VISION&LEARNINGNEWS

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Standardized Testing:
Will Your Children Be Ready?

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It is unavoidable. The new standardized testing is here; PARCC, and this spring, our children will be exposed to a dramatically different test and testing format. Over the years, I have helped many children visually prepare for their standardized tests in a variety of ways. Some have needed extra time to complete tests, while others have needed glasses to help with up-close activities, such as reading and test taking. Additionally, some have been treated for their eye movement and eye coordination problems, as these make it more difficult to read and to fill in the scantron bubbles. There is still quite a bit of uncertainty over how the testing format will look, but visual skills are going to be an important factor in obtaining scores that represent academic achievement. It appears some schools will be able to use computerized testing, while others will continue with paper and pencil. Either way, there are still a multitude of visual challenges with the PARCC assessment.

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From the preliminary sample tests that are online, it looks like the PARCC requires excellent computer skills in addition to academic and visual skills, such as: being able to find navigation bars, performing a lot of mouse work such as clicking and dragging text, going back and forth between text on the left and test questions and answers on the right, etc. Even though your child may use the computer a lot, that doesn't automatically mean his or her computer skills are strong enough to support him or her with this new testing paradigm.

To prepare your children for the new format, start with computer basics. For example, teach them about navigating a computer screen, clicking and dragging, recognizing what a scroll down bar looks like and knowing how to move it up and down. Also, have your child practice on PCs or Macs, depending on the kind of computers found in your school's computer lab. But most importantly, make sure that your child is visually ready to take the test.

When a child is missing any of the 17 visual skills required for learning, it is very difficult to achieve higher level thinking skills. In some cases, the child may have the academic skills and knowledge necessary to do well, but his or her performance on standardized tests won't reflect his or her true potential. If the child is missing any of the necessary visual skills, the results will often show a gap between verbal and performance skills. In fact, one of the largest optometric studies performed on the relationship between vision and learning found that "visual factors are significantly better predictors of academic success as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) than is race or socio-economics." This study involved 540 students over three consecutive school years, with a total of 2,659 examinations, and shows the importance of vision in standardized testing.

Therefore, it is important to identify visual challenges your children might be having, as they can be exasperated by a computerized format. For example, the sample math test for 6-8th graders requires the visual ability to locate information placed on a table and to be able to go back and forth from the test questions to the table. If this test were on paper, it would be easier to use a placeholder to ensure using the right information; however, when it is on the computer screen, maintaining your place becomes more difficult when you have an eye-tracking problem, such as convergence insufficiency (CI).

A study regarding vision and learning, "Improvement in Academic Behaviors After Successful Treatment of Convergence Insufficiency," involved 218 children and showed that, "A successful or improved outcome after CI treatment was associated with a reduction in the frequency of adverse academic behaviors and parental concern associated with reading and school work as reported by parents." It is estimated that 10 percent of school aged children exhibit some level of CI, so there are a lot of children scoring lower on tests simply due to untreated CI.

While most parents and educators assume they have ruled out vision problems by performing cursory vision screenings, aside from identifying nearsightedness, vision screenings only detect approximately 10 percent of other vision problems. Screenings often miss serious vision problems, such as Amblyopia (often referred to as lazy eye), as well as convergence insufficiency and eye tracking problems.

If your child is struggling with reading, learning or has a history of poor performance on standardized tests, don't wait for the school or pediatrician to tell you it's time to have your child's vision evaluated.

To determine if your child has the visual skills required for the PARCC testing, here is a basic symptom checklist:

—Loses place frequently when reading

—Short attention span when reading or copying

—Omits letters, numbers or phrases

—Makes errors in copying from page to paper

—Misaligns number and digit columns

For a more in-depth checklist visit: evandlc.com.

I also recommend that parents and children log into the PARCC website (parcconline.org) to take the practice tests yourselves and see how involved the testing is. If you don't think your child has the skills to do well on the test, schedule an appointment in my office, or call our learning center. We are available to help determine if your child is ready for PARCC and to help enrich any missing skills.

Wishing you and your children every success with the upcoming tests.