

Backpack Load May Be Too Much For Kids to Bear

Years ago, if a child was trudging up the street with a sack over his shoulder, you might think he was going camping or running away from home. Today, however, it is unusual to see a child without a backpack. For many students, the expression “carrying a heavy load” has taken on a new meaning – one that could lead to permanent spinal column damage.

Backpacks offer a convenient method to transport necessary items to and from school, however thousands of school children cause themselves injury with overloaded or improperly carried bookbags.

In 1998, backpack injuries accounted for more than 3,300 emergency room visits. Nationwide, chiropractic family practitioners are seeing more cases of nontraumatic back pain in their pediatric patients, often associated with backpack use - and those are just the ones that are reported.

Students are not only carrying these bookbags to and from school, many children report carrying full backpacks all day long at school because they are prohibited from visiting their lockers during the day or because time between classes does not allow locker visits. We have weighed some of these loaded backpacks at as much as 25 pounds.

Spinal damage that children sustain from lifting backpacks is much like repetitive stress industrial injuries in adults. Educating children now could eliminate much pain and grief later in life. Billions of dollars in workers compensation are lost every year due to back, neck and repetitive stress injuries. Most of those are because of bad habits learned in childhood, habits that could be prevented by education at an early age. It has been estimated that, before they graduate high school, children will lift more than 22,000 pounds or eleven tons of backpack weight. That is enough to cause stress and injury, especially to a growing spinal column.

There is a saying, “As the twig bends, so grows the tree.” Backpack injuries during childhood can lead to permanent structural problems of the spine and elsewhere in the musculoskeletal system. Just as the adult workforce is trained in injury prevention, early intervention should be

made to educate children regarding safe use of backpacks.

To safely use a backpack, the child must first be fitted properly. An ill-fitted pack can cause back pain, muscle strain or nerve impingement. Some companies manufacture smaller-sized packs with shorter back length and width to fit a 5 to 10 year old. Shoulder straps should be padded to avoid pressure on the nerves around the armpits and worn snugly but never too tight. Both shoulder straps should be used. Never sling a pack over just one shoulder, because this distributes weight unevenly and could contribute to long term problems such as scoliosis, neck, shoulder, back and/or other problems. Choose a pack that has a waist strap to stabilize the load.

Repetitive lifting, even of light weight, can cause damage, so children must lift their packs properly as well. First, bend at the knees and, using both hands, check the weight of the backpack to assure that it is not excessive. Next, the child should lift the pack with the legs (not the back) and then slip into the shoulder straps one at a time. The pack should be worn over the mid and upper back rather than slung low over the lower back and buttocks.

A loaded backpack should never exceed 15 percent of the child’s body weight. For instance, an 80-pound child should not carry more than 12 pounds on his back. If the backpack forces the child into a forward bent posture, then the backpack is overloaded.

Parents should encourage children to be selective about what goes into the pack. Handheld computer games and other non-school items should be excluded. Necessary items should be packed carefully to distribute weight evenly otherwise the body will shift into unnatural postures to compensate.

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