Opening our eyes to Vision Therapy

Dr. Philip Bugaiski of the Developmental Vision Center in Charlotte is an expert in vision and learning. He discusses below some important facts for parents.

Every parent wants their child to be successful in school. But as many as 25 percent of children in any classroom have vision problems that keep them from attaining their highest level of success. Four of five classroom hours involve doing near vision work less than arm's length from a child's eyes. Vision problems that interfere with learning include things like poor teamwork, difficulty focusing, inaccurate tracking, and visual processing problems that can interfere with attention to detail, memory and sequencing. **These problems have nothing to do with 20/20 eyesight, and are not associated with eye diseases.**

Hallmark Characteristics

In general, children with vision problems that get in the way of their school performance seem to be smart, but they struggle to do the work and get the grades. They don't seem to be living up to their potential, and may appear to avoid doing work (potentially being labeled as inattentive or lazy) or they may struggle inordinately (appearing to have a learning disability). Some parents describe their children as working very hard, but the effort isn't reflected in the quality of the work or the grade; there's a mismatch between effort and result.

There are a lot of warning signs that parents and teachers can watch for during schoolwork or homework. Many of these signs are on the checklist below. Problems may also present when the academic demand exceeds the developmental level of the visual skills. For example, a bright child with developmental vision problems might be able to learn how to read, but problems can surface when they get to 3rd grade and are expected to *read to learn*. We've also seen some children that make it through elementary and middle school, but can't seem to handle the volume of work in high school. These older students are usually children that are especially gifted, and were able to achieve at a relatively high level in earlier grades, but were working especially hard in the presence of visual difficulties.

Vision and Learning Checklist

✓Short attention span for reading

✓Must read and re-read material to understand it well

✓Takes "hours" to do 30 minutes of homework

✓Disturbs other children in class during reading or other subjects that require intense near work

✓Gets sleepy when reading

✓Still reverses words, letters beyond second grade

✓Better at Math than English

✓Skips or re-reads words or lines

✓Covers one eye while reading, exhibits odd postures at desk

How and Why Vision Therapy Works

Our current understanding of human neurology reveals that approximately 70% of our brains are primarily involved in vision (not just 20/20 eyesight, but knowing where to look for tracking, focusing, and teaming, remembering what we've seen and where we saw it, linking up what we hear and what we visualize, guiding our hands along the page when writing or drawing, etc). And educational psychologists estimate that approximately 80 to 85% of classroom learning is visually-based; a "small" visual problem can actually be quite troublesome in the classroom. (There are a few very astute psychologists in the area that, when they see a child with a mismatch between verbal and non-verbal test scores, refer for care; the "non-verbal" could more appropriately be described as "visual".) Vision therapy builds the neuromuscular and perceptual mechanisms necessary for learning, and the new skills are repeatedly being applied in the classroom.

One warning for well-intentioned parents: if your teacher, tutor, or therapist has recommended an evaluation to check for vision problems that interfere with learning, you go to the eye doctor, and you are told that there is no problem because your child sees 20/20 and their eyes are healthy, the doctor didn't look for what you wanted them to look for. The kind of hidden vision problems that interfere with learning are not always detected at an eye exam, often because the doctor is especially well-trained at evaluating "eyes" but not at how the person is able to use their eyes.

Average Length of Treatment

In our clinic, the majority of patients that we see are bright children who have a hard time showing how smart they are during school. Those children usually have 20/20 eyesight and healthy eyes, are in good health, and are eager to get better at reading and writing, but the visual problems are a huge barrier to their success. The average length of treatment for those children is approximately 6 to 8 months, with treatment sessions twice a week and a few minutes of daily "home support activities". (In general, children that attend twice a week develop much better visual skills than children that attend the same number of sessions at a frequency of once a week.) But there is no "magic number" of sessions, so I formally reassess visual skills every 6 to 8 weeks – we don't want anyone working longer than they need to, nor do we want someone stopping treatment before the new skills become new habits that are an integral part of their being.

Dr. Philip C. Bugaiski, OD, FCOVD first developed an interest in optometry as a result of childhood vision challenges which were treated with vision therapy. Graduating from Penn State with honors, he was awarded one of six national scholarships for optometry from the US Air Force. He received his optometric degree from State University of New York College of Optometry, was commissioned as an Air Force Captain, and served at Pope AFB, NC and Lakenheath RAF, England. With an honorable discharge, Dr. Bugaiski settled in Charlotte and founded The Developmental Vision Center in 2005. His practice specializes in Vision Development, Vision Therapy, Pediatric Optometry, Sports Vision Training, and Vision Rehabilitation.