

VISUAL DIFFICULTIES GUIDANCE 2025

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Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) and Visual Difficulties

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SASC Visual Difficulties Screening Protocol

Visual difficulties that affect an individual's performance will typically give rise to *symptoms* of discomfort and visual disturbance, which may result in changes in behaviour as an effect of the symptoms, or as a strategy to cope with the difficulty. These behavioural changes are often helpful *signs* that the individual is experiencing visual difficulty. Often, though not always, visual difficulties will be exacerbated by tasks involving sustained and intensive reading or studying of visual material.

The role of the SpLD practitioner is to undertake visual difficulties screening (if it is feasible to do so) and refer the individual for professional assessment, if necessary, on the basis of this screening.

The screening protocol described below provides two short questionnaires, which assessors should use to gather information on an individual's visual history and any symptoms and signs of visual difficulty, and a template letter for referral to an optometrist if required on the basis of the questionnaire responses.

It must be emphasised that assessment of visual difficulties by an SpLD practitioner is to be limited to recording of reported symptoms and signs — there must be no attempt to suggest a diagnosis or propose a treatment, for the following reasons:

- In some cases there may be ocular or visual system pathology, so symptoms **MUST** be investigated by a qualified professional.
- Refractive problems are a very common cause of symptoms, but assessment and management of these can only legally be undertaken by suitably qualified, registered professionals.
- Similar symptoms may have very different causes, especially those involving headache and eyestrain, and so a variety of assessments and professional knowledge may be required to reach a correct diagnosis.

Note specifically that, in keeping with advice in the previous paragraph, SpLD practitioners, specialist teachers, and others involved in providing support to individuals with SpLD should not undertake assessment aimed at identification and treatment of 'visual stress'.



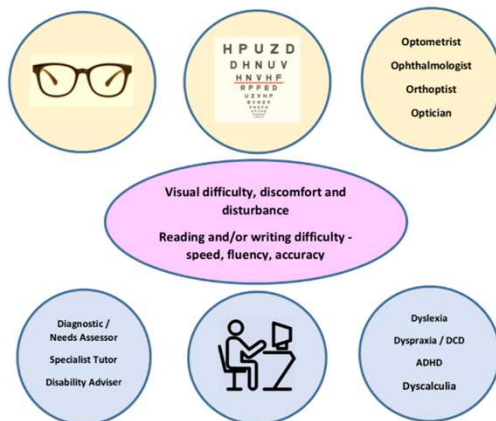
SpLD Assessment Standards Committee

Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) and Visual Difficulties

A Guide for Assessors and SpLD Practitioners

SASC Working Group June 2018

Dr Jim Gilchrist, Caroline Holden, Jane Warren.



SASC SpLD Assessment Standards Committee

www.sasc.org.uk

SASC Guidance 2018

SpLDs and Visual Difficulties

Jim Gilchrist

and

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Summary – Our Responsibilities (1)

1. Ensure correct diagnosis and management of any visual difficulties that affect a student's reading / school work.
2. Raise awareness that the primary aim is to assist reading and other work by enabling clear and comfortable vision, it is not treatment of dyslexia or other learning difficulties.
3. Raise awareness that visual stress is a small part of a bigger picture. It should be taken into account, but in the context of comprehensive assessment by qualified professionals.



Summary – Our Responsibilities (2)

4. Recognise that it is misleading, costly and unethical to promote visual stress and coloured overlays as having special status in relation to dyslexia/SpLDs.
5. Acknowledge the degree of scepticism and professional concern over the current position on SpLDs and vision. Move away from terminology and practices that fuel this concern. Promote & demand open, transparent and evidence-based approaches.
6. Work together to rewrite the story of the role of visual difficulties in SpLDs.





Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs)

- **Dyslexia** – affects learning of accurate & fluent word reading and spelling.
 - **Dyscalculia** – affects learning of arithmetic facts & calculation procedures.
 - **Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)** – affects motor activities & skills.
 - **Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)** – affects language & communication.
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- **Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** – hyperactive-impulsive and/or inattentive behaviour.
 - **Autism / Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC)** – repetitive, restricted behaviours or interests, deficits in social communication.

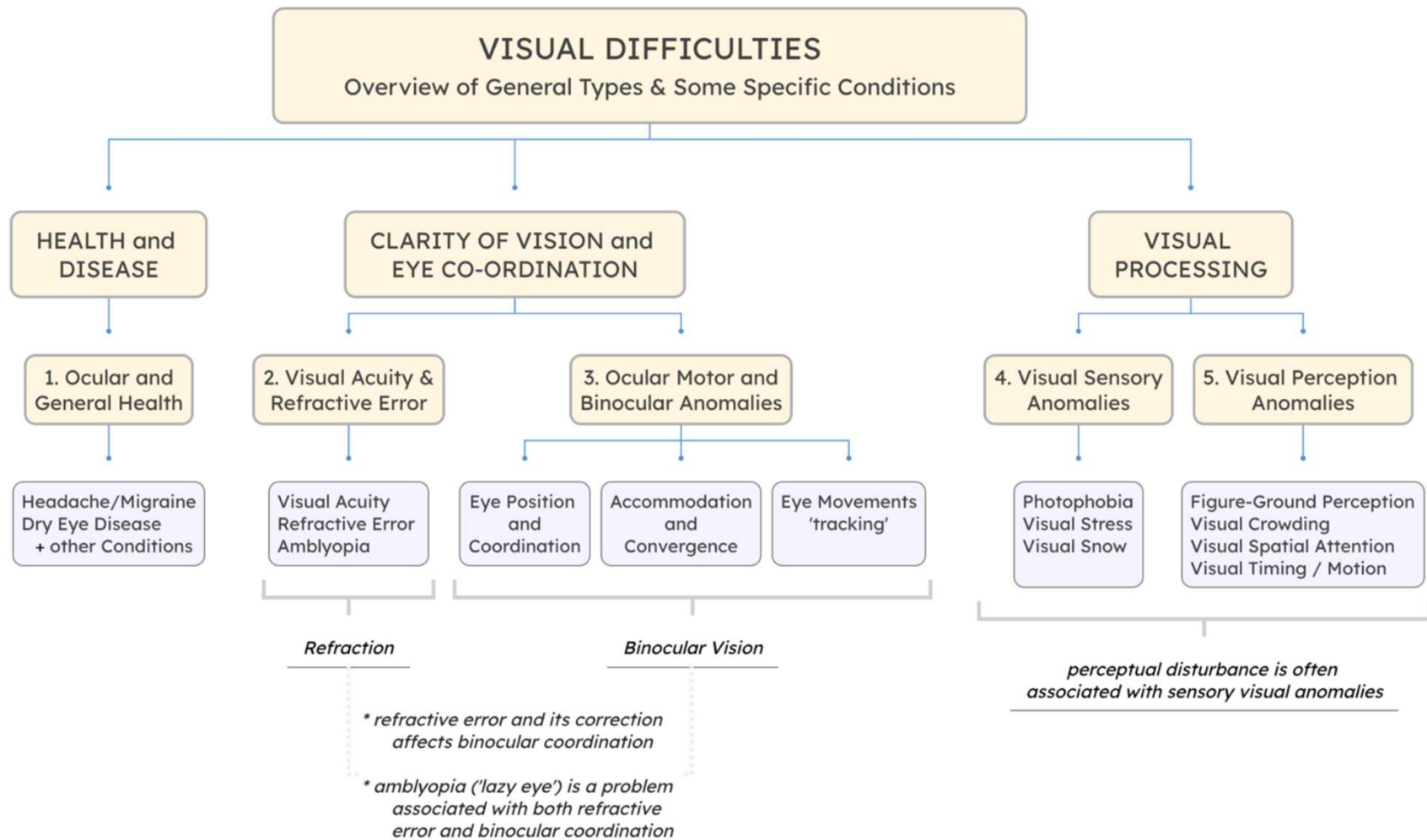
Recognising Visual Difficulties

Learning is a visual task.

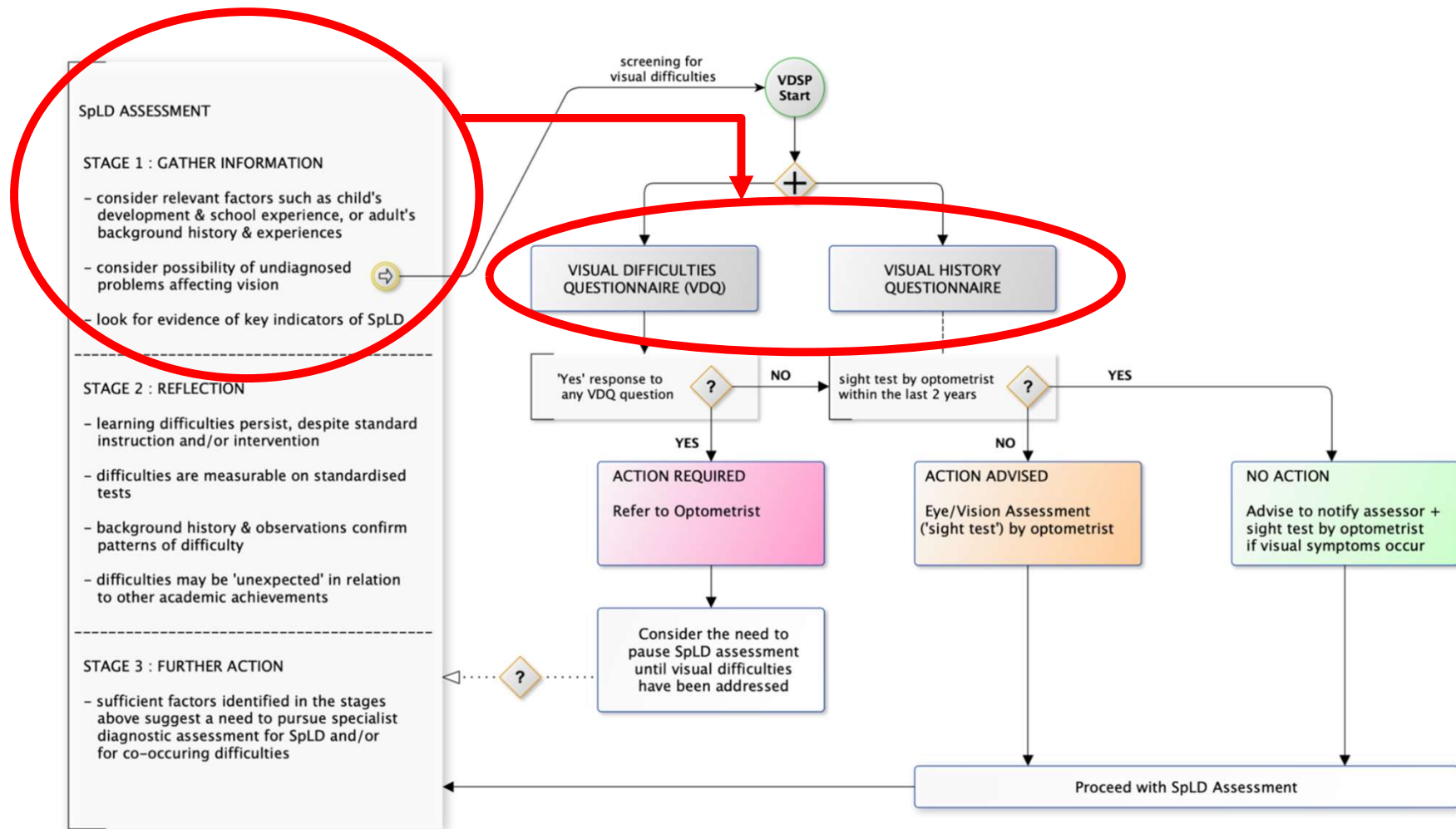
The presence of visual problems will increase the challenge for individuals with SpLD.

Visual difficulties **co-exist** with SpLD.

Many types of visual difficulty and the problem may be multi-factorial.



Symptom or Sign		MYOPIA	HYPEROPIA	ASTIGMATISM	ACCOMMODATION DYSFUNCTION	CONVERGENCE DYSFUNCTION	OTHER OCULAR MOTOR	OTHER
FEELS Discomfort	Headache	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Eyestrain	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	Tired eyes	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	Gritty eyes	X	X	X	X	X		X
	Sore eyes						X	
SEES Disturbance	Blurry when reading		X	X	X	X		
	Blurry at distance	X		X				
	Double vision		X	X	X	X	X	X
	In and out of focus			X	X			
	Unstable image					X	X	X
	Moving text					X	X	X
	Patterns seen							X
DOES Behaviour	Screw up eyes when reading		X	X				
	Screw up eyes when looking at distance	X						
	Hold objects up close	X						
	Move objects away		X	X	X	X		
	Rub eyes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Skip words / lines					X	X	X



Visual Difficulties Questionnaire (VDQ)

4.14. The VDQ requests simple yes/no answers to a few questions about symptoms and signs involving FEEL (visual discomfort, Q1-3), SEE (visual disturbance Q4-7), DO (behaviour Q8-9), and one general question (10) about any other experience.

QUESTIONS	NO	YES
often = persistent, occurring several times a week, though not necessarily every day		
1. Do you often get headaches when you read or study?		
2. Do your eyes often feel sore, or gritty, or watery?		
3. Does reading from white paper or from a bright screen often feel uncomfortable?		
4. Does print often appear blurred, or go in and out of focus, when you are reading?		
5. Does the print, or book, or screen, often appear double when you are reading?		
6. Do words often seem to move or merge together when you are reading?		
7. Do objects in the distance often appear more blurred after you have been reading?		

Start with the Visual Difficulties Questionnaire.

Questions require simple Yes / No answers from the individual.

If answer to any question is 'Yes' refer to an optometrist for further assessment.

Use the Visual History questionnaire to gather more information and referral letter to give the optometrist as much background as possible.

Visual History Questionnaire

4.13. The following questions provide information on visual history, which helps in putting any reports of current visual difficulties into context.

QUESTIONS	RESPONSES	NOTES
1. Have you been prescribed and advised to wear any optical prescription lenses (i.e. glasses or contact lenses)?	Yes / No	
if YES then:		
1a. Are these required for distance vision (e.g. television), near vision (e.g. reading), or both?	Dist / Near / Both	
1b. Do you wear your glasses / contact lenses as advised?	Yes / No	If correction prescribed and normally worn for near work, then it should be worn for SpLD assessment
1c. Do you have your glasses / contact lenses with you today?	Yes / No	
2. How long ago was your last sight test or eye test by an optometrist ("optician") — less than two years ago, more than two years, or NEVER?	< 2 years > 2 years Never	see Screening Protocol above for use of the response to this question
3. Have you ever used coloured overlays or precision-tinted lenses?	Yes / No	

Assessment and Referral

In all cases consider visual history of individual and recommend sight test, even if no visual difficulty found, but the last sight test took place more than two years ago.

You do not have to seek out specialist optometrists. A basic sight test should be the first starting point for all individuals.

The optometrist should decide if additional specialist help is required and arrange onward referral.

Use the referral letter to request feedback.

Avoid suggestion that the visual difficulties are linked to 'visual stress'.

Summary

There are many different types of visual difficulty. Whilst the signs and symptoms may seem the same, the final diagnosis may be different.

Consider other ergonomic and environmental adjustments to improve the level of visual comfort for the individual.


Use the Visual Difficulties Screening Protocol as early as you can in the assessment process.

Refer to an optometrist for a sight test. By means of the referral letter, advise the optometrist the reason for your referral.

The optometrist will decide if further specialist assessment / management is required, e.g. visual stress assessment.

Pause the SpLD assessment if you think that the outcome of the vision assessment may impact the result of the SpLD assessment.

Follow-up study??



Thank you for
listening



Any questions ?

