Chapter Four
Vision and Reading

The aspects of vision usually mentioned in relationship to reading are eye movements, eye fixations, binocular vision (fusion), and focusing for clarity. Typically, peripheral visual awareness is consistently ignored or given a negative connotation. Children are told that while reading they should concentrate on the book, close out their surroundings, not become distracted and try hard to read the words. There is no physiological basis to support this restriction of physiological function for performance. It seems that those people who have learned to perform academically through restriction and repression are in the majority in telling children how to function.

When telling a child how to use his visual system while reading it is necessary to keep in mind that vision was designed for man's survival in a physically threatening world. As civilization has advanced, the daily threats to survival have decreased while the near-point visual demands of the culture have increased. The mechanism of vision has not changed. Survival is still its primary function. The visual system is designed to cause the body to react to external stimuli quickly and automatically. This can happen only when the visual system is free to function. Peripheral awareness is a measure of the freedom to function.

When reading a child must do the following:

- Translate the visual configuration of the letters into speech.
- Comprehend what he is reading by responding to the words in terms of his own previous multi-sensory experiences.
- Feel himself in the situation about which he is reading.

It appears that children with low comprehension skills have difficulty relating themselves to their reading material and retrieving past experience. This happens because they may not have developed adequate visual and supportive skills. Also, these children close off peripheral visual awareness. Those children who have adequate comprehension in spite of inadequate skills and lack of peripheral awareness compensate by developing problems in other areas of performance.

Reading Using Peripheral Visual Awareness

Many children who have had difficulty in applying phonics, who were poor in comprehension, and some who were classified as non-readers, benefitted from the approach that will be described. The child must be able to maintain his peripheral visual awareness under the conditions of the training activities described in the chapter on Training Techniques before the following procedure is introduced.

The following process will help the child who can sound out words, but has difficulty in pronouncing the total word, because it helps the child mobilize and use his senses.

Before starting it is important for the child to understand the following:

- He is to learn the process of looking and allowing his visual system to automatically integrate the information by not struggling to get the word.
- Time pressures will not be placed on him. He will have time to process the data coming from the page.

Using a book at his reading level, or slightly above, have the child do the following:

1. Hold the book at the Harmon distance* with the book parallel to his face.
   **The Harmon distance: The distance from the bridge of a child's nose to the book should be no closer than the distance from the child's elbow to his first knuckle.*

2. As he reads, the child is to be aware of his total visual field. He is to use his eyes in the following ways.
   a. Aim his eyes at his place in the book.
   b. See the word, the sentence, the paragraph, the book, and the room all at once.
3. Read aloud or silently.
   a. Aloud – you can hear when he stumbles on a word which usually indicates loss of peripheral awareness.
   b. Silently – you have no feedback as only he knows whether or not it is registering.
4. Stop when he comes across a word that he has trouble reading. He is to aim his eyes at that word, maintain awareness of his surroundings until he knows what the word is. Then he is to continue reading.
   One caution: Should the child complain that the print blurs when he is peripherally aware, this may indicate a need for convex lenses at near point. A complete optometric examination is indicated.
5. Walk around the room, walk on a walking rail, or manipulate a balance board for variety.

Advanced Reading

When a child has learned to maintain peripheral visual awareness as he reads, he is to do the following while reading:

- Become aware of phrases.
- Become aware of his inner reactions to what he is reading. (He is not to suppress his reactions.)
- Relate his reactions verbally using his body and hands to illustrate and animate his discussion.
- Jot his thoughts down on paper.
- Discuss how he feels about what he has read and what his reaction is. He could answer questions such as, what he would have done, and other similar questions. The teacher could develop a discussion group to dramatize or present different reactions to the same story.
- There is no limit to the activities which can be developed when we work to have the child interact with what he reads. This interaction takes place at all levels of reading. When a child closes off his peripheral visual awareness, his inner language suffers and he may cease to interact with the external information coming to him and will function less effectively at reading. We must work to keep him open, alert, receptive, and responsive.