

WHEN TO REFER:

A THERAPIST'S GUIDE TO BEHAVIORAL OPTOMETRY

Many children with coordination, learning, or attention challenges are referred to therapy long before they ever receive a comprehensive vision evaluation. But what if the root issue isn't sensory or motor alone, but visual?

This guide helps allied professionals know **when** and **why** to refer a child to a behavioral or developmental optometrist, and what signs to look for beyond a standard "20/20" vision screening.

Key Referral Indicators

Use this list when reviewing cases with academic, sensory, or motor concerns. If multiple areas are present, a developmental vision evaluation may be warranted.

Academic & Attention

- Difficulty sustaining focus on visual tasks (reading, worksheets)
- Poor reading fluency or comprehension despite good decoding
- Frequent letter/word reversals or skipping lines
- Inconsistent performance with visual memory or copying tasks
- Appears to understand content better when it's read aloud

Fine Motor & Writing

- Poor spacing, alignment, or sizing of written work
- Fatigue or frustration with handwriting
- Struggles to copy from the board
- Avoids coloring, drawing, or pencil tasks

Gross Motor & Visual-Motor Integration

- Appears clumsy, bumps into objects, or avoids sports
- Trouble with ball skills (catching, kicking, aiming)
- Difficulty crossing midline or tracking moving objects
- Relies heavily on looking at hands or feet when moving

Visual Comfort & Behavior

- Complains of headaches, blurry vision, or double vision
- Squints, rubs eyes, tilts head, or closes one eye
- Avoids close work or becomes easily distracted
- Fidgets or slouches when doing tabletop work

What Is Behavioral Optometry?

Behavioral optometrists (also known as developmental or neuro-optometrists) assess how a child **uses** their vision—not just how clearly they see.

They evaluate skills like:

- Eye teaming (binocular vision)
- Focusing and tracking
- Visual-spatial processing
- Visual perception and integration with movement

These are often missed in routine eye exams, but they have a major impact on learning, attention, coordination, and confidence.

How to Refer Confidently

- Use language like: “Let’s rule out any underlying visual coordination issue that could be impacting therapy.”
- Attach a referral sheet or screening checklist
- Emphasize that this is not about getting glasses but understanding how well the child’s visual system supports function

When therapists and behavioral optometrists collaborate, outcomes improve. Children struggling in therapy often gain more from sessions once vision is addressed.