

The Medical Minute: Pediatric eye safety

29 July 2010, By Marianne E. Boltz

Yes, the dog days of summer are upon us; for most families that signals the longstanding tradition of back to school preparation. It's time to begin the search for the perfect backpack and notebook, shop for new clothing and shoes, get a haircut and maybe even sneak in a trip to the dentist. Regrettably, few parents think to schedule an eye exam for their child prior to the beginning of school.

Why is it a good idea for your child to have an eye health and vision exam on a regular basis and particularly before beginning kindergarten? You may believe your child has good vision -- sees airplanes in the distance, does not squint when watching TV, no headaches and does not complain - but [vision problems](#) can be present without any remarkable signs or symptoms. These problems, which children can be born with or show up within the first few years of life, can affect both the health and function of your young child's eyes as well as prevent them from having efficient visual skills. While most parents do a great job at taking their children to the dentist, it is not teeth that help you to learn, give you proper [depth perception](#) and allow good eye/hand coordination and gross motor skills -- it is the eyes!

So what [eye problems](#) are we most concerned about within the first 5 to 6 years of a child's life? The most commonly seen vision problems include excessive refractive error (farsightedness, nearsightedness and astigmatism), strabismus (crossed or wandering eyes that do not work together as a team), [amblyopia](#) (where one eye - or less commonly, both - cannot be corrected to 20/20 due to either high refractive error or strabismus). The good news is that if any of these conditions are caught early, they can be treated or even fully corrected. Treatments could include anything from prescribing glasses, patching therapy or eye muscle surgery.

Thankfully, eye health problems in the preschool population are seen less frequently, but do exist. These problems can include cataracts,

nasolacrimal duct obstruction (blocked tear duct), nystagmus (irregular movements of the eyes), glaucoma, retinoblastoma (a type of cancer in the eye). Children are typically either born with these more serious eye health concerns or they develop early on. Observant parents may see something "different" about their child's eyes such as a white pupil that shows up especially in photographs, one eye that appears larger or chronic tearing. It is crucial to have your child examined immediately by an eye specialist with a dilated fundus examination if any of these signs or symptoms appear. For more information about the importance of early eye exams and vision development in children, refer to www.aoa.org/ and www.infantsee.org/ online.

Parents, it's not too late. Until that first school bell rings, you still have time to contact your family optometrist or ophthalmologist to schedule an eye health and vision exam for your child. It will be the one back-to-school preparation that could have a longstanding positive impact on your child's academic life and development!

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

APA citation: The Medical Minute: Pediatric eye safety (2010, July 29) retrieved 23 September 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-07-medical-minute-pediatric-eye-safety.html>

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