

Bad Backpack Back: How to protect your children from getting an aching back! **by Ryan and Joanna Sleik**

We know that low back and neck pain contributes to a large percentage of adults that we see in the physiotherapy setting, but what about our children? Two months into the school year, our kids have settled into their classes. But along with bringing home homework, how can you make sure your child does not come home with an aching back? Did you know that carrying an overloaded backpack or wearing one improperly can lead to poor posture, unnecessary stress on the spine and strain on the muscles in the neck and back. In this article we want to discuss one of the most frequently purchased, but least properly used school supplies, and how to protect your children from developing bad habits and injuring their necks, shoulders and backs.

When purchasing a backpack make sure you look for one that has a padded back with wide and padded adjustable shoulder straps (at least 2 inches wide). A hip or waist strap will also help distribute some of the load and compression straps on the sides or bottom of the backpack will bring the backpack closer to the body and stabilize the items inside. Be cautious of buying a backpack that is oversized to carry more items, making it easier to over pack. The shoulder straps should fit comfortably and allow the arms to move freely. The bottom of the pack should rest in the small of the low back and should not “sag” more than 4 inches below your child’s waist, as this may force the back into an arched position.

Over time an overloaded backpack will result in fatigue and strain in the muscles of the neck, back and shoulders, causing the body to be vulnerable to further injuries. Choose a backpack made of lightweight material and consider the 15% rule set out by the Canadian Physiotherapy Association: Your child’s backpack should never weigh more than 15% of their body weight. For example, if your child weighs 80 lbs, his backpack should not weigh more than 12 lbs! When wearing the backpack, both shoulder straps should always be used to avoid excessive stress on one side of the body, and placing the spine in an improper alignment.

When wearing a backpack we depend on the support of our back and abdominal muscles, which are some of the strongest muscles in our body. Worn correctly and not overloaded, it can be a great way to carry our books, lunches, workout clothes or other items. Be aware of warning signs that your child’s backpack may be causing them problems including pain in the neck, back or shoulders, headaches, or numbness or tingling in the arms and hands. Be backpack beware and encourage your children to develop good backpack habits to protect their necks, shoulders and backs from future injury.