



**A Parents' Guide to
eye care for children
with a learning disability,
autism or both**

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Acknowledgements

This guide has been co-produced with parent carers of children with learning disabilities. They wanted their experiences and knowledge to shape this guide, so others like them can feel more confident about supporting their children to access the right eye care at the right time.

By parent or parent carer, we mean anyone with parental responsibility for children or young people with a learning disability, autism or both.

Introduction

Getting the best health care for your child is very important to everyone. Identifying health problems and treating them early enables children to continue to lead fulfilling lives.

The NHS Long Term Plan aims to improve children's health by making sure they get the right health checks at the right time.

This guide is one of a series of three to give parents information about **eye, hearing and dental checks**.

The guides will explain

- ▶ Why eye, hearing and dental checks are important
- ▶ How the checks are done
- ▶ How to access eye, hearing and dental care
- ▶ How you can prepare and support your child
- ▶ How to find out more

This guide is about eye care.

This guide has been produced in partnership with Contact - for families with disabled children www.contact.org.uk and The National Deaf Children's Society www.ndcs.org.uk

To find out more about NHS plans to improve services for children with learning disabilities, autism or both, visit www.longtermplan.nhs.uk

What do I need to know about eyes?

All children can get free eye care from the NHS and when they are needed, glasses. Government guidelines say that all children who attend special school should receive a full eye and sight check at least once a year in their school. This should include an assessment of how well they can see, measurements to check if glasses are needed, checks on the health of the inside and outside of the eyes. If glasses are needed, it will also include supplying and fitting them and providing support to get used to wearing them. It is very important that results from this check are shared with you and with school so that everyone can support each child with their eye care needs.

28x more likely

Children with a learning disability are 28x more likely to have a problem with their eyes and/or sight



1/2

of all children who attend a special school have a problem with their eyes and/or sight and at least 1/3 need glasses



Why is eye care important for my child?

Children very rarely complain of trouble seeing, they just adapt to how things are. Often there will be no obvious clues that their sight isn't normal. Many clues that a child has trouble seeing, such as a lack of eye contact, poor concentration, little interest in toys or games, 'clumsiness' or signs of frustration, can also be signs of a disability or autism, so an eye test is the only way to know whether there is a problem with sight.

As well as picking up eye problems, an eye test can often solve them, with glasses. Sometimes there may be a problem that can't be made better with glasses or treatment but understanding how much a child can see is really important to make the best use of the sight they do have.

The most common causes of poor sight can be corrected with glasses! If there are visual problems which can't be made better, understanding how they affect your child's sight is important to help you and teachers support your child to be the best they can be.

What do I need to know about eye care?

Children are still 'learning' how to see as their eyes and brains are still developing, so picking up any problems as early as possible is really important. Making sure your child's sight is as clear as possible by using glasses if they are needed will help with their overall development and learning, including development of social skills, eye-hand and motor co-ordination. In addition, clearly focussed sight allows the brain to 'learn' how to see to a greater level of detail. This means that not having glasses when you need them in childhood limits how well you can see throughout your life.



Squints, when the two eyes aren't looking in the same direction, need to be picked up as early as possible. Sometimes this can be corrected with glasses, less often an operation may be needed, and sometimes it may be difficult to treat in children with poor sight or poor control of their eye movements.

No child is too disabled to have an eye test

Problems with sight that are caused by the brain (sometimes referred to as Brain Based Visual Difficulties or Cerebral Visual Impairment (CVI)) are the leading cause of untreatable sight problems for children with disabilities, especially children with Cerebral Palsy. CVI affects different children in many different ways. An eye test can help us understand how sight is affected and work out ways to best support a child to use the sight they have.

How would my child's eyes be tested?

It is possible to check to see if your child needs glasses by measuring the shape of their eyes using a special torch called a retinoscope. Glasses can then be accurately prescribed to ensure clearly focussed sight even if it is not possible to do 'vision tests' or make choices. Sometimes it may be necessary to use drops in your child's eyes to prescribe glasses.

You don't need to be able to read, speak or sit still to have an eye test or to be prescribed glasses if you need them.

Of course, vision tests are very useful too, to help measure and understand how well your child can see. There are many ways to do this, such as using test cards or a digital tablet or screen with letters, pictures, patterns or different sizes of beads and balls. How well and how accurately your child can move their eyes is important to understand, as well as if their eyes work together to give 3D or stereo-vision. Their peripheral or 'all round' sight as well as the health of their eyes, inside and outside should also be checked.

How can I support my child to have an eye test?

Before your child's eye test, think about how your child uses their eyes and sight and share this with their eye care professional. Do your child's eyes look straight or does one eye turn in or out, sometimes or all the time? Is their sight different when they are tired? Can they recognise you from a distance without sound clues? How is their concentration for different tasks, e.g. looking at a book, photos on a phone or watching TV? Do they rub or screw up their eyes or turn their head or face to look at things?

You can help your child to prepare by showing pictures or videos of what happens at an eye test. Playing eye test games using a small torch close to the eyes, playing peekaboo with small toys and practising covering each eye in turn can also help. 'Practice' vision tests (which measure how much a child can see) using free applications you can download on a tablet - such as the Kay Say and Match and Peekaboo Vision apps.

You know your child best so don't be afraid to tell the eye care professional what will help the test go well such as avoiding sudden movements, bright lights, darkness or touch and explaining tests or demonstrating them on you first.

What can I do to make sure my child gets good eye care?

Ask your child's eye care professional to provide a written report on their visual abilities, needs and difficulties, explained in language you and your child's teachers can understand. The report should include any glasses prescription and explanation of what it is needed for.

If your child needs glasses, it is important to understand that they will probably need time and support to get used to wearing them. Ask your child's eye care professional to show you the effect on your child's sight with and without their glasses using their 'test lenses'.



If your child is having problems getting used to their glasses, don't give up but seek further help. Make sure your child always has a spare pair of glasses and don't wait for routine appointments to address breakages or repairs.

If your child has very poor sight, they may be eligible for registration as Sight Impaired or Severely Sight Impaired by an ophthalmologist (eye doctor at the hospital).

This may help with accessing services including the support of a Qualified Teacher for the Visually Impaired (QTVI).

Your child should have a full eye check at least once a year, but if you are concerned that there is any change in their eyes or sight, then ask for it sooner.

Where can I find out more?

SeeAbility provide specialist support, accommodation and eye care help for people with learning disabilities, autism and sight loss.

Visit www.seeability.org to find out more and see our library of easy read eye care information.

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Patron: HRH The Duchess of Gloucester GCVO.
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SEEABILITY

SeeAbility provides specialist support to enable people with learning disabilities, autism, and sight loss to achieve their ambitions and participate fully in society.

We deliver ambitious support, preventative services and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, to enable them to fully participate and contribute to society, feel more connected and achieve independence.

