What is visual perception?

Children’s Occupational Therapy Service information for parents and carers
What is visual perception?

Visual perception is the way we know and understand the world around us through what we see. Children who have difficulty with visual perception often find the world a very confusing place. They may experience difficulty with some of the tasks other people take for granted.

Why do we need it?

We use our visual perception skills in everyday life, for example to find socks in a drawer, to find our way around buildings, to judge the depth of steps and stairs or to work-out what an object is when we cannot see the whole object.

What this leaflet is about

This leaflet explains how you can help if your child has difficulty with visual perception. It also explains some of the terms you may have heard and how they may affect your child.

What is visual discrimination?

Visual discrimination is being able to find similarities and differences between objects, looking at size, shape or colour. Problems with visual discrimination may lead to difficulties with:

- Recognising shapes or letters.
- Recognising words when the print is not written left to right and in horizontal lines.
- Reading.
- Drawing.
- Copying two dimensional pictures or three dimensional models (such as something made from building blocks).
- Understanding differences between size and colour.

How to help with visual discrimination

- Encourage your child to look more carefully at objects and consider their colour, size and shape.
- Start with real objects first and progress to pictures.
- Talk about opposites such as big and small, wide and narrow or under and over.
- Play “spot the difference” games.
- Copy two dimensional pictures and three dimensional models, starting with simple ones so your child achieves success. Increase difficulty as their confidence grows.
- Look at different shapes and letters and make comparisons between them.
- Look for shapes in everyday objects, for example the circle in a clock.
What is visual figure-ground?

Visual figure-ground is being able to find one shape or item from a collection of shapes or items. Problems with visual figure-ground may lead to difficulties with:

- Concentration and organisation.
- Reading and copying from the board at school.
- Picking out toys or items from a box.
- Finding items when asked.
- Jigsaws.

Ways to help with visual figure-ground

- Keep work areas and tables free from clutter.
- Ask if your child can sit at the front of the classroom at school.
- Turn off the TV when your child is doing other tasks such as eating a meal.
- Remove very “busy” pictures from the wall.
- Reduce the amount of information on worksheets, allowing your child to focus on one simple task at a time.
- Use paper to cover up part of the page when reading, allowing your child to focus on one part at a time.
- Play “spot the difference” or “Where’s Wally?” games.

What is visual spatial relations?

Visual spatial relations is being able to understand where your body is in relation to other objects and people in a room. It is also being able to identify different shapes and understand distance. Problems in this area may lead to difficulties with:

- Understanding words such as under, over, sideways and behind.
- “Reversals” of letters, like d and b.

Ways to help with visual spatial relations

- Practise with easy tasks to build-up your child’s confidence.
- When dressing, encourage your child to put “labels at the back and pictures at the front” when putting-on tee-shirts and jumpers.
- Have socks with coloured heels and toes.
- Encourage your child to explore different surroundings and surfaces, for example soft play, playgrounds, gravel and sand.
- Help your child to know where his or her arms and legs are, and understand how they work together.
- Place a star on writing paper to indicate to your child where to start or stop writing.
- Darken the line on writing paper to help with the positioning of letters.
- Use graph paper for writing, which will encourage the suitable spacing of words.
- Encourage your child to move slowly through doors or up and down stairs, holding on to the rail.
- Write letters in sand or glitter, or with your hand on your child’s back, to help them understand the correct direction to write letters.
What is visual closure?

Visual closure is being able to recognise and name an object when it is partly hidden. Problems in this area may lead to difficulties with:

- Writing, drawing or copying.
- Reading well, because most people tend to recognise and say a whole word without having to read every letter.
- Joined-up writing.
- Recognising partly hidden objects around the house.
- Completing missing parts in a picture.
- “Dot-to-dot” puzzles.
- Jigsaws.

Ways to help with visual closure

- Encourage your child to practise simple “dot-to-dot” puzzles and jigsaws. Increase the difficulty as confidence grows.
- Hide parts of objects or pictures and ask your child to say what it is. Try choosing simple objects first, like a cup.
- Draw part of a shape or letter and ask your child to complete it. For example draw a semi-circle for your child to complete a circle, or draw a basic chair with a leg missing and your child can add a leg.

What is form constancy?

Form constancy is being able to recognise that two objects can be similar even though one may be bigger, smaller, turned around, upside down or partly hidden. Problems in this area may lead to difficulties with:

- Ability to match shapes or letters.
- Reading other people’s handwriting.
- Finding the way around school and following a map, especially if starting from a different point than usual.
- General reading.
- Jigsaws.

Ways to help with form constancy

- Encourage your child to remember simple shapes and match them.
- Encourage your child to recognise shapes in objects, for example the circle in a clock.
- Begin by looking at simple objects and then use pictures.
- Hide parts of objects or pictures and ask your child to say what it is. Try choosing simple objects first, that the child is familiar with, like a cup.