION COVERAGE

Many health plans offer a covered vision benefit for children. Your health insurance plan with an eye care provider to determine the children's vision benefits your plan provides.

And be sure to add eye exams to your back-to-school "to do" list. Making sure your children have excellent vision will help them perform at their best — in and out of the classroom!

Gary Heiting, OD, has more than 20 years experience as a clinical optometrist.

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