



Dr. K helps Emily with a vision therapy exercise.

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Dr. Howard B. Kushner

Helping Families Through Vision Therapy

While back-to-school can be an exciting time for parents, it can also raise anxiety for your child's well being. What if my child struggles in school? What if my child struggles with sports? What if my athletic child gets a concussion?

There has been a lot of media coverage about concussions and student athletes lately, and the concern is well warranted. However, did you know that at least 50% of people with concussions have visual deficits? "In reality, it's probably more than that," says Dr. Howard Kushner,

a Behavioral/Developmental Optometrist specializing in Vision Therapy. "Many people, including doctors, don't have vision problems on their radar screen. In addition to all of the commonly recognized symptoms of concussion, there are visual consequences most people are completely unaware of and are missed, for example, being overwhelmed in a visually busy environment such as a supermarket or mall. Unless vision issues are addressed, the concussed person will not be able to be fully functional."

Dr. Kushner emphasizes that when it comes to sports concussions, it's not just about how to help someone who has already sustained an injury, but how to prevent it in the first place. His advice for parents of athletes is to have a vision evaluation on their child before playing in order to create a baseline of measurements and to see if there are any skill deficits. An evaluation is not simply a standard vision test. A person can have 20/20 vision and still have vision deficits. And these deficits can be a risk factor for concussions.

Dr. Kushner grew up in the town of Greenlawn on Long Island before he found his way to the Capital District. He loved music and taught himself to play guitar. But as a child, he was identified as having Convergence Insufficiency – a problem of using both eyes together as a team. Although the problem was identified, none of the doctors knew how to treat it, and he had to work extremely hard in school to try to overcome the problem to gain academic success.

This experience sparked an interest in Vision Therapy – a program of activities that are used to build visual skills such as focusing, tracking, teaming and processing skills. While children are often monitored for possible learning disorders in school, many of these visual skills are not monitored. "Many children get eye exams that only evaluate the ability to see 20/20 and the structural health of the eye. While these areas are important to evaluate, the visual system and visual process is far more complex," explains Dr. Kushner. Research shows that somewhere between 80-94% of children that struggle academically also have visual skill deficits. Which means that if your child is struggling, vision likely is at least part of the problem.

Not sure if a visual deficit could be affecting your child? Observe your child in everyday situations. Do you notice if he/she has eyestrain or headaches when reading? Poor reading comprehension, poor handwriting and poor overall coordination can also be signs of a problem as well. Dr. Kushner advises to "be involved and work to establish



Dr. K exams Emily's eyes.

good communication with your child's teacher(s). If there are concerns, you can address them quickly." Back-to-school is a great time to have your child's whole visual system evaluated.

But that doesn't mean that vision therapy is just for children. "Everyone can benefit. I work with athletes who simply want to perform better at their sport. I work with adults who are having a hard time working at the computer. I work with a lot of patients who have concussions. Not only can we rehabilitate their visual skill deficits, we work to improve their visual skills to prevent another concussion."

A visit to Dr. Kushner's office is a little different than the usual clinical offices of other doctors. Sensitive to their patient's needs, they have a warm, inviting space that isn't over stimulating. They purposely schedule plenty of time to meet with each patient on time, so there will be no rush and they can fully understand the patient's needs. They also will be offering some new services in addition to their standard vision therapy – play groups to build vision skills for pre-k kids, yoga classes for children or adults with head injuries, as well as tutoring services geared towards teaching students full learning skills, not just going over homework.

While school-aged students tend to be highlighted for vision deficits, vision problems can affect any age and will make an impact on all aspects

of life – whether if it is working on the computer, driving, even being able to read facial expressions and body language for everyday social skills.

"Most people underestimate the role vision plays in our lives. For many reasons, it's important to have comprehensive vision evaluations that go beyond checking to see if you have 20/20 eyesight and that your eyes are physically healthy. The visual system is far more complex than that. Part of living well is to connect to the world in a healthy way. Vision plays a big role in this."

Even preschool age should have evaluations to ensure their visual skills are developing properly. Developmental stages can have a huge impact on the visual skills. For example, crawling is a critical stage. If a child does not have enough belly time, or even if they have multiple ear infections, these are both things that can impact their vision development. Dr. Kushner suggests that infants have their first evaluation at around 6 months old, then annually after that.

He says that his favorite part about the job is seeing the effect vision therapy can have. "Children come to my office struggling in school. They have a poor self esteem as a result. When they finish vision therapy, they are different people. They are self-assured, doing much better academically and proud of their accomplishments. I also see many

people who have had brain injuries. Their lives are turned upside down. When they finish vision therapy, they are a lot closer to having their lives back. I love the fact that I help people in a very tangible way. It's incredibly rewarding!"

Since many people are not familiar with these other vision deficits, Dr. Kushner is working to increase knowledge in the community and schools. Every year, he partners with local schools and parent groups to



Michael, Emily and Zachary doing visual therapy home exercises.

present information to both parents and teachers to create more awareness and understanding of Learning Related Vision Disorders.

However, it isn't all about the eyes for Dr. Kushner. In his off-time, he enjoys spending time with his children and still actively pursues his music by listening, writing and playing music, as well as performing in the rock band, *Lila and the Obsessions*. He also goes to the gym, meditates and catches a baseball or hockey game when he can. And if he wants to get out in the Capital District, his favorite spots to go are the Saratoga State Park or Thatcher Park in the Heldeberg Mountains.

If you would like to contact Dr. Kushner about speaking at your school or group, or would like to set up an appointment for an evaluation, you can contact him at integrativevisiontherapy.com or at 383-2270. ■

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at jcaputo@bestversionmedia.com.