



Chiropractic Newsletter

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Backpack Safety 101

Kids' spines are still growing and are therefore vulnerable to back injuries, so having the right backpack and wearing it correctly are essential. Backpacks can cause pain and discomfort or even scoliosis if not worn properly, all of which can lead to chronic back issues in adulthood. Throughout my 24 years in family practice, I have collected a myriad of key safety tips you can share with parents to help make sure their children's spines are being protected...

Choosing the right size backpack is the first step.

For point of reference, the bottom of the backpack should hang no lower than three to four inches below the child's natural waistline. The shoulder straps can always be tightened to make it fit better. If it's still too low after that adjustment, then the pack may just be too big for their child. The character backpacks for some reason are notoriously disproportionate to the size of small children, their target demographic, so be careful selecting one of those.

It is a good idea to actually bring the child to the store to try on and select a pack that is the appropriate size, allowing room for growth if needed. Buying a backpack online can get tricky, so if this route is taken, make sure to read the pack dimensions and cross reference that information with the child's size. Since they are adjustable, you can often get a few years out of investing in one good pack.

Wearing the backpack properly is key.

Make sure to wear both shoulder straps always. No exceptions. Using only one strap may be more



convenient or potentially look cooler, however this puts uneven pressure on the child's growing spine. Uneven pressure distribution can lead to subluxations, discomfort and even scoliosis.

Speaking of straps, choose a pack with wider straps that are cushioned if possible, as this tends to be more comfortable overall. They can additionally feel free to utilize any chest or waist straps the pack provides.

Pack the backpack properly.

The International Chiropractic Pediatric Association suggests that a backpack should never hold more than 10-15% of a child's body weight. So for example, if a child weighs 60 pounds, then the maximum weight of their loaded pack should be no more than 9 pounds. We see the biggest room for improvement here. Let me ask, have you ever lifted your child's pack? These packs far exceed the recommended weight maximum, but there are some things you can do to move the needle in the right direction.

Let's start with the heaviest item kids carry...laptops. If they need to bring a laptop to school, they can simply keep it in a laptop sleeve and carry it under their arm instead of unnecessarily adding this additional weight to their backpack.

My favorite tip is for parents to schedule monthly folder dumps with each child. You would be surprised how quickly things accumulate throughout the school year, making the packs heavier than necessary. They certainly don't need math homework sheets from September still in their folders in February.

Utilizing the compartments in the pack to distribute the weight of the contents, being mindful to keep the heaviest books in the back is also helpful. Parents can even ask teachers if there are extra textbook copies available so the child can keep a copy at home versus lugging it around all day.

Lift the backpack properly every time.

When lifting a backpack to put it on or put it in a locker, encourage kids to lift with their legs by bending at the knees instead of the waist. They might not understand what you mean by this, so demonstrate it for them. A consistent proper lifting technique is a valuable life skill and habit they can apply in many scenarios.

At our office, we offer a free Backpack Safety Clinic for the month of August every year. Parents can bring their kids in to get their backpack fitted properly and have us measure their heavy load against their body size. Let's face it, kids may not like to listen to their parents, but all of this sage advice hits differently coming from a professional.

We tell parents to simply call us to schedule a "backpack safety checkup" so they can be proactive about protecting their child's spine each school year to ensure the future health of their spines. Scheduling a backpack safety check-up is a great opportunity to ensure your child's spine is protected for the school year. Many parents who bring their kids in for these checkups also schedule their child's first chiropractic adjustment, recognizing the importance of spinal health. This is a simple way to help your child feel better and stay healthier. As a parent, you'll appreciate the value of expert advice and the peace of mind it brings.

-Jessica L. Tagliarini, DC

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