

Questioning Visual Difficulties: Information for Parents

Difficulties with study and reading, may in some cases be exacerbated or even caused by a vision-related problem and therefore needs to be investigated. Current guidance is clear that where symptoms of visual discomfort and/or disturbance are reported or observed, it is best practice that these should be medically investigated by a registered orthoptist prior to any diagnostic assessment for any specific learning difficulty with reading. This is in addition to routine optician sight checks.

What are the criteria for suggesting a Visual Processing Clinic referral?

If any indicators of visual problems are found a referral should be made. These can include:

- Eye strain
- Headaches
- Seeing visual distortions:
 - Text appearing to change, move or swim on the page
 - Bright coloured text or images 'flashing'
 - Seeing shapes or patterns on the page
 - White paper 'glaring'
- Reversing single letters or reversing letters within words (e.g., was or saw?)
- Reversing numbers or a sequence of numbers (e.g., 31 or 13?)
- Tiring quickly when reading
- Losing place on the page
- Continuing to use a finger to follow the words when reading (tracking) after the age of 8 years
- Missing out bits of text
- Becoming fidgety when reading / losing concentration
- Experiencing blurred or double vision
- Closing or covering one eye when reading / rapid blinking

Who will make the referral?

The school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) or allocated Specialist Teacher might recommend a referral either before or following a specialist assessment. The school's SENCO will complete the referral form. Permission will be sought, and the letter of referral will need to be signed by the parent/carer. Any concerns/questions should be discussed with the school's SENCO. Parents/carers should indicate if they consent to information being shared with the school; this is recommended. Referral forms are e-mailed to the central appointments system by the school SENCO.

Parents/carers are required to have a recent (within 6 months) optician's report for the pupil. If this is difficult, please explain why on the letter of referral.

Where are the Visual Processing Clinics?

Depending on the child's home address or school, the referral will be made to the closest hospital that has a Visual Processing Clinic:

- Boston Pilgrim Hospital (serving Boston/Skegness areas)
- Spalding Johnson Hospital (serving Spalding/Deepings/Stamford areas)
- Lincoln County (serving Lincoln /Louth areas)
- Grantham (serving Grantham/Sleaford areas)

What will happen next?

Once a referral has been accepted the child is put on a waiting list. Waiting times vary from hospital to hospital. Currently, the average waiting time is between 6-8 months.

A letter OR a text with a link to the NHS Portal will be sent to the parent/carer offering a consultation appointment for their child.

Please ensure attendance to the appointment or re-arrange if necessary. Nonattendance takes up valuable NHS time and adds to the waiting time for others.

What will happen in the Consultation?

The orthoptist will gather information about the child, including:

- Case history
- General health
- Birth history
- Observations by parents using questions that require an Always / Sometimes / Never response.

The orthoptist may complete the following, as appropriate:

1. Carry out a full orthoptic assessment looking at convergence and ocular movements.
2. Ask your child to read to investigate tracking (the ability to follow text with their eyes) and eye movements.
3. Complete a coloured overlay assessment.

Where needed, a plan of support will be discussed with the parent/carer and put into action. A copy of the findings and the remediation plan will be sent to the child's GP, parent, and school SENCO for their information.

How are difficulties treated?

Vision therapy may include eye exercises to strengthen the eye muscles. These exercises can help to retrain visual behaviour; but only if carried out regularly. It is essential that the exercises are carried out at home for short periods every day to train the eyes. Without regular practice the difficulties can remain and cause on-going difficulties. These difficulties can impact on reading accuracy and speed.

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A coloured overlay may be issued if the pupil responds to colour. If the pupil continues to experience increased reading fluency as a result of the overlay, the orthoptist will discuss progression to coloured-lenses or 'clip-ons'.

How will we know the treatment is working?

Where appropriate a follow-up telephone consultation approximately 6-8 weeks from the time of the initial consultation will allow for parents/carers to discuss how the exercises are progressing. Alternatively, a face-to-face follow-up appointment might be scheduled at one of the hospitals.

When appropriate, your child will be recalled to the Clinic for a face-to-face appointment for re-assessment and review of progress. Further action may be needed, or your child may be discharged.

Is there anything else I can do?

In addition to any eye exercises given, regular reading with your child will help them develop and practice the ability to track text with their eyes with greater accuracy (in addition to all the other benefits of regular reading).