



VISIONandLEARNINGNEWS

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Evergreen Vision and Learning Center

A Back-to-School Message: Learning Problems Can be Vision Related

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August is the time that families focus on making sure their children are ready to go back to school. However, over the years, I have witnessed many parents miss a critical step on their checklist: an eye examination. More specifically, one designed to test all the visual skills required for academic success.

This is what happened to Samantha when her daughter, Mary, started having difficulties with reading in first grade. Mary knew her 'site words' and was above grade level on them, but she couldn't recognize these same

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words when they were in a paragraph. The pediatrician affirmed Mary's vision was fine; however, Samantha could see that her daughter's eyes weren't moving correctly when she was reading, and she continued to struggle throughout first grade.

When a child struggles with reading,

attentive parents will say they could tell something wasn't right. Often, their smart child hates to read, but loves it when they are read to. Some parents can even detect something wrong with their child's eye movements while reading. Teachers often label this as 'tracking' issues. However, when the child is taken to the pediatrician, the parents are told that their child's vision is fine. In many cases, I don't actually see the child until he/she has struggled for years with unsuccessful remedies.

According to Samantha, "her principal was convinced that 'reading support' was the way to help Mary, so we tried and saw no improvement. She was placed in reading support again in second grade; she made no progress at all. I questioned the school and was told they sometimes have kids in reading support for years." Samantha was frustrated, "I thought that's all well and good, but I kept thinking about Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. We were beyond frustrated and unable to find an explanation for the difficulty our daughter had with reading. It didn't make sense that she tested above level with her vocabulary words, listed in columns, but then was unable to read them in a sentence."

She knew she had to do something different. In her search for answers, Samantha stumbled across literature relating Mary's symptoms to the muscles of the eyes respon-

sible for reading eye movements. Her daughter was suffering from fatigue, difficulty concentrating or staying on task, and had trouble moving her eyes smoothly and accurately. "Mary would come home from school in tears because she was so exhausted. At that time, I didn't realize Mary had a vision problem. I just knew her issues were so different from our other children."

Fortunately, Samantha found her way to my office, and I was able to identify that Mary had an eye coordination problem called convergence insufficiency, which is very common. It can cause double vision and make words look like they are moving on the page while reading. I see children with this type of vision problem frequently. Fortunately, the treatment is very effective and can change a child's life.

After an individualized program of vision therapy, Samantha was delighted. "Mary was a changed girl. This year, not only have her grades improved, but she enjoys going to school! She arrives home with a smile instead of tears. Many times she hugs me and tells me how much easier it is for her to read and do math problems now."

With Mary's amazing success, Samantha questioned why no one else had diagnosed the problem and why vision therapy had not been suggested. But the answer is simple: vision therapy is an optometric specialty service that requires a significant amount of post graduate training and continuing education. In fact, while there are several of these doctors in the Denver area, I am the only Developmental Optometrist here in our mountain communities.

Seeing the changes in Mary, Samantha decided to have her other children tested. It turned out that Mary's older sister, Lauren, also had a vision problem. Her symptoms were more subtle; she loved to read, but she would get headaches after reading for 20 to 30 minutes and would have to stop. "Lauren would use her finger to track when reading, had difficulty focusing and suffered from dizziness, motion sickness and headaches. After completing optometric vision therapy, Lauren is now a straight 'A' student, and she has also started playing sports. No more dizziness, motion sickness or headaches. She reads constantly!"

When I conduct an eye examination for a child who is struggling in school, I will assess the child's focusing system, binocular vision, eye movements and visual acuity as well as eye health, and then I will diagnose whether or not there is a vision problem that is interfering with reading and learning. If there is not a vision problem, then we can look into other possible causes, but getting the eye exam first is critical because it is often the underlying cause, even when other professionals have attested to good vision.

I feel very blessed that my staff and I at Evergreen Vision and Learning Center are able to help families like this. So my special 'back to school' message for you is this: if you know of a child who struggles with reading or learning, you need to schedule an appointment in my office as soon as possible. It could be the missing link for your child's success.