

CHILDREN'S VISION PROBLEMS NEGATIVELY IMPACT LEARNING

A visit to your local doctor of optometry should be added to your annual back-to-school checklist

Madison, WI – Studies have consistently shown that vision and eye health have a direct impact on a child's ability to learn; in fact, 80 percent of a child's early learning comes from vision. As the 2011-2012 school year approaches, Wisconsin parents are encouraged to take their "back-to-schoolers" to a doctor of optometry for a comprehensive vision and eye health exam to help ensure their ability to see clearly and succeed in the classroom.

"Healthy vision is a critical part of a child's overall learning experience," advises Dr. Lisa Slaby, Green Bay area optometrist and current WOA President. "A comprehensive eye health and vision exam performed by a licensed doctor of optometry can detect problems such as astigmatism (blurred vision), poor eye-hand coordination, and eye health diseases, all of which can restrict a child's ability to learn in school and participate in activities beyond the classroom."

According to the April 2011 edition of the *American Optometric Association News*, about one in four school-age children suffer from an undetected or untreated eye health or vision problem. In addition, a *2010 survey conducted by the AOA found that 64 percent of teachers witnessed a direct improvement in a child's academic performance and/or classroom behavior after an eye health or vision problem was diagnosed and treated.

"Children have a hard time recognizing that a vision problem exists because they do not know the difference between normal vision and their particular ability to see," explains Dr. Slaby. "A child who displays disruptive or inattentive behavior may actually be reacting to their inability to participate fully in the classroom, as undiagnosed vision problems can affect their ability to see the board or complete reading and writing assignments."

Common signs of a vision problem may include:

- ✓ Losing place while reading
- ✓ Avoiding close work
- ✓ Rubbing eyes
- ✓ Headaches
- ✓ Turning or tilting head
- ✓ Making frequent reversals when reading or writing
- ✓ Using a finger to maintain place when reading
- ✓ Omitting or confusing small words when reading
- ✓ Consistently performing below potential
- ✓ Struggling to complete homework
- ✓ Squinting while reading or watching television
- ✓ Behavioral problems
- ✓ Holding reading material closer than normal

If detected and treated early, several vision and eye health conditions can be corrected, allowing the child to see clearly in class, at home, and at play. The WOA recommends a child's first eye assessment take place as early as 6 months of age. Comprehensive eye exams should be conducted before a child enters school, and then every two years after unless otherwise advised by an eye doctor. In between exams, parents and teachers should monitor children for the more prevalent signs listed above, indicating that a student's vision may be impaired.

The April 2011 AOA News also identifies that while most vision screenings can and do catch vision problems, they tend to miss more than 75 percent of children with a **learning-related** vision problem.

"It is important to keep in mind that a school vision screening, while helpful, is not a substitute for a comprehensive eye examination by a licensed optometrist," said Dr. Slaby. "Vision screenings usually only test a child's ability to see from a distance and cannot detect eye diseases or other more complicated vision problems."

For parents of low-income families who do not have the means to vision and eye health care, the Wisconsin Optometric Association's VISION USA – The Wisconsin Project program is a year-round, benevolent program which offers no cost, comprehensive eye exams to children from uninsured, low-income families. WOA member doctors are located throughout the state to volunteer their time and services to provide care to VISION USA patients. Parents can visit the WOA website and fill out a VISION USA application in order to have their children considered for approval in the program. Applications are available in both English and Spanish. Further questions about the program should be directed to 1-877-435-2020 or woacvi@tds.net.

*The American Optometric Association (AOA) Teacher Survey was created and commissioned in conjunction with TNS from May 13-17, 2010. Using an online methodology, TNS interviewed 300 full- and part-time teachers for grades kindergarten through grade 8 and 100 full- and part-time teachers for grades 9-12.

About the Wisconsin Optometric Association: The Wisconsin Optometric Association (WOA) is a nonprofit affiliation of licensed doctors of optometry and associated businesses dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the vision welfare of the people of Wisconsin. The WOA accomplishes its goals through: Education and dissemination of information, organized governmental activity, legislation and regulation, mediation with consumer and public interest groups, and provision of collective benefits to its members. Approximately 631 doctors of optometry are currently members of the WOA, located in nearly every county in the state. All members must be licensed and certified to practice optometry by the State of Wisconsin. The WOA also maintains an affiliation with the American Optometric Association (AOA). For more information, visit WOA's website at www.woa-eyes.org.