

## Some pupils aided by vision therapy

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TEMPE - When 11-year old Jacob Sparks grades began to fall, instead of sending him to his room to study, his mother sent him to a vision therapist.

The idea was to help the youngster coordinate his eye movement with his body movement to increase "eye-teaming skills."

The eyes are supposed to work as a team. They should be moving as one. Poor eye-teaming skills result in reduced depth-perception and inaccurate hand-eye-body coordination." explains Dr. Jeff Eger, and optometrist who has added vision therapy to his Tempe and Mesa practices. Eger says reduced eye-teaming is often associated with delays in learning.

"When a mismatch is created between vision and touch, vision becomes unreliable. The patient learns not to trust what he sees," Eger says.

Eger called Jacob's vision condition "wired."

"He had poorly developed eye movements. This caused him to skip lines while he was reading and reverse words." Eger said.

Eger also worked with Jacob's older sister, Sara, 13. He describes her problem as amblyopia, or "lazy eye."

He treated the children by putting them through twice-a-week therapy sessions that included physical activities such as walking a balance beam, jumping on a trampoline and working word puzzles and drawing.

The trampoline exercises, he explains, help develop rhythm, sense of direction, verbalization of movements and integration of eye movements.

The children practiced jumping on the trampoline while looking at a chalkboard and calling out directions of arrows on the board and pointing their hands in the direction. Under the doctor's direction, the youngsters bounced and answered questions about the arrows on the board.

"Smooth and accurate eye movements are important to reading. Our eyes must move smoothly along a line of print and precisely on to the next line. When the child isn't doing this, when the eyes are jumping, reading becomes a chore and a task they want to avoid," he said.

The balance beam was used to strengthen eye and body coordination and develop focusing or "eye-teaming."

Eger explains, "Focusing is the change our eyes make to maintain clarity as we shift our gaze. This is important when a child copies something from the chalkboard in the classroom. If it (focusing) is slow or inaccurate, the child's schoolwork suffers. Paying attention in class also becomes a problem."

For visualization, the ability to create a mental picture of an object already seen, Eger had Sara and Jacob copy a drawing. He says this test and exercise can help him discover if the patient favors one eye over another. It also, he says, helps the student learn to follow directions and think abstractly.

"Good visualization helps us remember what we've read and studied," he adds.

Susan Sparks, Jacob's and Sara's mother, says she's pleased with the children's progress because of vision therapy.

"Sara's lazy eye was so bad, she was going blind. The eye test they give in school don't pick up the kind of problems a vision therapist can detect. And Jacob's grades have improved," Sparks said.

She recommends parents consider vision therapy as an alternative to help children who are doing poorly in school. But there is one drawback, she says.

It can be expensive. And you don't know how long it's going to take to help them. "Some insurances will cover it, though," she said.

Eger said vision therapy isn't a new practice, but it is more popular back East. He also does vision training with golfers, bowlers, and other sports enthusiasts who want to improve their games.

The Sparks' children attended vision therapy for approximately four months. Besides office sessions, they were given exercises to do at home. Eger said Sara's condition also improved when he fitted her with a contact lens.