

Vision Therapy and Children

As far back as the Middle Ages, people have been using eye exercises in attempts to make their eyes to work together or just point in the desired direction. The belief behind such efforts is that because exercise strengthens other parts of our bodies, it can also strengthen the eyes.

Today this belief has evolved into vision therapy, an alternative therapy that uses exercises designed to improve visual function. Vision therapy practitioners and optometrists often recommend it for children who are falling behind in school because of reading difficulty, dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. Swept up in the potential for vision therapy, these enthusiastic practitioners sometimes make excessive claims that eye exercises produce optimally aligned eyes and improve on all aspects of life, including children's learning disabilities. Some practitioners may even provide anecdotal evidence of their success. Frequently, these practitioners charge several thousand dollars for a complete course of vision therapy. For parents with children falling behind in school and desperate for them to catch up, this sounds like a reasonable and obvious solution.

Because of the lack of rigorous studies, we can neither prove with certainty whether vision therapy works. We do know, however, that the connection between vision therapy and reading or learning disability is tenuous at best. Reading and learning are language and cognitive functions taking place in the brain. Disabilities in these areas are the result of impairment of brain functions, not the result of impaired vision.

In light of the absence of the rigorous standards that modern scientific study demands, enthusiasm for vision therapy fades. Anecdotal success aside, no one has conducted a vision therapy study as a well controlled, multiple subject clinical experiment as required by evidence-based medicine. Among other things, this type of study might rule out the placebo effect as a cause for many anecdotal successes.

There is no doubt that any learning problems children exhibit are a concern and deserve some form of treatment. Because numerous studies show no connection between visual perception and reading disability, research by the American Academy of Ophthalmology concludes that there is "no consistent evidence" supporting vision therapy, colored overlays and lenses as an effective treatment for learning disabilities. Instead, studies indicate that eye movement and visual perception are not key factors and that the brain's processing of language plays a larger role. A policy statement by the American Academy of Ophthalmology advises against using any treatment approaches that "lack objective, scientifically established efficacy." At present, this includes vision therapy. The academy also notes there are no known visual causes for learning disabilities and no known visual treatment that is effective for learning disabilities. Instead of vision therapy, the academy advises parents with children struggling with educational problems to seek appropriate educational diagnostic evaluations and services.

While alternative and complimentary therapies are a growing part of medicine in the United States, for many, including vision therapy, no hard data show whether they work or not. For vision therapy, the existing evidence is not encouraging because studies have yet to be scientifically conducted.

In the case of vision therapy, families can often save themselves money, time and additional anxiety by bypassing vision therapy and going directly to educational or psychological services. What we do know is by seeking out vision therapy, parents are actually delaying any improvement in their children's educational performance. Coordinated treatment from multiple disciplines, including medical specialists, tutors, psychologists and occupational rehabilitation therapists give children with learning disabilities a better opportunity to increase their learning potential