

Teaching pupils who have mild vision and hearing difficulties

With 1 in 5 students affected by mild to moderate vision and/or hearing loss, our recent best practice webinar heard practical strategies from SENCOs and headteachers for how schools can support children and their families

How many pupils in your classroom or school have vision and hearing difficulties? And how are you supporting these children?

The extent to which vision and hearing difficulties could be going undiagnosed was discussed during a recent webinar hosted by *SecEd*, *Headteacher Update*, *Children and Young People Now* and the *SEND Network* in partnership with Thomson Screening and its SchoolScreener for Schools.

The webinar heard testimony from three schools about their work to identify pupils, support them in the classroom, and encourage families to seek support.

In the UK, there is mandatory screening for hearing problems at birth but nothing afterwards, while all children are meant to be screened for vision issues on school-entry, but the availability of this provision varies across the country.

Caroline Lang, headteacher of Longsands Community Primary School in Preston, recognises the issues.

Last year, at her previous school, Anchorsholme Academy in Blackpool, Ms Lang led a screening programme to identify pupils with difficulties. Of 515 children who were screened, 175 were referred to a follow-up optician appointment. Of those who were seen, 60% required an intervention – and some of those interventions were “quite significant”.

She added: “Quite often the children who were being flagged

were the same children who staff had reported as having difficulty in accessing curriculum, making poor progress, and very often the same children who had SEMH needs or were displaying poor behaviour.”

It is an issue that Liz Zoccolan, SENDCO and assistant headteacher at Harrogate Grammar School, a large comprehensive secondary in North Yorkshire, recognises: “If you are finding the classroom environment challenging because of potential hearing or vision difficulties, you will automatically default to poor behaviour. Teenagers can adopt some really quite significant tactics to take away that focus (on their struggles).

“When there are five hours of classroom learning in a day, if a student has a difficulty, then processing all that information whether through visual or auditory means is going to be challenging. Levels of fatigue are going to increase and that has a knock-on effect on motivation, self-esteem, confidence...”

Sharon Hobin, early years lead and early years SENDCO at Beech Hill Community Primary School in Wigan, added: “Younger and younger, children are being sat in front of screens and I think that is definitely affecting vision as well as hearing. We have a bank of screening products that we use to identify any difficulties.”

Research evidence tells us that mild vision and hearing problems in children are common and can act as a significant barrier to

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teaching and learning. Studies suggest that 1 in 5 children have some form of visual deficit with the potential to affect their educational development (Li et al, 2016) and there have been “significant increases” (Holden et al, 2016) in short-sightedness due to increasing screentime among other factors.

Professor David Thomson, an expert in clinical optometry and visual perception, told the webinar: “The most common issues you’re likely to see in the classroom are refractive or focusing errors – short-sightedness, long-sightedness, astigmatism – and those can have a significant impact on a child’s ability to function efficiently in the learning environment.”

Other problems might include what is often referred to as a squint, where one eye looks in, or the two eyes are not correctly aligned, and which can lead to a lazy eye and problems with judging distances. Eye movement control problems are relatively common and that can affect a child’s ability to read, causing things like double vision.

Prof Thompson added: “The most likely vision concern will depend on their age. Younger children tend to be slightly long-sighted and as they go into the teen years there’s an increasing prevalence of short-sightedness. And there has been a rapid increase in the prevalence of myopia (short-sightedness).”

Meanwhile, almost 1 in 5 children can be affected by mild hearing loss with the majority developing problems during childhood. Even minimal problems can have an impact on cognitive and auditory skills, speech and language development, and educational outcomes (Lieu et al, 2020; Moore et al, 2020).

Prof Thompson added: “Some of those are temporary as a result of glue ear and they will resolve. But the impact of hearing problems in the classroom can be just as severe if not more severe than vision problems.”

Parental engagement

All three schools use screening programs to pick up pupils who are struggling. But once issues have been picked up, a key challenge is working with families to ensure children get specialist support.

Ms Hobin explained that they screen all children for hearing deficits after the first term in reception. They also screen any child who they have concerns about for both vision and hearing issues. She said: “A lot of our parents fail to engage with medical appointments so being able to give them information about how



their child has done on the screening program ... gives them the confidence to go and speak to the doctor.”

Ms Lang, meanwhile, said that having a dedicated member of staff working with families helps to break down barriers: “We had a member of staff on the phone every week chasing up with families – have you made an appointment, have you been seen, what has been the outcome, has there been any intervention? A real benefit was that we had a known member of staff delivering the screening and who was then that first point of contact with families.”

Ms Lang recommends making any screening programmes “opt-out” for parents in order to maximise pupil participation and to make use of events such as parents’ evenings to “nudge” parents about things like optician appointments.

As part of its reporting, SchoolScreener for Schools provides automatic letters to print off for parents and this was effective, the panellists said.

Ms Hobin added that they had worked with local GP surgeries to facilitate the referral process, leading to one surgery in particular agreeing to refer pupils directly to specialist services without carrying out additional tests themselves.

Ms Lang, meanwhile, advises

that schools running screening programmes should warn their local opticians to expect an influx of appointments.

Another key role of the school in supporting parents, according to Ms Zoccolan, is one of reassurance: “When you have a child who is struggling at school that has an impact on the family, and when we work with parents, being able to reassure them that we do have a toolkit of assessments and screening that is going to help get to the bottom of what is causing that problem (is important).”

Teaching tips

But of course, while schools are waiting for parents to seek the right support and interventions, children still need to be taught. The webinar ended with some teaching tips from our panellists. Ms Lang recommended sharing the screener results with teachers to help them when planning learning – with seating plans often being key.

She explained: “As part of quality first teaching every classroom is communication-friendly. At the most basic level, it is considering things like seating plans and where children are sitting in relation to potential sources of noises, their line of sight of screens and the teacher themselves.”

About Thomson Screening

This webinar was produced in partnership with our friends at Thomson Screening. City, University of London, founded Thomson Screening in 2011 to build on the research of Professor David Thomson and develop software applications enabling schools and non-clinical NHS staff to check children for undetected eyesight and vision problems that may be affecting their educational and social development and their healthcare.

Thomson Screening’s SchoolScreener, which is used by non-clinical NHS staff, has clocked up more than 1.2 million screenings in more than 5,000 schools. Its sister technology – SchoolScreener for Schools – can be used easily by school support staff to screen pupils in key stages 2, 3 and 4 and the software automatically provides reports to parents recommending full clinical assessments.

For more information, visit www.schoolscreenerforschools.com

Ms Hobin echoed these sentiments and said that using the screener results to empower teachers was effective: “Once you have the screening completed, you can use that to support your staff. You can say, for example, this child is having difficulties with hearing on the left side so can you keep that in mind when you’re seating them.”

Ms Lang added: “Consider the fonts you are using on the screen (some fonts are easier for children to read than others). What colour is the background? Have enlarged version of texts or texts in front of them that mean they are not having to constantly read from a screen at the front of the classroom.”

Ms Zoccolan said that we have to assume we have children with vision or hearing issues in our classrooms: “When you’re lesson planning and organising your classroom, come at it from the assumption that there are some children in that class with some of these difficulties.

“Make sure the text is accessible, never ask students to copy from the board, if students are engaging in poor behaviour sit them nearer the front, and consider your pace in a lesson – not going too quickly, lots of repetition of key concepts, and rest breaks might help students.”

One tip to reduce noise in the classroom is to put felt tabs on the feet of chairs to prevent them screeching as pupils sit down.

Final thoughts

The webinar closed with a final plea from Prof Thompson: “A plea to those of you who are at the sharp end – who are teaching – to be vigilant. Screening is great for detecting these issues, but you are in such a powerful position to recognise these issues, so be vigilant to the behaviour of children, look out for things like a child screwing their eyes up, complaining of headaches, watery eyes, whatever it may be.

“If you have a child who has reading difficulties, consider whether that is because they have some problem processing the words or is it simply that they cannot see the words. Bear in mind these sensory issues when considering the academic progress of children and their behaviour in the classroom.”

Watch the webinar

The one-hour webinar is available to watch back for free via the SchoolScreener for Schools website, where you can also find the research references cited in this article. Visit <https://schoolscreenerforschools.com/webinar-june-24/>

MEET THE EXPERTS

Professor David Thomson: David is the clinical lead: optometry with Thomson Screening. He has spent most of his professional life at City, University of London. He was elected a Life Fellow of the College of Optometrists in 2016.

Liz Zoccolan: Liz is SENDCO and assistant headteacher at Harrogate Grammar School, a large comprehensive secondary school of more than 2,100 pupils in North Yorkshire, part of the Red Kite Learning Trust.

Caroline Lang: Caroline is the headteacher of Longsands Community Primary School in Preston. The webinar focuses on work at her previous school, Anchorsholme Academy, Blackpool, which has 600 pupils aged 4 to 11.

Sharon Hobin: Sharon is the early years lead and early years SENDCO at Beech Hill Community Primary School in Wigan, which has 300 pupils aged 3 to 11.

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