

Miami Herald

Posted on Mon, Aug. 11, 2014

Eye experts say standard school screenings are not enough to ensure students see well

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NICOLAS KHAYAT / KRT

SEXY SHADES: Tina Fey arrives at the "Mean Girls" premiere in New York City, in April 2004, sporting her black fashion glasses.

Not too long ago, kids who wore glasses were made fun of with names like "Poindexter" or "four-eyes." But thanks to celebrities like Johnny Depp, Tina Fey and LeBron James, glasses have become hip and even considered a fashion statement.

"Some kids actually make up not seeing well to get glasses when they are actually seeing perfect," said Dr. James Hagen, an optometrist in Kendall. "The old stigma is not true anymore."

This may come as a form of relief for parents with kids who don't see well and need glasses to do well in school, as their numbers are increasing.

According to the American Optometric Association, nearly 25 percent of school-age children have vision problems and are not receiving adequate professional eye and vision care. Only about one-third of all children have an eye examination or vision screening prior to entering school.

"The reason that this generation sees so poorly is that they are the first generation born into technology where their whole life they've had computers, iPads and iPhones," Hagen said. "The more people work without resting their eyes, the higher chance they may develop myopia."

Myopia, also known as nearsightedness, is a vision condition in which close objects are seen clearly, but objects farther away appear blurred.

For Hagen, who owns a family practice, his clientele has changed drastically. At one time, his No. 1 age group came from people in their 40s. Now, the top group is kids from 10 to 19 years old, followed by children younger than 9.

"This generation of kids see the worst of any generation before them at this age," he said.

For public school students in Florida, vision is checked through eye screenings that are mandated for children in kindergarten, first, third and sixth grades. It is also required for new students entering Florida public schools for the first time in grades kindergarten through five.

But some local optometrists believe that may not be adequate.

Dr. Richard Myers, an optometrist in West Miami-Dade, said the screenings pick up big issues "but I think there are much more subtle problems, where many children fall in the cracks."

The screenings given by the Department of Health, which are done at the schools, are not full indications of eye health, he said.

"It's really a fallacy, you can't just go by 20/20," he said.

Experts recommend having children's eyes examined earlier than kindergarten and every year or, at minimum, every two years.

The earlier the detection and treatment, the less the potential impact eye problems may have on a child's development.

"Generally if a person has one or both parents who wear glasses and they are under 45, the child is likely to inherit those propensities to need glasses as well," said Dr. Allan Levitt, an optometrist in Miami Beach.

Parents and teachers can spot indications of issues. The more obvious ones are cosmetic where a child's eyes are not straight or the child may be squinting, holding reading material too close or sitting too close to the television.

"Some students are resilient and they can overcome their difficulties," said Dr. Vanessa Marino, an optometrist in Kendall. "Unfortunately other children's vision is so bad it's hard for them to pay attention."

Marino believes that often children get labeled as having attention problems because of this.

"I get referrals from psychologists, who before labeling or doing any tests on them, they have them get their eyes checked," she said. "You'd be amazed how many people don't fit the diagnosis once they have their glasses on."

There are other indications that parents never attribute to eye health, like getting tired during the day, frequently complaining about headaches and performing poorly in school. Many optometrists believe that a lack of success in school is often tied to issues with vision.

"There's a very strong correlation between vision problems and juvenile delinquency in the middle to later grades," Levitt said. "If it goes uncorrected for a long time, the child might get frustrated."

Eye exams, glasses and contacts prices vary depending on the office and the specification tailored to each child. Some children may be covered under the Affordable Care Act or Medicaid programs.

And for those who are not covered, the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program provides free eye examination and eyeglasses to children whose parents can't afford eye-care and don't have insurance. The program is run through the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Last year, the program provided more than 8,000 eye exams.

"Parents of all socioeconomic levels are uninformed about the necessity to have eye exams for their children," Levitt said. "It's not just the kids from the poor neighborhoods."

Resources

For more information about the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program, visit http://www.miamilighthouse.org/Florida_Heiken_Program.asp or call 305-856-9830.