Vision & Learning: How You Can Help

By Dr. Christina M. Danley, O.D.

Many children struggle unnecessarily with vision-based learning problems because they have passed standard vision screenings and everyone assumes their vision is fine. Yet vision problems can undermine the education of even the smartest of children.

Working with a child who has unidentified visual challenges can be very difficult. Children have no idea how they should see, so it is hard for them to tell you when they have a vision problem. The way children tell us if they have vision problems is through their actions. For example, the top three signs that your child may not be able to see 3D are:

1. Clumsy: Spills milk when pouring, trips while walking, bumps into things
2. Scared of escalators, going down stairs, climbing play structures or avoids them all together
3. Has difficulty hitting or catching a ball

Not being able to see 3D can also be a sign that there is a vision problem blocking learning. Some additional behaviors to watch for include: attention problems, difficulty with reading, writing, coloring within the lines, and avoidance or dislike of puzzles. These are signs that your child may have a binocular vision disorder. A binocular vision disorder means your child has difficulty coordinating the images from each eye to form a single, clear image.

It can be confusing to parents when the problem is intermittent. For example, when you go over spelling words your child can say, spell and even understand the words, yet when he is reading for about 5 minutes or so, all of a sudden he starts having trouble and can't make out the words. Parents often think the child is just lazy or not applying himself, because there appears to be no other logical explanation. After all, why would he not recognize words she knows?

A binocular vision disorder can cause the words to look double or blurred, and sometimes the words look like they are moving on the page. This usually happens after reading for a few minutes and it is different for each child.

By the time your child is 5 years old, his eye-hand coordination should be well developed: coloring within lines, cutting and pasting quite well on simple pictures, copying simple forms and some letters; placing small objects in small openings and recognizing names or colors. If your child is school age and has any difficulty with these activities, there could be a visual development problem holding him back.

When a child has academic problems which don't seem to resolve, parents will seek a professional opinion. When a child has a vision-based learning problem, the results of a psychoeducational evaluation can show a visual motor or visual perceptual disorder. A simple explanation of visual motor is eye hand coordination. Visual perceptual means how well does one interpret visual information. Parents are often given modifications they can do to help.

Generally, a child with this type of problem needs help in structuring and organizing visual information. The suggestions below are by no means comprehensive and hopefully can be implemented during your teaching sessions without too much difficulty.

Teaching Strategies

1. Point out and emphasize differences in whatever visual information is provided. Ask him to "trace" over the letters and words, "draw" them in the air with a finger, "draw" them with his eyes closed, and in as many other ways as possible, appreciate the construction of the symbol.

2. Until visual skills are established, a good short term, temporary technique is to encourage the use of his finger as a pointer when he is reading. When helpful, allow him to use a liner under each line of print on the page, or to use a mask which has been slotted so that only one line is visible at any given time.

3. If possible, evaluate or test your child orally rather then in writing. If written performance is poor despite stellar oral performance, this is a definite sign that a vision problem is holding your child back.

Use of Materials

1. Avoid giving your child paperwork or work book assignments in which the pages are busy or cluttered. Simplify the layout or clearly divide the work spaces for each task.

2. Help him organize the space on his paper before he starts a written task. For example, have him fold his paper into rectangles in which to do arithmetic. If the folds are not enough, use heavy lines to divide the paper into defined spaces.

Learning Environment

1. Short visual work periods will tend to reduce stress and fidgeting.

2. Read and write at a distance equal to the length of the child's arm from elbow to middle knuckle (known as "Harmon's distance").

The most important point for parents to understand is that vision develops, which means that if your child has not yet developed the visual skills critical for reading and learning, he can still learn how to use his eyes correctly. And, if there is any problem with how visual information is interpreted, this too can be taught. For more information please visit: www.covd.org or www.startreadingsuccess.com.

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