



Children's vision problems can be hard to spot.

Shortly after Lucas Pillozzi of Oakville, Ont., started first grade, his teacher's comments about his extensive vocabulary, intelligence, and enthusiastic attitude abruptly stopped, replaced by concerns about his behaviour.

"He wasn't sitting still during carpet time, and he was constantly asking to go to the washroom," recalls Lauri Pillozzi, Lucas' mother, who herself is an elementary school teacher. Strategies aimed at helping him to stay on task and sit still – like marking an X on the carpet as a reminder of where to stay – didn't help.

However, before leaping to the conclusion that Lucas might have a learning disability or an exceptionality in behaviour such as ADHD, Lauri remembered something from her teacher's training. "We were taught that when you start to see a behaviour like anxiety, or attention problems,

to ask the parent if they've had the child's eyes and ears checked."

Lauri took Lucas to a doctor of optometry, also known as an optometrist, for a comprehensive eye exam, which revealed vision problems severe enough that he was having to concentrate with all his might just to navigate from one place to another. Eight years later, Lauri still sounds slightly choked up when she recounts what her son said when he put on his first pair of glasses. Accustomed to seeing only indistinct blobs of colour, Lucas gasped, "I didn't know things had a frame," meaning a sharp outline.

Lucas' story illustrates why it's so important that children see an optometrist at an early age. The Canadian Association of Optometrists recommends that children have their first eye exam at six to nine months old, between the ages of two and five and once a year throughout school. In Ontario, as in most provinces, there is coverage

who, as a grade two teacher, now makes a point of telling parents about OHIP coverage of comprehensive eye exams.

Like Lucas, many children with vision problems don't exhibit any outward clues, like squinting, or complaining of headaches; nor are they likely to even realize such an issue exists. "Children don't know how they're supposed to be seeing – they have no benchmarks to measure their vision against," says Dr. Tina Goodhew, a doctor of optometry with Abbey Eye Care in Oakville, Ont. who first diagnosed Lucas' vision problem and continues to treat the Pillozzi family. "You can't even assume your child's eyesight is normal if they've had a vision screening at school, since up to 43 per cent of kids with vision problems can pass that type of test," she adds.

Similarly, kids typically can't identify when they're experiencing eye strain, or difficulty focusing. "They just know every time they try to focus on something that's detailed, it's uncomfortable, so they tend to push it away," Dr. Goodhew explains. Not only can this be misinterpreted as disinterest, it can cause short attention spans and ADHD-like symptoms. And since 80 per cent of learning involves sight, undetected sight problems can also lead to

learning difficulties. In fact, according to the National Coalition for Vision Health, 60 per cent of children with reading difficulties actually have an undiagnosed vision problem.

When it comes to treatment of vision problems in children, early detection is key. "For eyesight to develop normally, the brain and eyes have to learn to work together, and those connections must be built early in life," says Dr. Goodhew. "It's a little like having your arm in a cast from birth until five years old, then taking it off – no matter how much physiotherapy you put that arm through, it's never going to function as well as one that was free to function from birth. Had Lucas' vision problem gone undiagnosed for two or three more years, we would not have been able

to get his vision back to 20/20," Goodhew says.

Soon after Lucas got that first pair of glasses, his attention and behaviour problems resolved, his anxiety eased, and he rapidly learned to read. Far from being put off of learning, he began enjoying school, and developed an avid love of reading that continues to this day. Now 15, Lucas is thankful his mom knew to take him for an eye exam. "I can't imagine what it would have been like if (my vision) had never been fixed," he says.

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More than Meets the Eye

The Canadian Association of Optometrists recommends that children see an optometrist between six and nine months of age, once again between two and five years, and return for check-ups every year afterward.

"We test a lot more than just how well you see," stresses Dr. Tina Goodhew, a doctor of optometry in Oakville, Ont.

Unlike simple vision screenings, comprehensive eye exams can also determine:

1. A child's focusing ability
2. How well the eyes are aligned
3. How well a child's eyes work together
4. Whether there are any diseases affecting the eyes



Book your child's annual eye exam today. Visit doctorsofoptometry.ca to find a doctor near you.