

Protecting your child's back from a too-heavy backpack

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Children often complain about the increasing amount of homework they receive from their teachers—and the weight of that homework. Recent studies conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics indicate about 30 percent of elementary and high school students around the country experience low-back pain resulting from carrying too much weight in their backpacks, and carrying them incorrectly.

Anne Packard-Spicer, DC, associate professor at Northwestern Health Sciences University and a faculty clinician in the University's Bloomington Natural Care Center, recommends parents carefully monitor how much weight is being carried in their children's backpacks.

Spicer has treated thousands of children over the last 10 years and notes the weight of larger backpacks can affect a growing child's posture and spinal health. She also says other joints besides the child's spine can be affected because a heavy weight can throw the neck, shoulders and pelvis off balance.

"Be aware of your child's spinal health," says Spicer. "If your children complain of back pain, get them checked out immediately." According to Spicer, children hit their growth spurts between the ages of 12 and 14. During this time, a heavy backpack can cause changes in the shape of bones, which can cause permanent damage. "The whole skeleton is connected; you can't get away from that," advises Spicer.

Here are some tips from Spicer to help keep your child's back healthy and pain-free:

—Make sure backpacks weigh no more than 10-15 percent of a child's body weight. Any more will encourage bad posture and may induce back pain.

—Purchase backpacks with wide, padded straps and a pelvic strap. This will help distribute the weight to the hips and take weight off the back.

—Encourage children to wear their backpacks over both shoulders. Even though it's considered

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“cool” to carry a backpack over just one shoulder, it creates uneven muscle development in children’s backs and shoulders.

—If there are many books that need to be transported, urge your children to carry some in their arms to take some of the weight from their backpacks.

—Consider purchasing a backpack that is on wheels. This new trend has become increasingly affordable and takes the weight off children’s shoulders.

—Be a stickler about good posture! Backpacks may encourage students to hunch forward, but if they are carried and fitted correctly with the appropriate amount of weight, children should be able to stand straight comfortably.

—Exercise. Free body movement while playing helps children’s bodies return to normal posture.

For additional resources on keeping kids healthy, visit www.nwhealth.edu/nns, a website focusing on natural approaches to health and wellness hosted by Northwestern Health Sciences University.