Providing Eye Care to Patients with Learning Disabilities

The term “learning disability” can mean different things to different people, but by definition, it’s a classification of functioning in which a person has difficulty learning in a typical manner. That’s a broad definition, which seems appropriate because learning disabilities come in a wide range of disorders.

For eye care professionals, providing eye care to patients with learning disabilities can be challenging, and for the patient who has a learning disability, the eye exam can be frightening and frustrating. Children with learning disabilities are a critical patient population, because these children can grow up to be adults with learning disabilities. Helping these children have proper vision care early on can lead to better test scores, more educational opportunities and more productive lives.

When it comes to learning related vision problems, Dr. Joel Zaba, an optometrist with practices in Virginia Beach and Norfolk, Virginia, is nationally known for his work with children and adults with these problems.

Aside from being a practicing optometrist for four decades, Dr. Zaba is a researcher, author and lecturer, and has served as the chairman of the American Optometric Association’s communications division and as the national spokesperson for the Vision Council of America. He’s also served as the consulting editor for the Journal of Learning Disabilities and on the editorial board of the Journal of Behavioral Optometry.

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Dr. Zaba shares his approach for better connecting with and evaluating the eye care needs of patients with learning disabilities. While Dr. Zaba’s emphasis is on children’s learning related vision problems, many of these techniques apply to adult patients, too.

**Set Them at Ease**

One of the best ways to connect with individuals who have learning disabilities is to set them at ease. Dr. Zaba does this by using a simple and non-verbal approach. He leaves his white lab coat at home.

“I don’t wear a white jacket. By the time these children get to me, they’ve already seen a lot medical professionals, and they’ve seen a lot of white coats,” says Dr. Zaba. “These children know what a white jacket means. They associate it with shots, pain, and with poking and prodding. That’s not the message I want to send.”

Dr. Zaba says something as simple as a smile can go a long way to make patients feel more comfortable.

Another approach Dr. Zaba employs is to speak with the parent alone before performing the eye exam on the child. Children with learning disabilities are often under the care of multiple health care professionals, and it’s important for eye care professionals to know whether there are other medical or emotional issues of which they should be aware.

“When speaking with a parent, I might discover that the patient has recently met with a psychologist for anxiety,” says Dr. Zaba. “In this case, I know in advance that I’m going to have to change how I interact with this patient, because they will be more anxious than other patients.”

**Get Them to Like You**

Many eye care professionals feel that they are at the office to examine and treat patients, not make friends, but for individuals with learning disabilities, getting them to like you can make treating the patient much easier.

“When a child with a learning disability is in my exam room, everything they do is right,” says Dr. Zaba. “During an exam, I reinforce that there are no wrong answers. Negativity can shut them down. I want them to like me, because then they will be more relaxed and more receptive to care.”
Dr. Zaba explains his patients can often become anxious during a refraction test, when he asks them which image is clearer.

“Sometimes, it can be hard for the patient to determine the clearer image,” he says. “Eye care professionals need to recognize this anxiety or confusion and explain that there are no wrong answers, and it’s okay if they look the same. By continually reassuring patients, eye care professionals can keep them engaged.”

Dr. Zaba also suggests eye care professionals change the way they relate to the patient depending on the patient’s mood and verbal cues.
“If a child is very active and has trouble staying in the exam chair, I’ll have an assistant lightly touch them on the shoulder to help calm them,” he says. “If the child is very loud, I’ll talk in a low voice. You have to adapt to the patients’ personality, whatever your own personality is.”

**Know When It’s Time to Quit**

Attention spans play a large role when providing eye care to patients with learning disabilities. Eye care professionals should realize when a patient has had enough and when it might be better to stop the eye exam and continue at another time.

“You have no idea what a child with a learning disability has been through that day. If he or she is already having a bad day and is frustrated, there might be nothing you can do to make it a productive exam,” says Dr. Zaba. “When this happens, you have to know when to throw in the towel and continue the exam at another day.”

Providing eye care to patients with learning disabilities can be difficult, but by being compassionate to these individuals’ needs and making them as comfortable as possible during the eye exam, you can make the experience easier and more productive.

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