

How Well Does Your Baby See?

By Dr. Christina M. Danley

As a new mother, vision development has taken on a whole new meaning for me. I have watched in awe and amazement as my little one's vision develops. It may surprise you to know that your newborn baby can barely see you! Infants are not born with perfect eyesight. Vision develops during the first few years of life.

Vision should normally develop by 3 years of age. Prior to that point your infant goes through various stages starting with everything looking like shadows up until about 3 months of age. By 6 months things are still a little fuzzy, but much clearer and easier to identify. At one year of age everything should be clear and easy to see.

There are 17 visual skills that are required for academic success that are all developing as your little one grows. While many parents are often anxious to have their child start walking, it is very important that your child learn to crawl first as this helps develop eye-hand coordination. There are some things you can do to help encourage the development of good visual skills:

- Place toys within focus of your baby's eyes—only 8 to 12 inches away.
- Talk to your baby as you move around the room to encourage him or her to follow you visually around the room.
- Hang a mobile above or outside your baby's crib.
- Give your baby toys to hold and look at.
- Make sure your baby is following moving objects with his or her eyes.

Your child does not need to be able to read in order to have an eye exam. Depending on the age of your child, there are a variety of different ways to check his or her vision.

If your child seems to be able to see OK, and doesn't complain—you still need to schedule an eye exam. While only 4 out of 100 children have amblyopia (also known as lazy eye) the only way to be sure it is caught early is with a thorough eye exam. Early detection of lazy eye will prevent permanent vision loss. Half of the children with lazy eye in this country go undetected because they have never had a complete eye exam.

Former President Jimmy Carter has two grandchildren who each had a case of lazy eye that wasn't caught until they were already struggling in school.

Mr. Carter was so moved by this that he is the national spokesperson for a special program developed by Johnson & Johnson and the American Optometric Association. The special program is called InfantSEE which provides complimentary vision assessments for all infants from 6 to 12 months of age. You can find an InfantSEE provider by visiting: www.infantsee.org.

If you notice that one eye turns in or out or that your baby doesn't seem to respond to visual activity, schedule an exam immediately. Otherwise you should schedule your baby's InfantSEE vision assessment sometime between 6 and 12 months. Unless your eye doctor tells you otherwise, the next eye exam should be at 3 years and then again before entering school.

For your school-age children, they should have an eye exam every other year, unless your doctor has given you other instructions.

While "sight" refers to the ability to see, "vision" is more about the ability of the child to comprehend the information that comes to him through his eyes. The body's eyes are designed to work together for optimum performance. If his eyes are not working together properly, the information input will be hard for him to understand.

Once your infant develops clarity of sight, the next stage involves making sense out of what they are looking at. Just because a child can see the eye chart it does not mean that they have perfect vision. In fact, 3 out of 5 children with learning problems are missing many of the visual skills critical for reading and learning. They might be loud and disruptive, or easily distracted and hyperactive, or even moody and silent, to name a few of the symptoms. If your child is missing even one of these 17 visual skills, reading and learning could become difficult.

Most children think that everyone sees the same way they do, and as such, usually won't voice to their parents or teacher that they are having problems. So it is important for parents to know the symptoms of some of the more common vision problems. Following are a few educational websites which would be good to visit: www.covd.org (College of Optometrists in Vision Development), www.infantsee.org, www.aoa.org (American Optometric Association) and www.center4vision.com. If your child is struggling with reading, a developmental vision evaluation may be the key to unlocking your child's actual potential.

Dr. Christina M. Danley is a MTHEA member and a developmental optometrist at The Center for Vision Development in Franklin, TN. You can find her online at www.center4vision.com. Her office can be contacted at (615) 791-5766 or center4vision@center4vision.com.

