

The Eyes Have It



BY FIRST 5
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Four-year-old Uriah Acosta was having trouble seeing. Sometimes he sat too close to the television. Other times, his eyes would cross.

Then came the day he was seeing cakes, baby chicks, telephones and horses.

No, he wasn't hallucinating. His Norwalk school was receiving a visit from the UCLA Mobile Eye Clinic, where he was given a free eye test that featured cakes, chicks, phones and horses projected on a screen.



An outreach program of the Jules Stein Institute, the mobile eye clinic has received an allocation of \$4.1 million from First 5 LA that will be used to screen more than 90,000 children between the ages of 3 and 5 from underserved populations in the county over the next five years.

"We wouldn't be here if it weren't for First 5 LA," said Faye Oelrich, UCLA Mobile Eye Clinic's program manager. "Previously, we were seeing 4,000 preschoolers per year. We're going to reach up to 25,000 per year by the fifth year of our grant."

At Ramona Elementary School, where Uriah attends preschool, dozens of children were walked to the giant blue and yellow bus to be given the free eye examinations by Oelrich, who used a Retinomax to detect for lazy eye, crossed eyes and other abnormalities. If the child failed the initial exam, they were sent to ophthalmologist Andrew Young at the other end of the bus.

Sometimes dealing with kids who are still little enough to wear diapers, Young takes a playful approach to the exams with games like peek-a-boo and creative ways to dilate the children's eyes.

"The hardest part for a lot of children is eye drops because they sting a little," Young said. "I tell them they are rain drops."

If an eye problem requires, the children are given free eyeglasses and a prescription for a second pair if the first pair breaks. The kids even get to pick out the frames.

All of which works out perfectly for children and their parents.

"A lot of times, parents don't have the flexibility to go to the eye doctor or the insurance to pay for the visit," said Letty Contreras, a family service worker for Head Start at Ramona Elementary. "This helps them a lot."

"Much of children's health and learning abilities is greatly dependent on their sight," said Dr. Anne L. Coleman, who directs the Mobile Eye Clinic and the Jules Stein Eye Institute Center for Community Outreach. "It is estimated that one in five preschool children has a vision problem that affects their learning ability. Improving vision in these children not only helps improve their academic performance, but it also protects them from environmental hazards and enhances the quality of their social and personal lives."

For his part, Uriah received a prescription for eyeglasses. His father, Frank, was delighted.

"I'm pretty sure he'll enjoy wearing glasses," Frank said. "He already wears sunglasses. And his mother wears glasses. I'm just glad the mobile eye clinic is here."