

The Hidden Link Between Vision and Learning: Why Millions of Learning-Disabled Children Are Misdiagnosed

Katie Johnson, author of *Red Flags for Elementary Teachers*

Rosen, WB. *The Hidden Link Between Vision and Learning*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (July 5, 2016); 204 pages; on Amazon

In *The Hidden Link Between Vision and Learning*, Wendy Beth Rosen has made an important addition to the ongoing effort to get America's children the vision care they need. The importance of this effort cannot be understated: If a child is not able to see to read, that child will not be successful in school and in life. Vision comes before learning.

The first step in making any change, including changing attitudes, is information. *The Hidden Link* eloquently revisits, again, the way-too-widely held belief that children's failures in school are purely problems of education. They are not. In chapter after chapter, *The Hidden Link* disproves this inaccurate belief, again.

It's not that we don't have mountains of evidence, from Arnold Gesell to Carla Hannaford to Antonia Orfield, from Howard Gardner to Lynn Hellerstein to Jillian Benoit, to name only a very few of the excellent contributors to our understanding the connection between vision and learning from the 1920s until now. Rosen weaves their work and discoveries very effectively into the pages of this book, and in addition provides sidelights and insights into other areas such as the influence of sleep, lighting, screens, 3-D,

and, most recently, concussions on growing children.

Vision, because it is so basic to human development and function, is complex. As with anything complex, there are many pieces that can go wrong. Rosen supplies her readers with a very useful catalog of clear and helpful definitions of the many areas and abilities that comprise vision, from Acuity to Visual Closure, as well as reminding the reader of the differences between vision and eyesight.

Children – and other humans – usually don't know when they have a vision problem. In school, when the print becomes smaller and the requirements greater at around age eight, children begin to think they are stupid – no one else is having the trouble they are having. From feeling stupid to acting out, to being labeled, to continuing even with various kinds of "special" help, children still do not succeed. When someone notices that they are having trouble seeing, and they get help, their lives are turned around. Rosen devotes a riveting Appendix to the stories of such children.

As of April 2016, there are four states that require screening in schools for near vision – reading distance – as well as for distance vision. Only four, of fifty. State boundaries do not change the numbers: twenty-five percent of school-age children have some issue with near vision that makes success in school unlikely or, at least, very difficult. (In juvenile justice facilities, that 25% can be 74%.)

"Knowing what to look for in the scope of a child's development would be a game changer," writes Rosen. Parents, teachers, doctors, therapists – and politicians – play essential roles in this work. "We have the expertise, skills, and talent to respond to what is in the best interests of children. Our educational system needs to honor the developmental stages of movement and vision that children progress through."

But when we hear about education in Finland, where that understanding drives the way school is organized, it seems to be a

brand new idea. In the United States, between the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* to the 2015 revision of *No Child Left Behind*, “very little has improved,” says Rosen. “We’ve taken so many steps backward over time that the [current] policy improvements bring us back roughly to where we started. So while we think we’re in a better position we are actually in a ‘less worse’ position.”

The Hidden Link Between Vision and Learning repeats, clearly and with many examples and much data, that we already know what we need to know in order to do what is best for children. Doing it – unifying or at least weaving together the points of view and agendas of the educational establishment (as distinct from the teachers of America), the medical establishments (where there is some new cross-discipline awareness growing between ophthalmology and optometry), and the justice systems at every level (from the principal’s office to the penitentiary) – this is our task now.

“Change has to occur in both education and health care,” Wendy Rosen repeats, “because vision lives in both.”

Read this book, rejoice in its clarity, and give it to all the teachers and parents and school administrators and pediatricians and politicians you can buttonhole. We – as a country, as parents, and as educational and medical practitioners of all kinds – can fix this problem, just as soon as we acknowledge its existence.



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Katie Johnson has published three books about teaching writing to young children, worked as an adjunct professor of literacy in the teacher-training programs of Pacific Oaks College (California) and University of Washington (Bothell campus), in the graduate school of Lesley University (Cambridge, Massachusetts), and done many professional development presentations across the United States. She is a Fellow of the Southern Maine Writing Project and the Puget Sound Writing Project.

Katie has retired from teaching to work on raising awareness about vision issues. She likes to dance, read, cook, garden, write, talk, go to the symphony, and sample the ever-evolving microbrew production in the Northwest. She has two daughters, three granddaughters, and two great-grandchildren. www.katiejohnsonauthor.com
