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American Optometric Association

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MAKE EYE EXAMS PART OF THE BACK TO SCHOOL ROUTINE

Majority of children start school without ever having an eye examination

ST. LOUIS, MO, August 4, 2009 – Children across the country are gearing up for a new school year. Before heading back to the classroom, the American Optometric Association (AOA) recommends a visit to the optometrist. Healthy vision is an important part to the learning process and success in school. Reading, writing and computer work are among the visual skills that students are required to perform daily. However, studies show that 86 percent of children start school without ever having an eye examination.

Many experts believe that approximately 80 percent of learning comes through a child's eyes. Despite the strong correlation between vision and learning, many Americans underestimate the number of children affected by eye and vision problems. According to the American Optometric Association's (AOA) 2009 American Eye-Q® survey, which assesses public knowledge and understanding of a wide range of issues related to eye and visual health, 88 percent of respondents did not realize that one in four students have a visual impairment.

"Because a child's vision may change frequently, regular eye and vision care is crucial to a student's classroom success," said Dr. Michael Earley, optometrist and the AOA's vision & learning specialist. "Unfortunately, most parents are not including eye exams as part of their child's back-to-school health check-up."

According to the recent Eye-Q® survey, 58 percent of parents did not take their child for an eye exam until age three or older. The AOA recommends that children have their first eye assessment at six months of age, then comprehensive eye exams beginning at age three, before a child enters school, and then every two years, unless otherwise advised by an optometrist. In between visits to the eye doctor, parents, as well as teachers, should keep a watchful eye out for some of the more prevalent signs that a child's vision may be impaired.

The AOA recommends that parents contact their doctor of optometry if their child frequently:

1. Loses place while reading
2. Avoids close work
3. Tends to rub eyes
4. Has headaches

5. Turns or tilts head
6. Makes frequent reversals when reading or writing
7. Uses finger to maintain place when reading
8. Omits or confuses small words when reading
9. Consistently performs below potential
10. Struggles to complete homework
11. Squints while reading or watching television
12. Has behavioral problems
13. Holds reading material closer than normal

Many parents are not as aware of the less obvious warning signs of eye and vision problems. The Eye-Q® survey found that only one-third of parents identified using a finger while reading (31 percent) or behavioral problems (35 percent) as potential signs of a vision impairment.

“It is especially important to monitor the signs and symptoms of vision problems as a student progresses in school,” said Dr. Earley. “If a child’s vision is impaired, increasing visual demands such as smaller print in textbooks or additional homework can significantly alter a student’s performance. And, new technology changes in the classroom, such as the use of interactive whiteboards, can also potentially exacerbate less obvious vision problems. Without healthy vision, students may suffer not only in the classroom, but also mentally, physically and emotionally.”

Studies indicate that 60 percent of children identified as “problem learners” actually suffer from undetected vision problems and in some cases have been inaccurately diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The earlier a vision problem is detected and treated, the more likely treatment will be successful. Comprehensive eye exams play a critical role in this process. It is important to keep in mind, a school vision screening, while helpful, is not a substitute for a comprehensive eye examination. Screenings vary in scope and are not designed to detect many visual problems that can significantly impact tasks like reading where more than clarity of vision is needed. Comprehensive eye exams performed by optometrists are essential for clear, comfortable and healthy vision. States including Kentucky, Missouri and Illinois have successfully established programs requiring mandatory eye exams for school-age children.

To find an optometrist in your area, or for additional information on children’s vision or the importance of back-to-school eye exams, please visit www.aoa.org.

About the survey:

The fourth annual American Eye-Q® survey was created and commissioned in conjunction with Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates (PSB). From May 21 – 24, 2009, using an online methodology, PSB interviewed 1,000 Americans 18 years and older who embodied a nationally representative sample of U.S. general population. (Margin of error at 95 percent confidence level.)

About the American Optometric Association (AOA):

The American Optometric Association represents approximately 36,000 doctors of optometry, optometry students and paraoptometric assistants and technicians. Optometrists serve patients in nearly 6,500 communities across the country, and in 3,500 of those communities are the only eye doctors. Doctors of optometry provide two-thirds of all primary eye care in the United States.

American Optometric Association doctors of optometry are highly qualified, trained doctors on the frontline of eye and vision care who examine, diagnose, treat and manage diseases and disorders of the eye. In addition to providing eye and vision care, optometrists play a major role in a patient's overall health and well-being by detecting systemic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Prior to optometry school, optometrists typically complete four years of undergraduate study, culminating in a bachelor's degree. Required undergraduate coursework for pre-optometry students is extensive and covers a wide variety of advanced health, science and mathematics. Optometry school consists of four years of post-graduate, doctoral study concentrating on both the eye and systemic health. In addition to their formal training, doctors of optometry must undergo annual continuing education to stay current on the latest standards of care. For more information, visit www.aoa.org.

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