



Young Children and Their Eyes

By British Columbia Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors

A note to parents....

This Health File is designed to help you identify eyesight problems that are most common in children 1 to 4 years old. These problems can go unnoticed if you don't know what symptoms to look for.

For information about eye development and eye problems with babies under 1 year, please check your copy of Baby's Best Chance -- Parent Handbook of Pregnancy and Baby Care. If you don't already have a copy, your local public health nurse can tell you how to get one. For information about school age children and their eyes, please see Health File #53b.

What can my child see?

At age 8 to 12 months, children start to develop eye-hand coordination, as well as being able to tell how close or far away things are. This helps them pick up and throw things and marks the beginning of their skill in working with small objects. Young children then build from these skills, and use their developing vision to direct how they use their body.

Encourage children to climb, run on the playground with you, play with a ball, etc. as they grow. These and other activities -- like playing with building blocks and big puzzles -- help the eyes to develop and help your child practice other general skills.

Are there eyesight problems that must be corrected at an early age?

Yes. Some problems can end in permanent vision damage if not corrected early enough.

- crossed eyes (strabismus), where the eye muscles point one or both eyes in the wrong direction, and
- lazy eye (amblyopia), where the vision in one eye is weaker than the other. The child's brain will then ignore the weak eye and use the strong one in an attempt to see. If left untreated, the child's brain develops a clear picture in the good eye and a blurry picture in the weak eye which then means the weak eye won't function well.

These problems often have a family history, so if there have been vision/eye problems in your family you should have your child's eyes examined by your eye doctor by age 3.

What signs of vision problems should I watch for?

The most obvious sign of a vision problem (which you may notice while caring for your young child or perhaps while looking at photographs) is that both eyes often are not looking in the same direction.

Vision problems may also be present if your child:

- rubs his or her eyes or seems to be squinting or frowning;
- blinks more than usual;
- tilts or turns his or her head to use one eye only;
- has headaches; or
- avoids close work.

If you notice any of these signs, you should consider taking your child to your family doctor or eye doctor, especially if you know there are vision problems in your family. Red eyes or eyes which are very watery or have a discharge should also be seen by your doctor.

What do I need to know about a young child's eye exam? What does my child need to know?

Your child does not need to be able to read the alphabet to take a vision test. Special eye charts are used, with pictures that your child can understand. A useful eye test can be done even if your child isn't talking yet.

The eye doctor will check both the inside and outside of your child's eye's, looking at them with special equipment. These tests are not uncomfortable. However, you should tell your child that the eye doctor will show them his or her equipment before doing the tests, to prepare them for this new experience.

The eye doctor will check your child's:

- eye health,
- eye muscle movement,
- ability to see clearly,
- ability to tell how near or far away objects are,
- ability to see different colors.

The doctor will discuss the test results with you.

What about eye safety for young children?

Check toys and games to see if there are warnings for preschool children. Anything sharp, like darts, adult scissors or sharp pencils should not be played with. The same applies to missile-like throwing toys, including those with suction cups or rubber tips. Preschool children must also be kept away from older children who are using these toys/games/tools.

When a child is walking or running (especially when learning these skills) don't let them hold any kind or sharp object that they could fall on, or poke themselves in the eye with. This includes ice cream and lollipop sticks.

When you are using power tools, lawn mowers or household or yard chemicals, make sure your child is safely out of the way.

What about problems from children watching television?

Children should sit 3 meters (8 to 10 feet) away from the screen when watching TV.

The TV should be placed to avoid glare and reflections from the screen. The room should have overall soft lighting.

Preschool children will often take their own periodic breaks from watching TV. However, if they don't take a break you should encourage them to do so every half hour or so.