

**OPTOMETRISTS
CONTACT LENS PRACTITIONERS
BEHAVIOURAL OPTOMETRY
CHILDREN'S VISION**

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Optometric Vision Therapy

EARLY VISUAL PERCEPTUAL SKILLS ACTIVITIES

The following activities are designed to be used informally with young children. They are intended to help your child to develop good visual perceptual skills or **visual information processing skills**. These skills will help your child to more easily **understand** what he or she sees, which will make early learning easier.

The activities should be treated as fun and something to be enjoyed, but remember that none of us enjoy doing things that we find too difficult, so if your child tends to avoid a certain group of activities, it is likely that these are the ones that he or she finds the most difficult, so these are the ones where you should spend extra time working 'one-on-one' together.

- Play games that will help to improve the child's very important **visual discrimination skills**, that is, the ability to see subtle differences between similar items. For example: shape sorters, jig-saw puzzles, card games like Snap or Blink, Spot the Difference games, Where's Wally type books, Concentration, Guess Who.

For very young children try:

- **Sorting and organizing things**
 - buttons according to size or colour
 - playing cards according to suit or number
 - screws, nails, nuts, bolts, washers, etc. according to size
 - food cans according to size, shape or colour
 - cutlery according to function, size, shape
- **Matching patterns**
 - line up three or more playing cards or pieces of cutlery and ask your child to match.
- Help your child to become aware and confident with their own **laterality**, that is, to know right and left on themselves. Try playing Hokey Pokey ('put your right hand in, your right hand out' etc) and Simon Says with right/left instructions eg. Simon Says 'put your LEFT thumb on your nose'. Talk to your child about right and left every day, like when getting dressed, in the car etc. This will help the child to establish a solid directional base to refer to, so as to be able to easily differentiate between objects that have the same shape, differing only in orientation. Reversals of letters and numbers and mirror writing will then be far less likely to be a problem.
- Help your child to develop good **eye-tracking skills**, without any head or body movement. Play the game of Shiny Spoons where your child follows their own image, seen in the back of a large spoon, whilst the spoon is moved randomly around in front of the child's face. Try holding two small toy targets about 20 cm apart in front of the child's face and ask them to look from one target to the other on your command. Placing a bean bag on your child's head will help to develop awareness of any head or body movement. Asking your child to touch the target with their finger will make the activity easier, whilst asking your child simple questions or getting your child to stand on a step or low stool will increase the degree of difficulty.

Encourage beginner readers to use a finger as a marker – as eye-tracking skills mature, the finger will no longer be needed.

- Play **memory** games like the Object Memory Game (objects are covered then briefly exposed, then have to be named – try placing the objects in a row so the order has to be recalled).

The card game Distraction is good for visual memory as are the old favourites like Concentration and Guess Who.

Show your child an old family photo album - have your child name as many people as possible, or see if your child can recall a particular outing, place or occasion from the visual image, and have the child describe the scenario giving as much detail as possible, and paying particular attention to the correct sequence or order of events of that day.

- Help to develop your child's important **visualization skills** by playing the game of What Am I? You think of an object, animal etc and your child can ask up to 10 'yes/no' questions to conjure up a picture in their mind until they can work out what it is that you are describing. Then swap roles. Another way is for you to start making up a story, and have your child finish it. Listening to taped stories or reading chapter books out aloud to your child are other ways of helping them to visualize - if no pictures are provided, the child will have to '*make movies inside their own head*' in order to '*see*' what is happening. This is very helpful for good reading comprehension. It's never too early to start reading books with your child!
- Games involving manipulation of pieces or shapes eg. parquetry blocks, tangrams and Leggo are excellent for developing **spatial awareness and 'visual thinking' skills**.
- Games involving **recognition of number patterns** like dominoes, dice games and cards are excellent for developing 'pre-maths' skills.
- Card games involving counting such as '21', or sorting into suites, such as '7s', will help to develop **sequential, organized thought processing**.
- Play **eye-hand co-ordination** games like cutting, threading, colouring, pasting, drawing and construction. Blackboard drawing with thick, chunky chalk is excellent for developing 'pre-writing' skills. Balloon and ball games are also important for developing **visuo-spatial judgements**.

Activities in 'free space' using 'real' objects are critical for young children's development, so make sure your child gets lots of time with the sorts of activities listed above and **regulate their time with computers and electronic hand-held devices**. Encourage outdoor play.

Good visual habits are important from an early age to maintain good vision. So please give careful attention to your child's '**visual hygiene**':

- **Monitor near working distance, being careful not to get too close to the book or game**, using 'The Elbow Rule' - ensure minimum '*knuckle-on-chin-to-elbow*' distance at all times.
- **Ensure good posture for all near tasks**, keeping head straight and book centred in line with nose (so as the focus demand on the two eyes is equal). Avoid lying down in bed to read (especially on the tummy) or on the floor. Sit up to straight to read and be particularly careful not to bend over too close to books or electronic hand-held devices!
- **Enforce regular focus-shift 'rest breaks'** by looking up and far away for about 15 seconds every 15 minutes when doing prolonged near activities, especially with computers and electronic hand-held devices.
- **Ensure good lighting for all visually demanding activities**. General room lighting should allow distance objects to be seen easily when looking up. *Do not read in the dark or with a torch!*
- **Do not allow your child to sit any closer to the TV** than 2 x their body lengths. Young children like to sit very close to the TV because they want to be 'involved'. Again, regular focus-shift 'rest breaks' should be encouraged, and room lighting should allow other objects to be seen easily when looking away from the TV screen.