

Kids averse to wearing glasses, parental apathy makes it worse

Graphic: Shailesh Warang

Sumitra Deb Roy | TNN

Apathy of parents could be pushing many children towards a life with permanently reduced vision. A study of 3,581 schoolchildren has underlined how 64% of children with poor vision did not wear glasses regularly as they were not pushed enough at home or their need for spectacles was overlooked. Conducted by Advanced Eye Hospital and Institute, Navi Mumbai, the study suggests periodic eye checks and a vitamin-A-rich diet.

The findings of the study, based on screening programmes carried out in five leading schools of the satellite city, are alarming, given that previous studies among schoolchildren had pegged the incidence of poor vision at 2-7%.

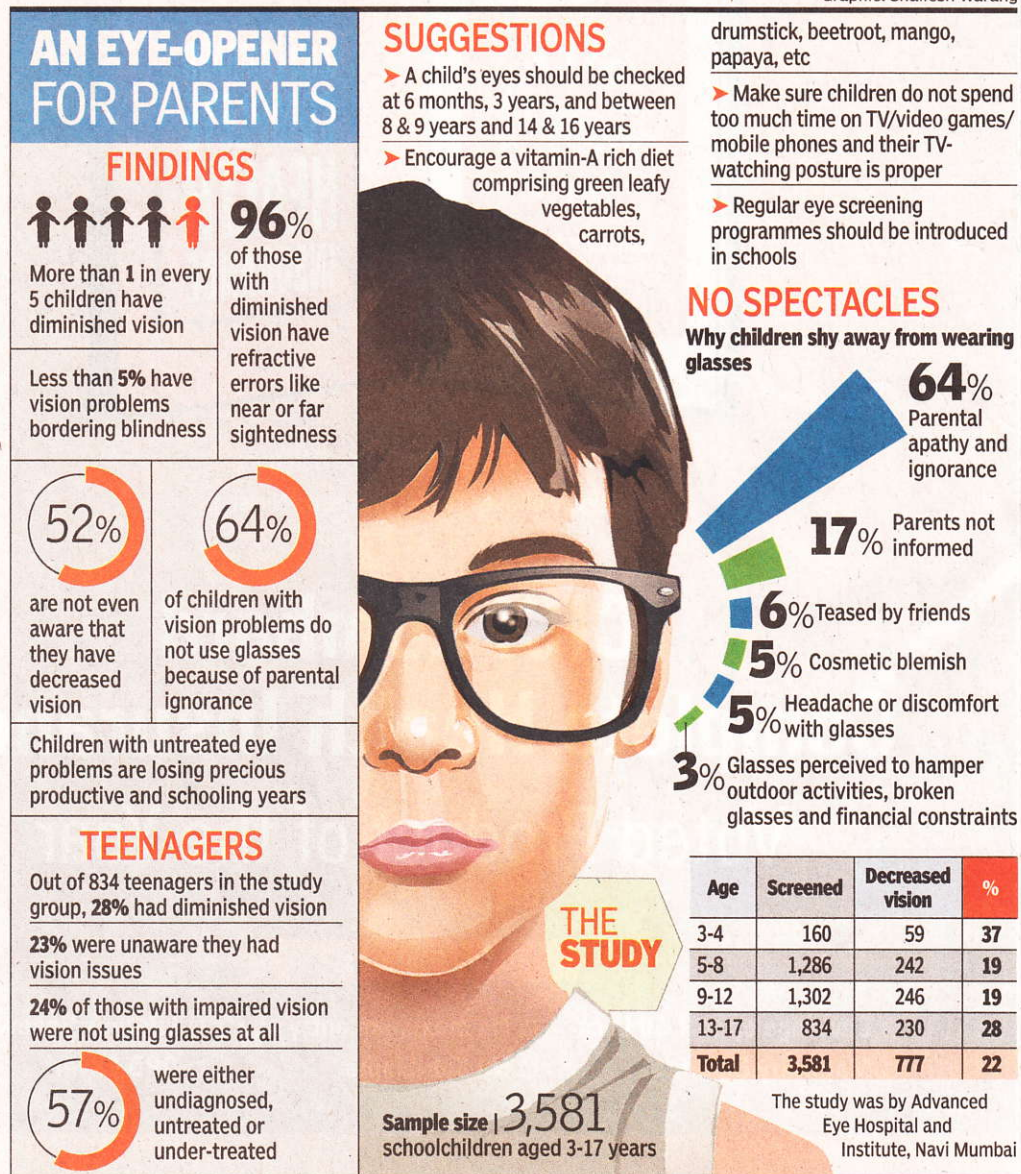
In the current study, refractive errors, like near and far sightedness accounted for 96% of low-vision cases. About 5% of the children were also diagnosed with serious vision issues bordering on blindness.

Surprisingly, children in the age bracket of 3-4 years had the highest incidence of diminished vision (37%). This age group was also the most neglected as in almost 100% of the cases, their parents were not bothered about the child not using glasses regularly. This group was also the least aware about eye problems, and in the absence of parental awareness, most likely to live with them for the next few years.

With progressing age of a child, apathy and ignorance of parents comes down—dropping from 73% in the 5-8 age group to 70% in the 9-12 age group.

For teenagers, parental apathy drops to 52%, hinting that either the children were aware about expressing their problems or were simply taken more seriously.

The effects of longstanding uncorrected vision problems could be catastrophic, said Dr Vandana Jain, cornea and refractive surgeon, and principal investigator of the study. "The first 11 years in the life of a child are crucial for the development of the eye. If measures are not



taken to correct refractive errors, the child may suffer from permanent reduction of vision."

She said many parents bring children to ophthalmologists, thinking they made excuses to avoid studies. "Ideally, parents should be insisting on an eye checkup just like they stress on vaccination, nutrition or co-curricular activities."

But, there are no clear answers as to what could have caused such a massive shift in the incidence of pediatric eye problems. "There are no studies to directly correlate the in-

creased use of gadgets or the continuous use of near vision for such devices to increasing refractive errors, but their role cannot be overlooked," said Jain.

Surgeon and member of the Bombay Ophthalmologists' Association Dr SS Bhatti said that one needed to investigate if more children were born with eye problems. "Use of gadgets may strain the eyes, but not necessarily give rise to refractive errors. It could also be due to genetic reasons or better diagnosis contributing to the rising trend."

Either way, experts say, the solution lies in better screening programmes in schools and more awareness at home. Pediatric ophthalmologist Dr Prachi Agashe, who was part of the study, said children could easily develop low self-esteem and have other development problems simply because they may not be able to excel in academics. "The child may not get to see the black board and play games, or may have difficulty coping with writing," she said. "But all this can be avoided by wearing a simple pair of glasses."