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Help, does my child need spectacles?

Why it's so important for babies and children to have eye tests on a regular basis.

Just like adults, children perceive about 80 % of their impressions visually. Good, sharp vision is therefore fundamentally important for children development. What should parents know before visiting the ophthalmologist or optician for the first time? BETTER VISION gives you some tips on finding the perfect solution for young spectacle wearers.

The first eyesight test

Strange as it may sound, it's never too early to have children's eyes examined. It's not always easy to detect whether a child has impaired vision or not. Parents generally notice if a child is having problems walking, before they notice any vision problems. Babies and young children are not able to detect or communicate their impairment. Even older children have a limited ability to differentiate sharp from fuzzy. Usually, parents only notice if a child's visual acuity is dramatically reduced by more than 60%. However, the earlier vision impairment is corrected among children and infants, the better and more successful correction will be. Remember that binocular vision can only fully develop when the image on the retinas of both eyes is equally sharp. Similar to learning to walk and speak, babies and young children learn how to see through constant practice. Only, it happens much earlier with vision, since the first time they open their eyes after birth when our little ones begin their visual experience.

Children should have their first eye test within the first ten days of life. Correcting vision problems early, when the eye is not yet fully formed, is more successful than later. In addition, certain visual impairments that cannot be corrected later can be minimised, or even wholly avoided, if detected and treated early.

Premature babies in particular have often visual impairments due to the reduced time spent developing in the mother's womb. So visual acuity should be checked while the baby is still in the incubator. For babies and young children, the exam is performed using an objective procedure

called the skiascopic measurement of visual acuity, where the doctor places a drop of atropine derivative into the child's eye. This dilates the pupil and disables accommodation (accommodation is the eye's ability to adjust in order to make objects at different distances appear sharply on the retina), which allows the doctor to pinpoint any potential visual impairments. Spectacles or even contact lenses can be prescribed and adapted for premature babies, babies and young children. Special spectacle frames and lenses are now feasible for even the smallest faces; some are even custom-produced by opticians.

After the first examination, parents should have their children's vision examined regularly – ideally once per year. It's also recommended for parents to observe their children's eyes and their visual behaviour. The ophthalmologist should be consulted if changes occur, such as strabismus, frequent rubbing of the eyes, lack of eye contact, cataracts, blinking, or among school-age children, need to hold the paper too close when reading or writing and copying incorrectly from the board.

Choosing an ophthalmologist and optician

Just like the choice of paediatrician, ophthalmologists and opticians should be chosen carefully with a view to how they treat young and older children.

Always consider how child-friendly the physician or optician is and how much experience has with children. There's nothing worse than when the therapist makes your child feel afraid. Spectacles should never be "sold" to children as something negative or like a burden. Instead, emphasise that spectacles are a great thing! Spectacles can make magic: you can suddenly see really small things.

In addition to a friendly and easy-going manner with children, the specialist's expertise is obviously a decisive factor. Make sure that they first perform a child-friendly, yet complete an initial assessment (medical history). As for adults, the optician should speak with you and your child specifically about the situations in which the vision problems usually occur, the situations in which the child will need the spectacles the most, whether the child is very active, plays a lot of sports, reads a lot (including in bed during the evening by twilight)...The more specific you and your child are about these daily habits, the better it will be when selecting and adjusting the vision aid.

The optician should be prepared to have time and patience when consulting with you and your child. Listen to what the child wants when choosing the spectacle frames. Avoid compulsion – ideally the child should accept the spectacles and put them on by him or herself.

Ask for detailed information about spectacle lens refinements, such as a coating for increased hardness or an anti-reflective coating. These additional coatings don't have to cost a lot more, while they can make the spectacles more durable and long-lasting – and make seeing more pleasant for your child. Look for shatter-proof spectacle lenses and frames with temples and nose bridges which are safe for children.

Please notice, that some opticians have special subscription offers for children's spectacles for you to take advantage of: "The spectacles that grow with you". These offers allow you to continue to obtain new spectacles when your child grows out of the old ones – for a fixed price. Take advantage of the aftercare offers and inspections for children's spectacles. A professional spectacle cleaning or inspection as to whether the spectacles sit correctly, plus any necessary correction, is very useful, especially for active children, and also increases the spectacles' service life.

Little vision games for children

1. Observe precisely!

You can play this game with multiple children, but need at least three. Ask the children to look at each other very precisely and observe. After five minutes, choose a child and ask them to leave the room. Cover another child with a blanket or sheet so only their head is visible. Invite the child who has gone outside to come back in and ask them to describe as precisely as possible the clothes under the cover. The child receives one point for every correct description. You can have the children change clothes or put on other accessories for the next rounds of the game.

2. I see something you don't see

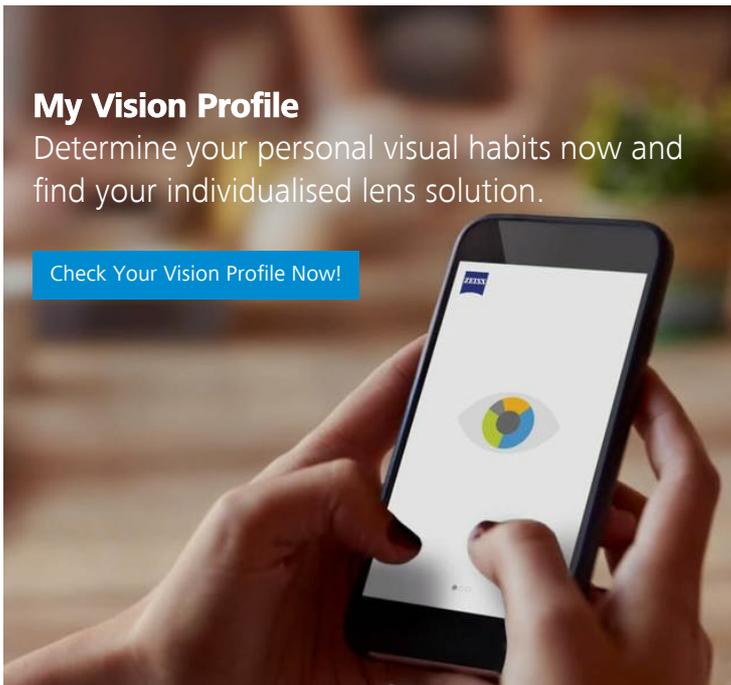
For this game, you will need a homemade telescope; it's best if you create this out of two toilet

paper rolls. The nose bridge in the middle can be made of a piece of cardboard or an empty box of matches, for example.

You need at least two people for this game. Place several objects, like toys, shoes or something similar together in a pile in the middle of the room. Ask one of the children to hold the "telescope" in front of their eyes and to look at the pile of objects. The child begins to describe one of the objects. The first child to correctly guess what object it is wins the round and takes a turn with the telescope.

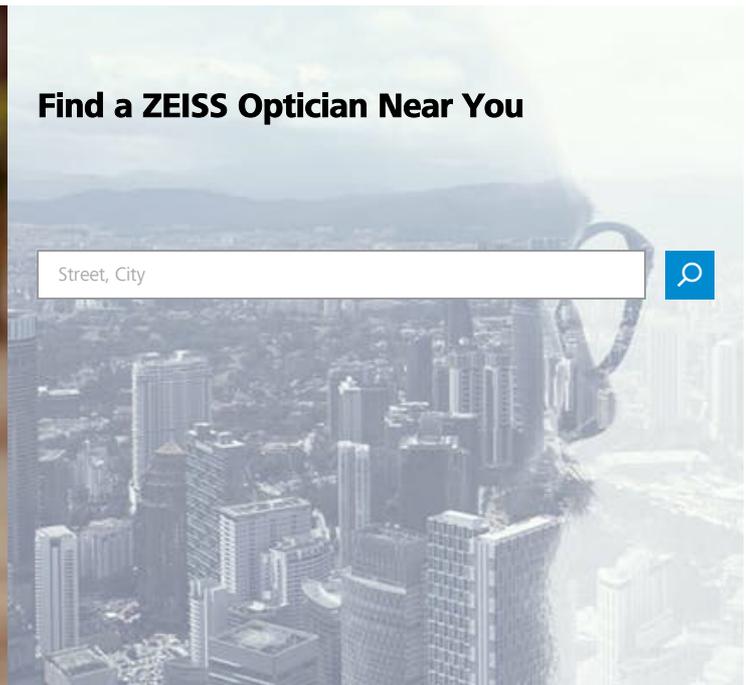
3. Spaghetti

You will need 10 long strings (e.g. different types of wool yarn or gift ribbons). Make sure that two strings are the same colour. First, have the children help you mix up the strings well. Now have one of the children pick out the two strings that are the same colour from the spaghetti pile.



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