

Why a back-to-school eye exam may help your child learn better

Does your child struggle to see the whiteboard or get headaches while reading? A back-to-school eye exam may help them ace this school year.



We all want to give our children the tools they need to do their best at school. That often means new school supplies and a fresh wardrobe.

But back-to-school eye exams are just as important as new shoes and notebooks. That's because poor vision can impact a student's ability to learn and participate in sports.¹

When kids can't see the whiteboard or read their textbooks without squinting, it can slow them down.¹ Here's what you need to know to help them get back up to speed this school year.

What's the link between vision and learning?

Vision issues are sometimes confused with learning difficulties.² When a child's vision is impaired, they may:

- Struggle to focus on what they're reading
- Lose their place while reading
- Have eyestrain
- Shut down because of embarrassment

"Clear vision is critically important for all activities of daily living, including educational pursuits and sports," says Mark E. Wilkinson, O.D., a clinical professor of ophthalmology and visual sciences at Carver College of Medicine in Iowa City, Iowa. "Without clear vision, it may be difficult to focus comfortably, which will slow learning."

What are common vision problems in kids?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 6.8% of kids under 18 have a diagnosed eye or vision condition.³

The most common refractive errors in children are:¹

- **Myopia.** Also known as nearsightedness, myopia makes it hard to see things in the distance. In the classroom, this applies to everything from a teacher's face to the whiteboard. In sports, uncorrected myopia could make it tough to see a ball coming at you until it's too late to make a move.

- **Hyperopia.** Also known as farsightedness, hyperopia makes it hard to see nearby objects. “Hyperopia can greatly impact learning by making it difficult to see to read clearly,” says Dr. Wilkinson says.
- **Astigmatism.** It causes blurry or distorted vision due to an irregularly shaped cornea or lens. It can happen alongside nearsightedness or farsightedness. Around 23% of infants have astigmatism, but many children grow out of it as their eyes develop. By age 5 or 6, that number drops to 9%.⁴

What are signs your child may have trouble seeing?

Children don’t always know when their vision is blurry or out of focus. After all, the world may have always looked like that to them. That means it’s important to keep an eye out for signs of refractive errors in your child.

According to Dr. Wilkinson, those signs may include:

- Red, watery or swollen eyes
- Droopy eyes
- Eyes with different pupil sizes
- Squinting, frowning or scowling when looking at objects
- Holding printed materials in an unusual position
- Rubbing their eyes
- Complaining about headaches
- Saying their eyes hurt, burn or itch
- Saying that words jump around on the page
- Complaining of double vision

How often should your child get their eyes examined?

It’s a good idea to get a baseline screening of your child’s vision at ages 3 and 5, says Dr. Wilkinson. If there are no signs of a vision issue, he recommends getting your child screened every 2 years after that.

If your child’s optometrist does spot a refractive error such as myopia, they will likely recommend annual eye exams to monitor for a change in your child’s prescription. They may also want to fit your child for corrective lenses — either eyeglasses or contact lenses.

What will an eye doctor look for during an exam?

The eye doctor will look for refractive errors by performing a series of tests. First, your child will look into an autorefractor. That’s a boxlike machine that determines how good or bad their vision is. This helps the doctor figure out your child’s prescription.

The doctor will also ask your child to read from an eye chart. That’s the chart with the big letters at the top and tiny letters at the bottom. They will also use different tools to look into your child’s eyes.

“They will check how well the 2 eyes are aligned with each other and how well they work together,” says Dr. Wilson.

At the end of the eye exam, the doctor will let you know when to bring your child back for their next visit. Keeping up with your child’s eye exams will help make sure they’re ready to tackle every school year.

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Sources:

1. [How vision affects your child in school](#) All About Vision, February 2022.
2. [Vision-related learning problems](#) American Optometric Association.
3. [Fast facts about vision loss](#) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed August 2023.
4. [Astigmatism in infants and kids](#) All About Vision, August 2020.