

Backpack Strategies for Parents and Students



Aching backs and shoulders? Tingling arms? Weakened muscles? Stooped posture? Does your child have these symptoms after wearing a heavy school backpack? Carrying too much weight in a pack or wearing it the wrong way can lead to pain and strain. Parents can take steps to help children load and wear backpacks the correct way to avoid health problems.

Loading a pack

- A child's backpack should weigh no more than about 15% of his or her body weight. This means a student weighing 100 pounds shouldn't wear a loaded school backpack heavier than about 15 pounds.
- Load heaviest items closest to the child's back (the back of the pack).
- Arrange books and materials so they won't slide around in the backpack.
- Check what your child carries to school and brings home. Make sure the items are necessary for the day's activities.
- If the backpack is too heavy or tightly packed, your child can hand carry a book or other item outside the pack.
- If the backpack is too heavy on a regular basis, consider using a book bag on wheels if your child's school allows it.



Wearing a pack

- Distribute weight evenly by using both straps. Wearing a pack slung over one shoulder can cause a child to lean to one side, curving the spine and causing pain or discomfort.
- Select a pack with well-padded shoulder straps. Shoulders and necks have many blood vessels and nerves that can cause pain and tingling in the neck, arms, and hands when too much pressure is applied.
- Adjust the shoulder straps so that the pack fits snugly on the child's back. A pack that hangs loosely from the back can pull the child backwards and strain muscles.
- Wear the waist belt if the backpack has one. This helps distribute the pack's weight more evenly.
- The bottom of the pack should rest in the curve of the lower back. It should never rest more than four inches below the child's waistline.
- School backpacks come in different sizes for different ages. Choose the right size pack for your child's back as well as one with enough room for necessary school items.



Need More Information?

For more facts on backpack safety, see "Backpack Facts: What's All the Flap About?"

If you would like to consult an occupational therapy practitioner about an ergonomic evaluation regarding backpacks, computer use, or other learning-related issues, talk to your child's teacher about whether a referral to occupational therapy is appropriate. Your physician, other health professionals, and your school district's director of special education may also be able to recommend an occupational therapy practitioner.