

School Vision Screenings: *Why They Aren't Enough*



Did you know that more than 10 million American school children are affected by vision conditions that could impair their ability to learn?

Unfortunately, it's true, says VSP network doctor Michael McQuillan, O.D., F.C.O.V.D. What's more, the typical school vision screening often fails to detect these conditions.

Dr. McQuillan has tested thousands of school children during 27 years of practice in Camarillo, Calif. In the following Q&A, he explains why parents should never depend exclusively on a school vision screening to protect a child's vision.

Q. What takes place during a typical vision screening at school?

A. The typical screening includes a distance acuity (visual sharpness) test where students read an eye chart. Usually the screening also includes a color-vision test for kindergarten boys only, since they're more susceptible to color blindness.

Q. Who conducts the screenings, and what are they supposed to achieve?

A. The screenings are usually conducted by a school nurse, and they're primarily designed to determine how well the child can read the eye chart from a distance. Near vision is not even tested.

Q. Does a school screening catch all vision problems related to learning?

A. No, it certainly doesn't. I'd estimate that 15-20 percent of school children are affected by vision conditions that are often overlooked in screenings. Remember, the school nurse is usually looking only for distance visual sharpness – the well known "20-20 vision" – and not for these more complicated problems. A child could pass the vision screening, but not be able to see well enough to read a book.

Q. What are the most commonly overlooked vision-threatening conditions in a school screening?

A. Several vision-threatening conditions often go undetected. The most common is an inability to coordinate the eyes and maintain clear, consistent focus. This failure to coordinate the eyes is called "binocular vision dysfunction," and it frequently won't show up in a screening. When it combines with lack of consistent focus, reading problems can result. Farsightedness, or the inability to see near objects clearly, is another commonly overlooked condition.



Another condition I've occasionally treated – after it was previously overlooked during a screening – is amblyopia, or "lazy eye," where one eye wanders and doesn't join the other eye in focusing. To compensate, the brain learns to ignore the visual input from the lazy eye. If amblyopia isn't caught during a screening or later in an eye exam, it can result in lifelong vision loss in the lazy eye.

Q. Why is it a problem if vision-threatening conditions are overlooked during a school screening?

A. Research shows that students who can't coordinate their eyes or focus clearly often have learning difficulties. I can't tell you how many times I've diagnosed a condition that was missed in a screening, with negative results in the classroom.

Q. Is it true that a regular eye exam can also uncover important health problems at times?

A. Absolutely! A thorough eye exam can identify the symptoms of such major health problems as diabetes, high blood pressure and even potentially life-threatening tumors.

Q. So what's your advice to parents about school vision screenings?

A. Never assume that the school vision screening is adequate, and be sure to take your child to the eye doctor for a yearly exam – because the stakes are high. The good news is that most conditions can be corrected, and there's no reason they should be allowed to affect your child's performance in school! •