

THE EYES HAVE IT

Does your child struggle to concentrate at school? Do they have issues remaining focused? Or do they complain of headaches and sore eyes? Time to get their eyesight tested, says optometrist Ravi Dass.



Elements of GOOD VISION

VISUAL ACUITY The ability to see clearly at close, middle, and far distances: Reading a book, working on a computer, or seeing the whiteboard.

EYE HEALTH A healthy eye is one free of diseases, such as strabismus (where the eye turns), and amblyopia (lazy eye), which can impair vision or lead to vision loss if not diagnosed and treated early.

VISUAL SKILLS All the functions the eyes must be able to perform to process visual information, including:

- **EYE FOCUSING:** Focusing and shifting focus to near and distant points easily.
- **EYE COORDINATION:** The ability of the eyes to work properly together.
- **EYE MOVEMENT OR TRACKING:** The ability to move the eyes together across a page of print, to look directly at an object, to follow a moving object or to jump smoothly from one object to another.
- **VISUAL INTEGRATION:** The ability to process and integrate visual information, which includes and coordinates input from our other senses and previous experiences so that we can understand what we see.

It may surprise you to learn how many children in New Zealand may suffer from eyesight problems. As an optometrist who works with children regularly, I'm not surprised. In one study we did, of 58 Year 6 children we screened, 19 needed follow-up with an optometrist. So how do you know if your child is one of the 19?

How do I know if my child's eyesight is okay?

You'd think it would be easy for a child to know if they can see clearly or not – but it's not always so simple. Remember that kids don't have any comparison, so for them their eyesight generally seems "normal". They can also be great at compensating for poor vision without knowing it (e.g. the child who has trouble seeing the whiteboard may start sitting closer and closer to the front). What's more, sometimes the eye can focus correctly, but it causes muscle strain and tiredness. In these cases, the child may not notice any blurriness in their vision at all – but they may well find it hard to concentrate, get frequent headaches, or dislike reading. Sadly, some of these kids just decide they are "no good" at school work. It is this group of kids that I'm particularly focused on with the Foureyes Foundation, because helping these kids get glasses can lead to greater success at school.

What can I do as a parent?

Formal government screening of eyesight does take place at various stages throughout childhood – there are tests at birth, age four, and then ages 11 or 12. While this is great, these screenings are not the same as a complete vision check, and each of them has been developed with a specific purpose, as follows:

AGE	MAIN PURPOSE
Birth	➤ <i>Checking for what is known as a "red reflex", which looks for abnormalities in the back of the eye.</i>
Age 4	➤ <i>As part of B4 School checks. Focus is checking for amblyopia (lazy eye).</i>
Age 11 or 12	➤ <i>Year 7 vision screening at school covers distance vision for all children, and colour blindness for boys.</i>

Problems with near vision are not covered at any stage, plus children's eyesight can also change a lot between ages 4 and 11 (which can make those years in between pretty tricky for a kid with eyesight issues).

Thankfully, there are some telltale signs you can look for:

- ★ Dislike or avoidance of close work.
- ★ Sitting at the table with an awkward posture, or turning or tilting the head to one side.
- ★ Closing one eye while reading, or excessive blinking or rubbing of eyes.
- ★ Losing place while reading; skipping or re-reading lines or words; using a finger as a place mark.
- ★ Taking an unusually long time to read or complete reading comprehension tasks.
- ★ Moving closer to a book, desk, or computer screen while reading.
- ★ Complaints of headache, dizziness, and nausea.
- ★ Lack of confidence in group sports and activities.

If just one or two of these ring a bell, there's probably no need for alarm – but if you have real concerns that your child isn't doing as well as they could with their reading, it's worth checking out. Some studies show at least 70% of children with learning difficulties have a vision problem.

The bottom line is, if you do have any doubts or concerns, getting a professional check is a good idea. Many optometrists these days offer children's eye tests at a reduced price – or even for free. The New Zealand Association of Optometrists recommends that children have their eyes examined at 6 to 12 months, again at age 2 to 3, before starting school, and then through their school years as indicated by vision screening or school performance.

For younger children, the Paediatric Society of New Zealand advises you to take your baby or child for a full eye-test if certain "warning signs" are recognised, including premature birth (gestation of 36 weeks or less), development delays, or family history or signs of strabismus (turned eye), amblyopia (lazy eye), or strong glasses at an early age. You can read more about how to spot these signs at kidshealth.org.nz/babys-eyes



Optometrist Ravi Dass is co-founder of the Foureyes Foundation, which works with children in lower decile schools to help identify and provide glasses to Kiwi kids who need them. For every pair of glasses purchased from www.mrfoureyes.co.nz, a pair is given to the Foureyes Foundation.