

Thematic Brief: Child Eye Health

Key Messages

- **Vision impairment** affects millions of children globally and is a **major, largely avoidable threat to learning, development, and wellbeing**. Over 90% of vision impairment can be prevented or treated with existing cost-effective interventions.
- Providing **early detection and treatment**, including glasses, significantly improves educational outcomes and quality of life.
- **Integrating child eye health services** into school health and primary care systems enhances reach and equity — especially in low- and middle-income countries where the burden is highest.
- **Barriers to access** — including service availability, costs, workforce shortages, and follow-up systems — **disproportionately affect** disadvantaged children.
- **Coordinated policy action across health, education, and social sectors is essential** to protect child vision and support broader development goals, including education and human capital outcomes.

Why This Matters

Vision is fundamental to a child's ability to learn, interact socially, and participate fully in daily life. Poor vision not only reduces classroom performance but can also negatively impact cognitive development, self-esteem, and future opportunities. Evidence reviewed by The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health shows that vision impairment in children contributes to reduced educational attainment and lifetime potential, and that in many settings the **highest burden is on children who lack access to basic eye care services.**

Quality eye care in childhood — including screening, diagnosis, corrective interventions and rehabilitation— **supports a child's rights to health and education**, helping countries achieve broader development goals such as universal health coverage and equitable learning outcomes.

The Problem

- **High Prevalence:** A significant number of children worldwide live with untreated vision issues, especially uncorrected refractive error (correctable with glasses), which is among the most common causes of visual impairment in childhood.

- **Educational Impact:** Poor vision contributes directly to lower academic performance, reduced participation, and increased risk of drop-out.
- **Inequity and Access Gaps:** Children in low-income settings, rural areas, minority groups, and those with disabilities face disproportionate barriers to eye care services and corrective aids.
- **System Shortfalls:** Many health and education systems lack the infrastructure, workforce training, and financing needed to provide routine child eye health services at scale.

What Works: Evidence and Solutions

- **Routine Vision Screening** in Schools and Primary Care enables early identification of refractive errors and other eye conditions, leading to timely management and reduced lifelong impairment.
- **Spectacle Provision and Corrective Care:** Providing glasses and other corrective interventions is one of the most cost-effective health measures, with immediate benefits for vision and learning.
- **Integrated Service Delivery:** Embedding eye health into existing child health programmes (e.g., school health check-ups, immunisation visits, and primary care) increases coverage, reduces duplication, and leverages existing infrastructure.
- **Community and Caregiver Engagement:** Awareness campaigns and caregiver education can improve early care-seeking and adherence to treatment plans.

Policy Options

1. **Mandatory Vision Screening** in Schools and Early Childhood Settings
 - Introduce age-appropriate vision checks integrated into education and health programmes including health promotion messaging for children, parents and teachers.
 - *Benefit:* Large-scale early detection and improved learning outcomes.
2. **Strengthen Child Eye Care Services at Primary Level** and Targeting out of School Children
 - Train health workers in paediatric vision assessment and establish referral pathways to eye care specialists.
 - *Benefit:* Better access for underserved communities.

3. Reduce Financial Barriers for Children and Families

- Provide free or subsidised spectacles and essential eye care services for children.
- *Benefit:* Increased equity and service uptake.

Recommended Actions

- **Integrate Child Eye Health in National Health and Education Policies:** Anchor eye health targets and accountability within broader child health strategies.
- **Ensure Routine Vision Screening Across Key Ages:** Mandate systematic screening at entry to school and periodic re-checks through school years.
- **Build Workforce Capacity:** Expand training for timely and accurate screening for teachers, primary care providers, and community health workers in child eye health. Increase the capacity to deliver quality paediatric care.
- **Secure Sustainable Financing:** Allocate dedicated resources in health and education budgets for child eye health programmes.
- **Monitor and Evaluate Coverage and Outcomes:** Include child eye health indicators in routine data systems to track progress and inequities.

Expected Impact

- **Improved child learning,** school retention, and cognitive development.
- **Reduced prevalence** of avoidable vision impairment.
- **Increased equity in access** to essential eye care services.
- **Strengthened health and education systems** through integrated service delivery.

Conclusion

Child eye health is a foundational investment in human capital, education, and equitable development. The *Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health* highlights that the vast majority of vision impairment worldwide is preventable or treatable with existing interventions — including in children. Urgent, coordinated action across health and education sectors will substantially improve individual and societal outcomes and help achieve universal health coverage and sustainable development goals.

References

1. Burton MJ, Ramke J, Marques AP, et al.
The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health: vision beyond 2020.
The Lancet Global Health. 2021;9(4):e489–e551.
2. World Health Organization.
World report on vision.
Geneva: WHO; 2019.
3. International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB).
Vision Atlas: Child Eye Health.
Data and evidence on global prevalence, causes, and impact of vision impairment in children.
4. World Health Organization & UNICEF.
Vision and hearing screening for school-based Children: implementation handbook
WHO; Geneva 2025.
5. Smith TS, Frick KD, Holden BA, et al.
Potential lost productivity resulting from the global burden of uncorrected refractive error.
Bulletin of the World Health Organization. 2009;87:431–437.