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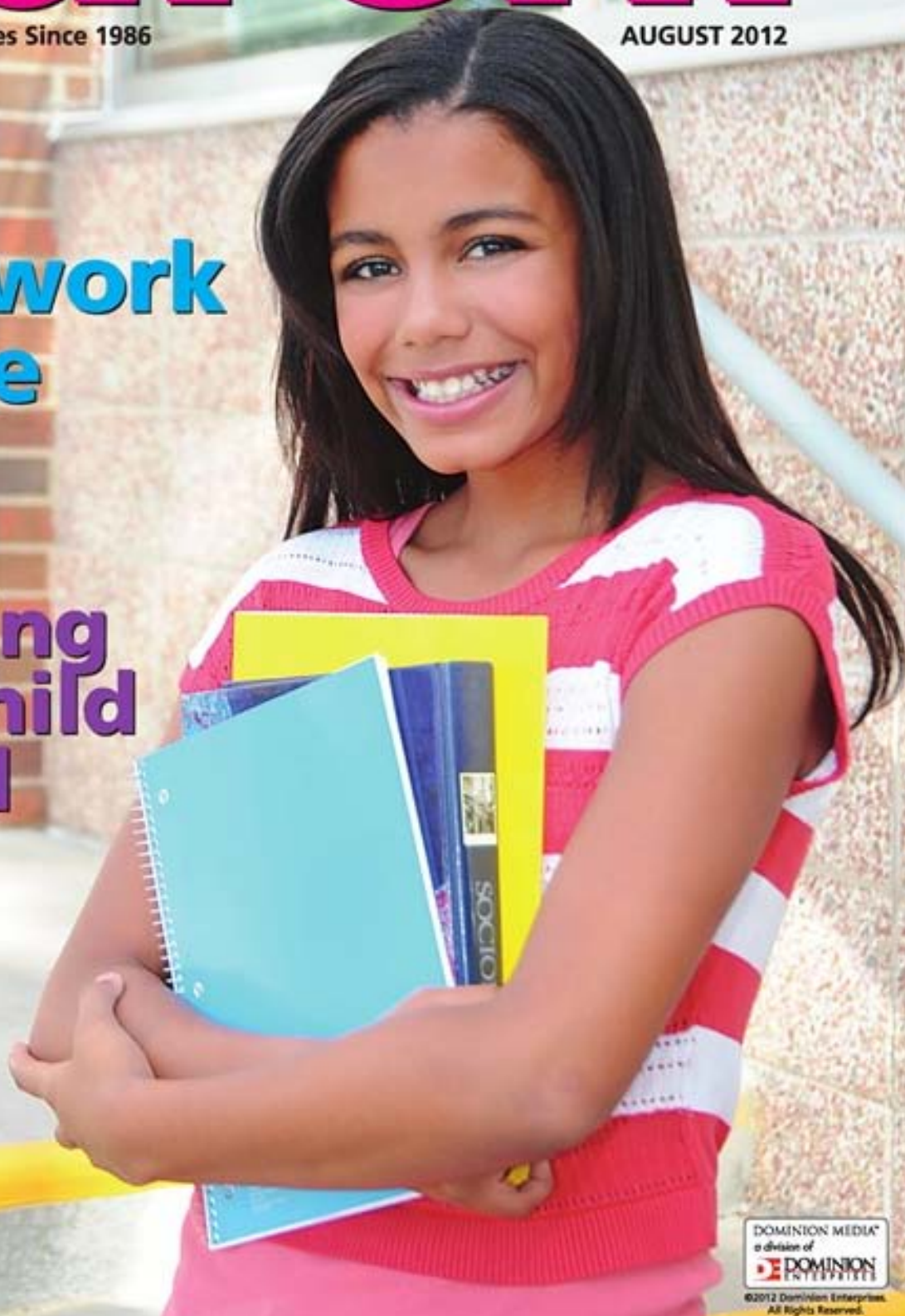
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# Healthy Eyes, Happy Eyes

*Expert tips to protect your child's vision*

By Courtney Drake-McDonough

When you look into your child's eyes, you notice their beautiful color, those long lashes and the expressiveness. But would you notice if there was a problem? It can be hard to recognize when something is going on with the health of your child's eyes. Since August is Children's Eye Health and Safety Month, we are looking deep into those baby blues (or browns or greens) to examine what parents can do to protect their child's vision.



- **Pediatric ophthalmologists** have additional special training to treat kids' eye problems.
- **Optometrists** provide services that may be similar to ophthalmologists, but they don't perform surgery. Some optometrists specialize in kids' eye problems.
- **Opticians** fit and adjust eyeglasses.

## When should a child first see an eye doctor?

Opinions vary as to when a child should have their first exam by an eye doctor, however screenings from a pediatrician or family doctor should start in the first year of life. According to Wendy Spirek, director of community outreach at Children's Eye Physicians in Denver, kids should undergo eye health screenings and visual acuity tests that measure sharpness of vision and eye alignment around age 3½. This enables doctors to detect specific problems early. Some eye problems, such as Amblyopia – a loss of visual acuity and binocular vision – may become irreversible after age 5.

While pediatricians can screen for significant eye issues, Hale Kell, OD with Front Range Eye Health Center in Louisville, says some common, treatable issues can slip through the cracks. "Pediatricians often don't have the equipment necessary to fully assess vision and health of the eyes."

## What kind of eye doctor should my child go to?

Spirek advises looking for an eye care professional with expertise in pediatric care. She knows the various types of eye doctor can be confusing to a parent, so she breaks it down:

- **Ophthalmologists** are medical doctors (have gone to medical school) who provide comprehensive eye care with medicine and surgery.

## Toys are often linked to eye injuries. What should parents look for in toys to avoid potential eye injury?

To avoid corneal injuries, scratches and abrasions, avoid toys that have pointy or rough edges, shoot objects in the air (air, BB and spring guns), and involve rubber bands.

## Are computer screens, TVs and gaming devices harming kids' eyes?

"As far as we know, computers and devices do not directly cause damage to your child's eyes," says Lynn Hellerstein, OD, Hellerstein & Brenner Vision Center in Centennial, and author of *See It. Say It. Do It!*.

To give their eyes a break and to avoid eye strain, experts suggest the 20/20 rule: For every 20 minutes engaged in computer use or reading, break the focus and look out a window or down a hall for 20 seconds to allow the eyes' focusing system to readjust.

## Should my child wear sunglasses?

Providing sun protection to the eyes is even more important in children than it is for adults for two reasons: First, children's pupils are larger and more transparent than adults, so a larger percentage of harmful UV rays pass through, into the eye, leaving kids more vulnerable to the effects of sun damage than adults. Second, according to Spirek, 80% of an individual's exposure to UV in their lifetime occurs before the age of 18 and can lead to cataracts, burns



**DOES THIS  
Baby  
HAVE A  
VISION  
Problem?**

IT IS ESTIMATED THAT MORE THAN  
**80%**  
OF ALL LEARNING  
TAKES PLACE THROUGH THE  
VISUAL SYSTEM


It is important to detect and treat vision problems early in life!  
Ensure that your children develop the visual abilities they need to grow and learn successfully.

Children of all ages should have yearly vision exams.

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## Common Signs of Vision Problems

Wendy Spirek, director of community outreach at Children's Eye Physicians in Denver suggests that parents watch for these signs of vision problems:

- Constant eye rubbing
- Extreme light sensitivity
- Poor visual tracking (following an object)
- Abnormal alignment or movement of the eyes (after 6 months of age)
- Chronic redness or tearing of the eyes
- A white pupil instead of black
- Inability to see objects at a distance
- Inability to read the blackboard at school
- Squinting
- Sitting too close to the TV

on the eye, sunburn around the eyes, macular degeneration, glaucoma, abnormal growths on the eye and more.

Look for sunglasses with lenses that block 100% of UV-A and UV-B rays, meet ANSI-Z 80.3 standards and are made of shatterproof polycarbonate.

### Top tips for vision health in children

- Have kids' eyes checked regularly, even if everything seems fine. "Children often don't complain about their vision, they just adapt," says Kell. Testing for both vision and eye health issues regularly, and treating them appropriately, will go a long way toward protecting vision for the future."
- A recent national survey found that approximately 59% of pediatric eye injuries occur during sport and recreational events with baseball and basketball being the worst, according to Spirek. She advises children who play contact sports such as basketball and baseball wear appropriate eye protection.
- While keeping an eye out for the more obvious symptoms of vision problems (see box above), Hellerstein says to also watch for changing behaviors such as struggling in school; resisting reading or writing (but loves being read to); suffering from test anxiety; appearing to be smart everywhere except in school; lacking confidence. All of these things can actually be related to vision issues.

With protective care and the watchful eye of both parent and doctor, your child's vision can be off-the-charts healthy. ■

Courtney Drake-McDonough is a Denver-based writer, editor and mother of four.