



## Seeing the Future: Why Child Eye Care Must Be a Priority

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### The overlooked crisis in children's eye health

When we think about a child health, we often focus on vaccinations, nutrition, physical development, and mental wellness. Yet, one vital aspect is frequently overlooked: eye health. It's a silent issue that affects millions of children worldwide. According to the World Health Organization, around 19 million children under the age of 15 are visually impaired, with nearly 12 million suffering from conditions that could be corrected with glasses or contact lenses.

In an increasingly visual world, where classrooms are full of screens and learning depends more than ever on visual engagement, good eyesight is not just important its essential. Despite this, regular eye exams are not prioritized in many households, especially in low- and middle-income communities.

Even more alarming is that children often do not realize they have a vision problem. They assume what they see is "normal" because they have no point of comparison. By the time the issue is detected often through academic underperformance or behavioral issues the damage may have already begun to affect their social and educational development.

Parents, educators, and health professionals must take a proactive approach. Vision problems are not just a medical concern they are an educational and developmental emergency.

### Common eye conditions in children and why early detection matters

Many parents are surprised to learn that children can develop a wide range of eye issues from a very young age. Some of the most common include:

- **Refractive Errors:** These include nearsightedness (myopia), farsightedness (hyperopia) , and astigmatism. These can often be corrected with prescription glasses.
- **Strabismus:** A condition where the eyes are misaligned. If left untreated, it can lead to amblyopia or "lazy eye".
- **Amblyopia:** Reduced vision in one eye caused by abnormal visual development early in life. It is one of the leading cause of vision impairment in children.
- **Congenital Cataracts:** Though rare, these can be present at birth and require early surgery to prevent permanent vision loss.

Early detection is crucial because children brain and eyes develop rapidly in the first few years of life. The plasticity of a child's visual system means that many issues, if caught early, can be corrected or significantly improved.

Unfortunately, many children do not receive a comprehensive eye exam until they are well into their school years if at all. Vision screenings at school, while helpful, are often limited and can miss

more subtle or complex conditions. Only a comprehensive exam by a pediatric optometrist or ophthalmologist can ensure that a child's eyes are truly healthy.

### The digital dilemma: How screens are straining young eyes

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the integration of digital learning, and while it offered educational continuity, it also introduced a new challenge: digital eye strain. Also known as Computer Vision Syndrome, it refers to a group of eye and vision-related problems that result from prolonged screen use.

Children today are spending more time on screens than any previous generation. Whether it's online learning, video games, or recreational use of smart phones and tablets, the average screen time for children has skyrocketed. This trend has been linked to:

- Increased myopia rates, especially in urban areas.
- Dry eyes, due to decreased blinking while staring at screens.
- Eye fatigue, headaches, and difficulty focusing.

Pediatric eye care now must include digital hygiene education teaching children and parents about the "20-20-20 rule": every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds.

Regular breaks, proper lighting, and ensuring screens are at eye level can also help reduce strain.

However, no digital hygiene rule can replace the value of in-person eye exams and human interaction. Vision is more than just clarity; it's about coordination, perception, and overall development. The more time a child spends staring at a screen, the more likely they are to miss out on critical visual experiences like depth perception and outdoor distance viewing, which are essential for healthy eye development.

### Solutions and call to action: A community approach to clear vision

Solving the child eye care crisis requires a multi-pronged approach: one that involves not just parents and doctors, but schools, governments, and communities.

#### What Can Parents Do?

- Schedule regular eye exams starting from infancy.

Recommended guidelines - the first eye exam at 6 months of age, then at age 3, before first grade, and every two years after that.

- Watch for warning signs: squinting, sitting too close to screens, frequent headaches, eye rubbing, or poor academic performance.
- Limit screen time and encourage outdoor play, which has been shown to slow the progression of myopia.

#### What Should Schools Do?

- Incorporate vision screenings and refer students for comprehensive exams when needed.
- Educate teachers about how vision problems can mimic learning disabilities.
- Adjust classroom setups for optimal lighting and reduce screen dependence when possible.

#### What Can Governments and Policymakers Do?

- Ensure that pediatric eye care is included in public health programs.
- Provide access to affordable eye exams and corrective lenses for low-income families.
- Invest in public awareness campaigns to make eye health a national conversation.

Healthy vision is not a luxury. It is a right. By protecting children's eyes today, we empower their potential for a lifetime [1-5].

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