



Susan R Barry Ph.D. Eyes on the Brain

Why Can't My Child Read?

Why do so many kids struggle in school?

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As another school year is brought to a close, we need to ask again why so many children struggle in their classes. Sometimes the answer is right in the front of our face.

When I was in second grade, I did miserably on a standardized achievement test. The school principal told my parents that I was, "a dim bulb," and I was placed in a class with other "problem" children. But the principal was unaware of the connection between vision and reading. I was cross-eyed and, in the previous five years, my eyes had been surgically rearranged in their sockets three times. I had 20/20 eyesight with each eye, but even after the operations, my two eyes still did not point to the same place at the same time. In fact, when trying to read, I saw letters with my right eye that were to the left of those I saw with my left eye. No wonder I had trouble pinpointing the letters on the page and did not like to read.

Poor eye coordination affects more than the four percent of children who are [cross-eyed or walleyed](#). An additional five percent of children (about one per classroom) have a condition called "[convergence insufficiency](#)." Although their eyes look straight and they may coordinate them well for far viewing, they do not use them well when they look near. When they try to [read](#), the letters appear blurry or doubled. Since a young child may not know that this is abnormal, he may not report what he sees to his teachers or parents. Sadly, this condition is not picked up by the [standard school eye exam](#) which tests only how well one eye sees at a distance of twenty feet. As a result, the child may be diagnosed with a learning disability, or if he misbehaves in frustration, with ADHD.

Even if a child's vision disorder is diagnosed, it can be surprisingly difficult to obtain the proper treatment. According to a recent [National Eye Institute study](#), the best treatment for convergence insufficiency is [optometric vision therapy](#). Yet, ophthalmologists and pediatricians are not generally trained in vision therapy and don't always refer the patients to the [developmental/behavioral optometrists](#) who are. Medical insurance companies may not cover the treatments making the vision therapy difficult to afford.

If we really want to help our children to learn, then we need to provide them with a thorough binocular vision exam before or at the time they enter kindergarten. Such testing could provide huge savings as

children struggling with reading in school may then get the early intervention they need. Detecting vision problems early and seeking the right treatment can change a child's vision and transform a child's life.

Note: I wrote about this issue in a recent [Op-Ed published in the Los Angeles Times](#) and in my book, [Fixing My Gaze](#). Another good website to learn about the connection between vision and reading is [here](#).

Submitted by Leonard J. Press, O.D. on August 28, 2009 - 4:56pm

Your blog is delightful, Sue. For many years, the children that we work with in our Vision & Learning Center have come to us with relatively limited sight word vocabulary. In some instances they confuse similar words when reading. In other instances they use similar looking words interchangeably when writing.

One of my favorite books is by Edward William Dolch, Ph.D., a well-known reading specialist at the College of Education, University of Illinois, in the mid 20th century, who wrote "A Manual for Remedial Reading". In it (2nd ed. pp. 104-5) he writes: "When a child quite consistently confuses the words which look very similar, such as went for want, skip for ship, and the like, we have reason to suspect that the child has a weakness in perception shown by lack of stereopsis or of depth perception ... It has been found that children who lack stereopsis or depth perception do confuse words which are similar ... Such a child will be slow in learning words because he does not easily notice differences between them ... He will often fail to make sense out of his reading ... Few persons who have not studied the matter are aware that this handicap exists".

Hmmm ... seems like Dr. Dolch may have been on to something beyond Dolch Sight Word lists.

About the Author



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