



CAO POSITION PAPER

BETTER VISION FOR CHILDREN

Focus on Prevention and Education
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BACKGROUND

Vision disorders are a common pediatric health problem in Canada. It is estimated that nearly 25% of school-age children have vision problems.^{1,2} Despite the economic, social and health care advances that have occurred in our society, many preschool and school-age children are not receiving adequate professional eye and vision care.

It has been estimated that only 14% of children under 6 years of age receive professional eye care³. The early detection and treatment of eye and vision problems needs to be a major public health goal. An important component of this continuum of care is for all children to receive a comprehensive eye examination before entering school.

Amblyopia (lazy eye) is described as weak or underdeveloped vision in one or both eyes as a

result of an uncorrected refractive error or a misalignment of the eyes during the early stages of a child's visual development. If amblyopia is detected early (before age 6), it can be treated usually with full visual recovery.

Untreated amblyopia affects the ability to complete daily tasks. In one study, 55% of individuals with amblyopia reported that it affected their performance in school, 48% reported that it interfered with their work and 50% felt that it influenced their general lifestyle. Reduced vision due to amblyopia also restricts certain employment opportunities that have specific vision standards, such as the armed forces.

Vision affects every aspect of a child's development:

- Gross and fine motor skills (large and small muscle movements)
- Language skills



- Imitation (copying) and repetition (repeating)
- Interaction with people and social skills

Vision affects every aspect of a child's learning⁴:

- Reading
- Transcribing notes
- Participating in classroom activities and discussions
- Maintaining attention and concentration
- Interacting in the playground
- Playing sports

THE COST OF VISION LOSS

The earlier a vision problem is diagnosed and treated, the less negative impact it will have on a child's development. Untreated vision problems can lead to:

- learning at a slower rate than other children
- frustration with learning
- negative self-image
- behaviour and discipline problems
- possible need for special education and related services
- higher risk for school drop out
- lifelong disadvantages and underachievement

Undetected and untreated vision problems can interfere with a child's ability to learn in school and to participate fully in sports and other childhood activities. Visual impairment in children is associated with developmental delays and the need for special education, vocational and social services, often beyond childhood into adulthood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the importance of vision to learning, development and the long term costs for individuals and society, Canada needs a nationally coordinated plan of action for vision health. Without early intervention we will see a diminished quality of life for Canadian children and adults.

We recommend:

- A comprehensive eye examination prior to entering school for every Canadian child^{5,6}
- A national public education campaign for parents and health professionals on early detection
- An overarching National Framework for Action to Promote Vision Health and Prevent Avoidable Blindness

References

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