First 5 Santa Cruz County



Annual Evaluation Report

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

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Acknowledgements

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Program Description

The American Optometric Association recommends that children should have their first comprehensive eye exam between 6 to 12 months of age, then at least once between 3 and 5 years of age, once again before they start school, and then annually.[28]

> *"Every experience a preschooler has is an opportunity for growth and development. They use their vision to guide other learning experiences.*
>
> - *From ages 2 to 5, a child will be fine-tuning the visual abilities gained during infancy and developing new ones. …*
> - *They are developing the visually-guided eye-hand-body coordination, fine motor skills, and visual perceptual abilities necessary to learn to read and write.*
> - *Steps taken at this age to help ensure vision is developing normally can provide a child with a good "head start" for school. …*
> - *The preschool years are a time for developing the visual abilities that a child will need in school and throughout his or her life."* [29]

To help identify vision problems early in life, VisionFirst was developed in Santa Cruz County as a way to provide children as young as 6 months old with a simple instrument-based vision screening right in their child care setting. First 5 VisionFirst Outreach staff were trained to use the Spot Vision Screener, a handheld portable device designed to quickly and easily detect vision issues. The Spot Vision Screener detects potential vision problems, such as nearsightedness, farsightedness, blurred vision, unequal refractive power, eye misalignment, and unequal pupil size.



The Spot Vision Screener does not replace a complete eye examination by an optometrist. Rather, it only identifies a potential vision issue. Parents of children who are found to be "out of range" (showing a potential vision problem) are encouraged and assisted in following up with a full vision exam from an optometrist. At this appointment, the optometrist can determine if the child requires glasses, needs to be monitored, or requires regular eye exam follow-up care.

Following the completion of a successful pilot program in summer 2015, VisionFirst was integrated into First 5's Santa Cruz Reading Corps program,[30] which increased the reach of the program.

[28] American Optometric Association, *Comprehensive eye exams*, 2019 [Retrieved 8/17/26 from https://www.aoa.org/healthy-eyes/caring-for-your-eyes/eye-exams].
[29] American Optometric Association, *Preschool Vision: 2 to 5 Years of Age*, [Retrieved 8/17/26 from https://www.aoa.org/healthy-eyes/eye-health-for-life/preschool-vision], 2026.
[30] The Santa Cruz Reading Corps program was discontinued in 2020-2021 as California State Preschool programs were not open to in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2016-17, VisionFirst was expanded to include all state-funded preschool programs in the County. In addition, because the Spot Vision Screener can provide screenings to children as young as 6 months old, First 5 piloted screenings in 19 infant and toddler classrooms.

Since the start of the program, vision screenings have been completed in 51 state-funded preschool and infant/toddler classrooms, 10 Migrant Seasonal Head Start classrooms, 4 state migrant classrooms, 4 Early Head Start classrooms, 13 Head Start classrooms, and 22 private preschool and infant/toddler classrooms, providing screenings at a total of **104** different classrooms in Santa Cruz County.



For children who are shown to have a vision issue, First 5 VisionFirst Outreach staff help parents find local optometrists if they don't already have one, and also provide crucial information and resources to help parents encourage their children to wear their new glasses.

- The First 5 website includes an entire section about VisionFirst, and provides videos and read-aloud books about eyeglasses. Some answer key questions for children, such as, "How do you know if you need glasses?", and "How does an eye doctor check your eyes?". Other books help build children's confidence in wearing their glasses.
- A new flyer is available to parents and caregivers, "*VisionFirst Tips For Your Child's First Visit To The Eye Doctor,*" that offers some suggestions that might help a child be better prepared for their first eye exam.

One VisionFirst story: Preparing a child for their first eye exam

According to the American Optometric Association (AOA), a child's first comprehensive eye exam should occur around 6 months of age, even if no eye or vision problems are apparent. But for some children, visiting an eye doctor can be a challenging and scary experience, leaving parents to question whether such a visit should be made at such a young age.

This year, a parent shared that they took their child twice to see an eye doctor, but on both occasions the child was uncooperative, and no exam could be administered. The eye doctor was willing to try again in a few months, but the parent felt that maybe screening should be delayed until the child was older.

First 5 staff were able to offer some suggestions to the parent that could help the child be better prepared for their next eye exam. When First 5 staff checked in with the parent a few months later, they were pleased to hear that the child had been successfully screened. The mother had implemented their suggestions, and as a result the child followed directions well and had no trouble during the eye exam. The child needed eyeglasses! And thanks to the guidance and encouragement she received, she was successful in getting what she needed.

- First 5 VisionFirst program

The VisionFirst program believes that the more activities and books about vision health and screenings teachers have in their classrooms, the more comfortable children will feel when getting

their eyes checked and seeing others with glasses. To assist with this, First 5 developed a bilingual *VisionFirst Dramatic Play Kit* that is given to child care sites participating in the program.



A VisionFirst Dramatic Play Kit set-up in a child care site

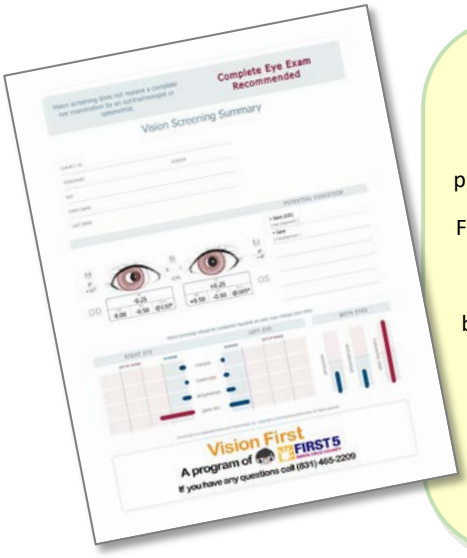
The following two images are examples of what the screening results look like using the Spot Vision Screener. The image on the left shows screening results that indicate that the child may have vision issues. The image on the right shows the screening results for the same child wearing glasses, which shows the vast improvement in his vision. This shows how the Spot Vision Screener camera can identify potential vision problems, and how easily these results can be shared with the child's parents for discussion.

Screening results indicating vision issues



Screening results after receiving eyeglasses





One VisionFirst story: Catching a vision issue early

Children in the VisionFirst Program who are identified as "out of range" are encouraged to have a comprehensive eye exam. While many receive eyeglass prescriptions, others obtain other treatments based on the doctor's assessment.

For example, a child screened this year who was found to be "out of range" (see screening results at left) was diagnosed as having intermittent exotropia. "Intermittent exotropia" is a common type of eye misalignment where one or both eyes occasionally turn outward. The pediatric eye doctor determined that eyeglasses were not needed at this time and recommended eye exercises, patching therapy, and ongoing monitoring.

The child's father expressed gratitude for the VisionFirst program and valued the screening.

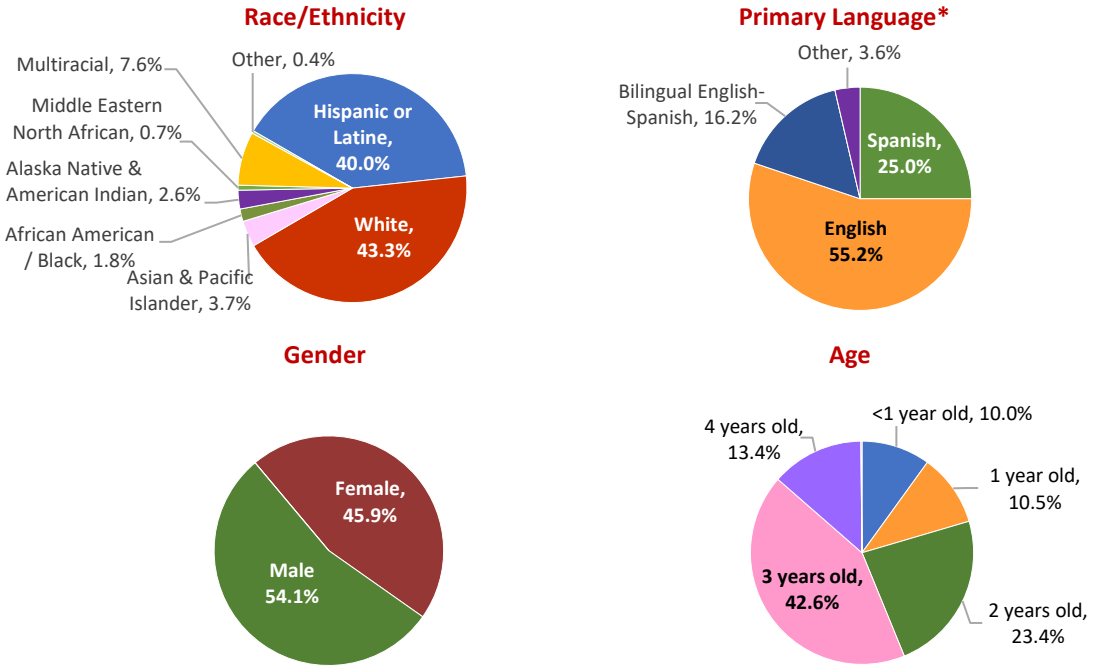
- First 5 VisionFirst Outreach staff

Population Served

	2025-2026
Children	582

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, VisionFirst records, 2026.

Figure 25: **Demographics of Children (ages 0-5) participating in VisionFirst (2025-26)**



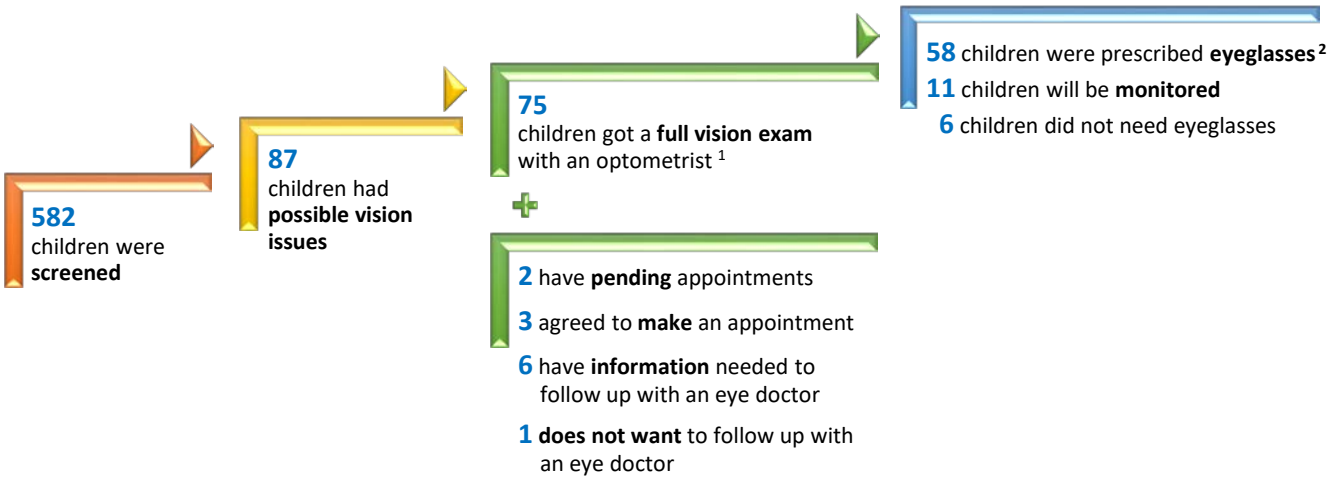
Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026.
Note: Clients with missing or unknown data for a demographic are excluded from that demographic's analysis.
* "Other" language options may include Multilingual, Bilingual-Other, and other languages.
N=(Race)=568; (Language)=580; (Gender)=582; (Age)=582.

Outcomes

VisionFirst helped identify children who might have vision problems, many of whom then had full vision exams at an optometrist. First 5 VisionFirst Outreach staff reported these screening results:

- Of the **582** children screened, **87** had possible vision problems identified (15% of all children screened).
- **75** of these children have followed up with a full vision exam at an optometrist.[31]
- Of those children who had a full vision exam, **58** were prescribed eyeglasses, **11** will continue to be monitored for possible vision issues, and **6** children did not need eyeglasses.

Figure 26: **VisionFirst screening outcomes – Santa Cruz County (2025-26)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, VisionFirst records, 2026.
Note: These FY 2025-26 results are as of July 29, 2026, in order to get as thorough a report as possible of the final outcomes for this cohort.
[1] Full vision exams were conducted either for the first time, or with the child's current optometrist.
[2] The number of children prescribed eyeglasses includes children who received eyeglasses for the first time, and also children who already go to an optometrist and have glasses but weren't wearing them during vision screening.

Local partner vision screenings

Due to the success of the VisionFirst program, some local partners have purchased their own Spot Vision Screener devices to provide ongoing screening for their own clients. In 2025-26 one site conducted their own screenings and follow-up, and reported these outcomes:

Figure 27: **Local partners' vision screenings using the Spot Vision Screener (2025-26)**

	Number of Children Screened	Number of Children with Possible Vision Issues	Number of Children who got a Full Vision Exam with an Optometrist	Results
PVUSD Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) program	516	93	93	• **89** were prescribed glasses • **4** will be monitored

[31] These FY 2025-26 results are as of 7/29/26, in order to get as thorough a report as possible of the final outcomes for this cohort.

The impact of the VisionFirst program—and at agencies that adopted this program—may be even greater, as it's likely that these efforts may also lead to families getting vision exams for their other children as well. Future work by the VisionFirst program will focus on continuing to provide these services to existing VisionFirst sites, expanding these screenings to additional child care sites, and helping more families follow up with full vision exams.

Santa Cruz County school-age children on Medi-Cal are receiving primary eye care services

A recent Policy Brief from the California Health Policy Strategies, L.L.C.[32] reports that the percentage of school-age children (ages 5-18) on Medi-Cal who have received primary care eye services[33] is very low, and that most counties have had a substantial decrease in the number of children who have received vision care over a multi-year period (from CY 2015-16 to FY 2022-24).

- During FY 2022-24, the percentage of school-age children with Medi-Cal insurance who received primary vision services was only 15.8% across the state, compared to 20.8% in Santa Cruz County.
- Across the state and for the majority of counties, these percentages have been decreasing over time (since CY 2015-16).
- However, Santa Cruz County is **one of only seven counties** that showed slight improvement during these two time periods (from 20.6 % to 20.8%).

It's possible that the percentage of school-age children who have received primary care eye services has been influenced by the VisionFirst program. By providing vision screening to preschool children, and supporting parents in following up with full vision exams for their child at an optometrist, entire families with children of all ages are now more aware of the importance of vision and eye care.

[32] California Health Policy Strategies, L.L.C., "*Policy Brief: Are Medi-Cal Children Receiving Vision Care They Need? A 2022-24 Update,*" December 2025.

[33] "Primary care eye services" includes eye examinations, determinations of refractive state, or dispensing of glasses.