Norfolk County Council
at your service

Virtual School Sensory Support
Sensory Support Centre
148 Woodside Road
Norwich
NR7 9QL
Tel: 01603 704040 Fax: 01603 704047
Minicom: 01603 704044
E-mail: sensorysupport@norfolk.gov.uk
Website: http://vsss.virtual-school.org.uk

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Visual Stress Factsheet – VSSS Guidance for schools

Below is a list of recommendations that schools may like to explore with students, they believe are showing signs of Visual Stress.

Visual Stress (often referred to as Meares Irlen Syndrome) is thought to be a visual perception dysfunction caused by over sensitivity to certain visual stimuli. This sensitivity shows as symptoms of visual stress by causing problems when visual information is processed in the visual cortex.

Typical Symptoms

The symptoms most frequently reported are print distortion and rapid fatigue when reading, with associated poor tolerance to glare, frequent headache and eye discomfort. The stimulus which most commonly causes problems is striped pattern (thus as print becomes smaller and more closely spaced it becomes increasingly problematic). Visual stress is not a problem with the functioning of the eye itself and the symptoms do not respond to conventional optometric treatment. However many people who experience visual stress find that coloured filters (overlays) or precision tinted lenses eliminate or reduce their symptoms and allow them to read for longer and in greater comfort. Other simple modifications in the classroom such as using coloured paper, changing the background colour of a computer screen or spacing writing on the board can also be helpful.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT

1. An examination by an Optometrist should be carried out to eliminate problems of refraction or binocular vision (this is appropriate if an examination has not occurred within the year prior to the assessment).
2. SASC Guidelines recommend that an assessment is carried out by an Optometrist with the correct equipment and experience in assessing for Visual Stress.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORT

1. It is often helpful to write on alternate lines of the paper, reducing the stripe pattern and thus improving legibility for proof reading and revision.
2. The child/young person should experiment with pen colours to obtain a colour which is easy to read on a white board and in an exercise book. This pen colour should be used for written work and for marking. A pen could be taken to each lesson so that responsibility for its use rests with the student rather than the teacher. Text written with a good quality fibre tip/gel pen is often easier to read than pencil or a biro.

3. Desk copies of board work are very useful. Text should be written legibly in large print and should be well spaced down and across the board. Text on the board should be kept to a minimum and should be read to the student before copying. Extra time will be required for board work. Desk copies may be required even when a student has precision tinted lenses.
4. When using a computer the background and font colour may be changed to reduce glare and improve comfort. Recent research indicates VERDANA is the best font for the child/young person who experiences visual stress. Enlarging the font and using 1.5 or double spacing will be helpful. Seating position is important and sharing a computer is therefore not advisable. It is advisable to take frequent breaks when using a computer.
5. Assignment instructions and notes, especially those copied from a board or a book/ worksheet should be checked for accuracy.
6. Visual stress means that reading and writing will be slow and will result in rapid fatigue. Extra time will be needed for tasks in school and for assignments. Extra time may be needed in examinations.
7. Worksheets and examination papers should not be printed in print smaller than N14 and generally the larger the print the easier it will be to read.
8. Support to help develop organisational and study skills is beneficial. A child/young person with symptoms of visual stress cannot work for sustained period.
9. Lighting: The child/young person with visual stress should sit in natural lighting and fluorescent lighting should be switched off when possible. Bright natural light should be controlled with blinds and curtains. Teachers should avoid standing in front of a light source e.g. window. Task lighting directed onto the work may be better than diffused light from overhead lighting.