

Never Too Early

It's amazing how much there is for a new or expecting parent to learn in such a short time. There are no manuals for raising a child, only suggestions; some good suggestions and some bad ones. As I wait for the birth of my second child in the coming weeks, I thought I would help refresh all parents about the importance of eye examinations for their children. Many people don't realize that a child can be examined and should be examined before they are able to read letters or numbers.

A child's first visual assessment is actually conducted at the hospital during birth. This is a screening conducted by the paediatrician or in some cases an ophthalmologist to check the structure of the eyes, and the clarity of the media. General assessments by the paediatrician continue during baby check-ups and would include general diseases, gross deformities, obvious eye turns, and neurological checks. The doctor might use a light, maybe a cover-paddle and an ophthalmoscope. During these early screenings there is no evaluation of binocular vision, significant refractive problems, amblyopia and some diseases. These early screenings have the benefit of helping determine if a child is at risk but does not actually detect vision disorders. A referral to an eye doctor is made to determine what vision disorders are affecting the child's development.

For children who aren't referred by their paediatrician for early visual disorders the first suggested examination is between 6 months to 2 years of age. This comprehensive examination will help determine if there is any need for glasses, ensure that the eyes are working well together, and check for any diseases of the eye. This examination can be done without any responses from the child but if the child participates it does make the experience more fulfilling since the child realizes that they helped.

The second comprehensive exam should be at 3-years-old. Children are typically more co-operative and language skills are developing. This is also the time that many visual problems begin. Amblyopia or the inability to see 20/20 can begin without any obvious signs or symptoms. Accommodative esotropias, eye turns caused by reading or near tasks, may develop as the child begins to want to read and colour. Moderate refractive error or a need for glasses occurs as the eye begins to grow towards its normal adult length and size. The child rarely notices any difficulties with any of these conditions; therefore, the condition is allowed to continue to worsen with time.

The third comprehensive exam is suggested at 5-years-old. Most children are able to communicate quite well at this age and can participate in subjective parts of the exam. The most important part of this examination is ensuring that the child is prepared for school from a visual perspective. Low refractive errors may put some children at risk for reduced benefits during school because they can't see certain things on the blackboard or in books. In Canada and some US States there is no formal requirement for an eye exam before entry into school but in some places there is a requirement for a dental exam. Very little learning is done by taste during school but greater than 90% of education is through vision.

At the age of 6 and then throughout the school years it is suggested that children have comprehensive examinations yearly since the eyes continue to change over this time. There is an increasing use of the eyes for detailed tasks, increasing demand for sustained work, decreasing print sizes and an increase in reading. Visual disorders can impact learning by decreasing performance and lowering self-esteem. Children often don't know what they are experiencing is not normal and many parents don't ask.

This little review of a child's development can hopefully help some new parents and those who have pre-school children realize that a child's vision doesn't start when they read but begins right from day one at the hospital. This vision needs to be monitored and evaluated to ensure that normal milestones are met and if they aren't treatment can start early before it becomes a significant or permanent problem.