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Vision Problems, Not ADD, May Underlie Problems in School

Do you know a child who has a short attention span, struggles with schoolwork, lacks organizational skills, makes careless errors, and is fidgety? More and more often, such a child is considered to have Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD, and these symptoms are treated with medication. However, these same signs may be indicative of a vision problem that can be corrected without the use of drugs.

The American Academy of Ophthalmology estimates that over 12 million children in this country suffer from some form of vision problem. Five percent of all preschoolers and twenty-five percent of all school-aged children have vision problems. About twenty percent of school-aged children suffer with vision problems that go undetected.

Vision is not just the ability to see; it is also the ability to understand and respond appropriately to what is seen. According to the Children's Vision Network, children process "over 80% of what they learn" through their eyes. Visual skills include the ability to use both eyes "as a team," to focus, and to track objects or words across a written page. Unfortunately, problems with the development of these skills may go undetected, making school, and life in general, more difficult for children. The need to detect vision problems early, when they are more treatable, is obvious. That is why eye doctors stress the importance of eye screenings for infants during their regular pediatric appointments, and recommend regular vision tests beginning at age three.

Unfortunately, the only eye test most children have is the distance screening using an eye chart that is typically administered in school. Often times, the eye chart will indicate a child has 20/20 vision for distance, and the assumption is made that the child has normal vision even though there may be serious problems with other visual skills. Even with the administration of the school eye test, approximately twenty percent of school aged children have undetected eye problems that hinder their school performance.

Before a child is labeled as dyslexic or having ADD, the possibility of vision problems should be ruled out. If a child is reading below grade level and has trouble understanding what is written, uses a finger to follow a line of print or else loses his/her place, gets tired or distracted easily when reading, omits or turns words around, or avoids reading or other close-up tasks, the problem may rest with the eyes. Other symptoms to look for include squinting, frowning, or rubbing the eyes when reading, red or watery eyes when reading, difficulty taking tests, holding the book too closely, complaining of blurred or double vision, reversing letters or numbers, and poor handwriting. Headaches, eye strain, poor hand/eye coordination, and clumsiness are signs that not only suggest vision problems, but also explain a child's lack of self-esteem, frustration with school, and apparent laziness.

When a child exhibits more than a few of these symptoms, it is time to schedule an eye examination. If the eye doctor (either an ophthalmologist or an optometrist) finds a problem, a number of treatment options will be considered. If there is a refractive error, a prescription for eyeglasses may be the answer. In addition, many doctors, particularly those that specialize in children's vision, now include vision

therapy for some vision problems. Vision therapy is a progressive program of vision exercises that are performed under a doctor's supervision, usually once or twice a week. Sometimes, the exercises are also conducted at home between visits. It is somewhat similar to physical therapy frequently prescribed by doctors for specific physical ailments. Vision therapy is often prescribed for binocular disorders, those that affect how the two eyes function together. Conditions that may be helped with vision therapy include "focusing deficiencies, eye muscle imbalances, motor fusion deficiencies, and refractive errors," according to the American Optometric Association. The goal of vision therapy is to improve function and performance of the eyes by retraining them through a series of eye exercises. Vision therapy can be an alternative to surgery in some cases of lazy eye, crossed eyes, and double vision.

Recently (June of 2005), the American Optometric Association partnered with The Vision Care Institute of Johnson & Johnson Vision Care to establish the InfantSEE program. This "first-of-its-kind national program" will provide children up to the age of one year free infant eye and vision assessments. The program is based on the premise that since many visual abilities are fully functional by six months of age, detection of any "interference with development during this very critical phase" can avoid serious, lifelong vision problems later on. Anyone interested in this program can find a participating optometrist by visiting the American Optometric Association's web site at www.aoa.org, or by calling 1-888-396-3937 (www.infantsee.org).

To find a developmental optometrist (an eye doctor specializing in children's vision), call the College of Optometrists in Vision Development at 1-888-268-3770 or check online at www.covd.org/mem.html. Additional information about children's vision is available through the American Academy of Ophthalmology at 415-561-8500 (www.aao.org) and the Children's Vision Information Network's web site at www.vision.about.com. Questions about this or any other public health concern may be directed to the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org.)