



Backpack Safety

Dr. Hagman's reference guide for parents and teachers

"Backpacks are a popular and practical way for children and teenagers to carry schoolbooks and supplies. When used correctly, backpacks can be a good way to carry the necessities of the school day. They are designed to distribute the weight of the load among some of the body's strongest muscles. However, backpacks that are too heavy or are worn incorrectly can cause problems for children and teenagers. Improperly used backpacks may injure muscles and joints. This can lead to severe back, neck and shoulder pain, as well as posture problems."

American Academy of Pediatrics

Selecting the Right Backpack

Wide, Padded Shoulder Straps

Select a backpack with shoulder straps between 2" and 3" wide. If the straps are too narrow or unpadded they can dig into the muscles of the upper back and shoulder causing pain, restricted circulation, and nerve pressure.

Two Shoulder Straps

Do not use a sling type pack that only goes over one shoulder. Always select a backpack that is meant to be worn over both shoulders.

Padded Back

Select a backpack that has a pad between the child's back and the contents of the pack. The pad will protect against sharp edges, book corners, and other objects from injuring the child's back and spine.

Compartments

Select a backpack that has several compartments. These compartments will help in distributing its contents appropriately and reduce movement of objects inside the pack.

Go for Smaller and Lighter

Select a backpack that is not heavy and does not provide unneeded space. If there is extra space, the child will likely fill it with unnecessary items making the pack heavier.

Dr. H's Recommendations

Use Both Straps

Always have the child carry their backpack using both shoulder straps. Carrying a pack over one shoulder can lead to muscular imbalances, poor posture, and spinal misalignments.

Fit the Pack

Make sure the straps are tightened such that the backpack fits snugly against the child's back. The top of the pack should rest just below the collar and the bottom of the pack should be no more than 4 inches below the belt line. In addition, frequently check to make sure that both straps are equal length.

Packing the Pack

The heavier books should be located closest to the back. The lighter items can be placed in the pockets and compartments farther away from the child's body.

How Heavy is Too Heavy

The American Chiropractic Association recommends that the filled backpack weigh no more than 10 percent of the child's body weight.

Keep it Clean

Clean out and organize the backpack on a weekly basis. Any non-essential items should be removed.

Know the Red Flags

Pain!!!!

Encourage the child to tell you about any pain or discomfort that may be caused by the backpack. **DO NOT IGNORE BACK PAIN IN A CHILD OR TEEN-AGER.**

Difficulty

If the child has difficulty putting on or taking off the backpack on their own, the pack is either too heavy or not properly fitted.

Leaning

If the child leans backward or has to bend forward in order to carry the backpack it is definitely too heavy.

Posture

If the child's posture is different when wearing the backpack than without it, it is either too heavy, not properly sized, or needs to have the shoulder straps adjusted.

Be Alert

Many times, children will not know to come to you if they are having issues with their backpack. Stay alert and be aware of the potential red flags. If you believe there is a problem, be proactive. Talk to the child, parent and/or teacher about the issue and how to resolve the problem.

• Strategies for a Safe Backpack

Try to limit the number of books the child carries in their backpack throughout the day. Have the child frequently stop at their locker to exchange books during the school day. After school, have the child leave the heaviest books at school and bring home only lighter hand-out materials or workbooks. Having a second set of books at home will eliminate having to carry them back and forth to school. If the backpack is too heavy and they have to bring the books to school, have the child carry one or two of the books under his or her arm. Any work that can be done on-line will also help.