Life is a blur for iPad kids

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Short-sightedness ‘epidemic’ because of computers

*Playing outside has a protective effect as it allows the eyes to relax*

CHILDREN as young as three are developing eye problems and struggling to read because they spend too much time playing on iPads.

This is according to Professor Jannie Ferreira, former head of the University of Johannesburg’s optometry department.

Speaking at the Cotlands Southern Africa play conference yesterday, he said a three-year-old patient he had treated recently squinted so badly that the child’s eye looked directly at his nose. He had been spending three hours a day on an iPad, watching videos and playing games.

Myopia, or short-sightedness, was increasing worldwide due to the time children spent in front of computers, phones or tablets, Ferreira said.

“Short-sightedness is at epidemic proportions, according to the World Health Organisation,” he said.

Many children were developing myopia because their eyes did not relax enough, something that happens when they look at objects at least 6m away, Ferreira said.

KwaZulu-Natal University professor of optometry Kovin Naidoo said: “There is evidence that the longer time a child spends reading, the more likely short-sightedness will worsen. The evidence shows that playing outside has a protective effect as it allows the eyes to relax”.

Naidoo and Ferreira said it was essential that children played outside regularly.

“Children spend too much time in front of a computer or reading from very young.”

Even watching TV was not as bad as an iPad because it was watched from further away, they said.

But Cape Town optometrist Bernard Coppez said he had not seen an increase in myopia in his Sea Point practice in recent years.

Coppez nevertheless urged parents to ensure children played outside because it was good for their eyes.

Educational psychologist Anel Annandale said too much time in front of a screen could affect a child’s visual perception.

“Children spend too much time looking at a two-dimensional image on a screen and their brains don’t learn to make sense of a threedimensional world, ” she said.

Ferreira said often children were not ready for school because their visual perception had not developed adequately. Children then struggled to read or pay attention and were labelled as having a learning problem.

Toddlers should not spend more than 20 minutes at a time staring at a phone or tablet, he said.

Annandale recommended that children under 13 spend a maximum of one hour a day during the week in front of a computer, tablet or television.

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