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photo by Chris Fritchie



## Do You See What I See?

By Kathryn MacDonell

**TURN THE CLOCK** back to the first day of kindergarten and meet Emily, an excited 5-year-old girl with wide, sparkling eyes and bouncy, brown hair. She's been waiting a long time to go to school, watching her big brother go off every morning to learn important things. At last, it's her turn. She can't wait to learn how to read all by herself. She knows words are important and she's anxious to begin decoding the mystery of the world locked away in those lines and circles.

But the path to academic success isn't always a smooth journey and Emily was one of those students who struggled. Despite her eagerness and remarkable drive, it wasn't easy for Emily to make sense of the black shapes that swam in front of her eyes. Her parents and teachers did all the right things to ensure Emily's success, but the path was a bumpy one. The bright spark of learning

dimmed as other children began to read, slowly at first – haltingly, but they gained momentum as the days and weeks of elementary school rolled by. Emily struggled to keep up - never finishing her work at the same time as the other students. She was being left behind by kids who could read faster. Emily knew it and it hurt.

"Emily struggled with reading for years while being a generally bright student. Her sheer will to succeed and perseverance carried her a long way," reflects Beth Robinson, Emily's mom and editor of *Frisco STYLE Magazine*.

During elementary school, Emily tried reading with colored transparencies laid over the page to deflect the starkness of the black print on white paper. This helped a little and made Emily "kind of cool" with the other students. The family eye doctor suggested reading glasses when Emily was in fifth grade.

They helped a little too. Emily's teachers at Razor Elementary were understanding and wanted her to succeed.

Kathleen Braffman, literacy specialist and Emily's first grade teacher, worked hard with her through fifth grade. "Emily was bright, attentive and wanted to please. She tried hard, but she'd lose her place when she read and had trouble phrasing. It took a toll on her comprehension. It seemed Emily had everything she needed to learn to read, but we couldn't seem to make a difference." So Emily, her parents and teachers landed in a resigned place about her learning struggle. Emily said, "We accepted it and pretended it went away."

Mrs. Robinson responds, "Emily may have thought we ignored her problem in sixth grade, but it was really a wait and see approach due to the change from elementary to middle school. The focus and emphasis in her language arts class was different at Hendrick Middle School and she seemed to adjust and flourish, so we did not pursue any additional help."

In eighth grade, when the reading workload increased, the family eye doctor suggested Emily see an eye specialist. She went to Dr. Melinda Surdacki of 1<sup>st</sup> Eye Care, a therapeutic optometrist. Dr. Surdacki specializes in pediatric exams and developmental evaluations for learning difficulties. She has offices in both Prosper and Carrollton. This astute eye specialist, who runs a practice of education, says, "This is a common problem and today can be diagnosed by first grade if parents know what to look for."

Dr. Surdacki helped bring Emily's world into focus. She performed a series of tests and at the first appointment diagnosed Emily's problem.

Emily had a physical problem with her eyes called "convergence insufficiency" (CI) which is characterized by a person's



Emily & Sundance

photo by Chris Fritchie

inability to maintain proper binocular eye alignment on objects as they approach from distance to near. The eyes tend to drift outward so the eye muscles must exert extra effort to keep both eyes pointed on the intended visual target (book, computer, etc).

Dr. Surdacki described Emily's condition like this, "Emily not only had a convergence insufficiency, but an exotropia (when one eye turns out – and for Emily that was at the near setting). She did not have double vision from the eye turn because it was a longstanding problem and her vision system had learned to turn off the vision to one eye to avoid the double vision. She also had significant focusing dysfunction. I would classify her condition as 'moderate to severe.'" This condition caused Emily to lose her place, or jump to another line above or below causing her to constantly reread material.

Emily's therapy was to perform eye exercises. She used a book of mazes and did therapy with strange glasses called "flippers" that were at first difficult to master but got easier as she progressed. She practiced every night at first, then four times a week, then two times a week, then every other week, and now

she's finished and reads naturally.

Imagine the relief and joy of having solid knowledge to work with, after eight years of feeling inadequate. It was as if Dr. Surdacki had lifted a dark curtain so Emily could see the world of print more clearly.

Emily began treatment with Dr. Surdacki in the fall and by Christmas break was moved to honors science. By the end of eighth grade, Emily was commended in reading for her TAKS test results and inducted into the National Junior Honor Society. That's solid proof of the critical link between vision and learning.

"Things at school just got easier," says Emily. "My work took less time. I can read faster, I'm more interested in school and I feel more confident. I'm even able to learn patterns for my horseback riding more easily."

Eye exercises to strengthen the eye muscles did the trick for Emily. She has now completed the therapy and will not have to do any further exercises. Now Emily's focus doesn't jump all over the page, but stays put. This fall she'll walk through the doors of Clark High School, as a confident freshman. In the future, Emily plans to attend Texas A&M to

become a veterinarian. Her new-found ability to focus, paired with great drive, is indeed the magic combination for success.

As much as 80 percent of everything we learn comes to us through our vision. Eye-hand coordination games, observation, reading, watching TV, using a computer-- these are examples of common visual tasks we use to learn about the world around us.

Children's visual systems are developed early in life and signs of difficulty need to be treated early so they don't worsen. Generally, children do not outgrow eye coordination problems or many other visual problems. When problems occur, steps need to be taken to help children learn to move their eyes smoothly and accurately when reading the words on a page or following a moving object like a ball.

Lisa McGill is the office manager at Hendrick Middle School and would visit with Mrs. Robinson when she would come to take Emily to her eye therapy appointments. "I would've never known to explore this issue, but because I was made aware of Emily's diagnosis, I was able to identify similar difficulties with my daughter. Her eye doctor has diagnosed the same condition and she is now in treatment," explained Mrs. McGill.

The College of Optometrists in Vision Development notes that problems with eye focusing, eye coordination, eye movement control and visual perception can all interfere with a child's or adult's ability to read or learn. Experts estimate five percent of school-age children have CI. They can suffer from headaches, dizziness and nausea, which can lead to irritability, low self-esteem and inability to concentrate.

Unfortunately, many individuals do not know about the importance of eye movements as an integral part of vision and learning. Whenever a learning problem is suspected, a thorough vision examination needs to be conducted to diagnose and treat vision problems.

Emily's wise words of advice, "Don't ignore the fact when you're not doing well in school. Find an expert or keep looking for help."

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