

Choosing the Correct Backpack for Your Child

It's that time of year again—back-to-school time! Many parents and children prepare for that first day of school by doing some back-to-school shopping, which often involves buying new clothing, pens, pencils, paper, markers, etc. However, backpacks are one of the biggest necessities for both college-aged and younger students, and it's important to choose wisely.



There are so many backpacks to choose from, and choosing the right one for your child is not always easy. Backpacks come in all sizes, colors, fabrics, and shapes—all of which help kids express their own sense of style. As practical as backpacks are for those who use them, backpacks can cause strained muscles and joints and back pain when worn incorrectly.

The human spine is made up of 33 bones called vertebrae, and between the vertebrae are discs that act as shock absorbers. When something heavy—such as a backpack filled with books—is incorrectly placed on your child's shoulders, the force of that extra weight can pull your child backwards. To compensate, your child may bend forward at the hips or arch his or her back, which can cause your child's spine to compress unnaturally. Because of the heavy weight he or she is carrying, your child might begin to develop shoulder, neck, and back pain. What can we do about this? The American

Academy of Pediatrics recommends that before you purchase a backpack, look for the following five criteria:

- Choose a **lightweight backpack** that doesn't add a lot of weight to your child's load. For example, although leather backpacks look cool, they weigh more than traditional canvas backpacks.
- Choose a backpack with **two wide, padded shoulder straps**. Straps that are too narrow can dig into shoulders.
- Choose a backpack that has a **padded back**, which provides increased comfort and protects the wearer from being poked by sharp edges (such as pencils, rulers, notebooks, etc.) inside the backpack.
- Choose a backpack that has a **waist belt**, which helps distribute the weight more evenly across the body.
- Choose a backpack that has **multiple compartments**, which also helps distribute weight more evenly.

Although most backpacks come with two shoulder straps, this doesn't mean that your kids will use both straps!

Many kids wear their backpacks over just one shoulder, which is the wrong thing to do. This makes the person lean to one side to offset the extra weight, and they might develop lower and upper back pain and strain their shoulders and neck.

Wearing the backpack



incorrectly can also lead to poor posture. So, make sure your children wear the backpack using **both** straps. It's also a good idea to tighten the straps enough for the backpack to fit close to the body, and it should sit 2 inches above the waist.

Girls and younger children may be especially at risk for backpack-related injuries because they're smaller and may carry loads that are heavier in proportion to their body weight. Doctors recommend that people—especially children—carry



backpacks that are no more than 10–15 percent of their body weight. For example, if a child weighs 80 pounds, 15 percent of his or her body weight is 12 pounds. So, for an 80 pound child, the backpack and its contents should not weigh more than 12 pounds—but remember, lighter is always better.

Lifting and Positioning Backpacks

Children also need to know how to lift and position their backpack. Improper lifting can cause damage. Teach your children these four simple steps to safely lift their backpacks:

1. Face the backpack before you lift it.
2. Bend at the knees.
3. Using both hands, check the weight of the backpack.
4. Lift with your legs, not your back.
5. Carefully put one shoulder strap on at a time; never sling the backpack onto one shoulder.

Another Option

Another option to consider when purchasing backpacks is to look for a backpack on wheels. However, these types of backpacks may be less practical than traditional backpacks because they're difficult to pull up stairs. If you're thinking about purchasing a rolling backpack for your child, contact the child's school first to be sure that they are allowed. Many schools don't allow rolling backpacks because they pose a tripping hazard in the hallways.

By following these guidelines, your child will start off this school year with a healthy back! For more information contact your local county Extension agent.

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