

REPORT TO PARENTS

Safe Backpacking

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When children say their schoolwork is back-breaking, they might just be right! The problem is their backpacks--heavily loaded with notebooks, schoolbooks, supplies, and sports equipment.

It's not just a hassle to carry a heavy backpack; it can be dangerous. Most physicians believe that children are at risk of muscle fatigue or injury to the spine or shoulders when they carry backpacks that weigh more than 20 percent of their body weight. That means a 100-pound child should be carrying no more than 20 pounds. Yet many elementary and middle school students are lugging around backpacks far heavier than 20 pounds. Taking action to reduce the risk of injury is important.

Get out the scale. Weigh your children's backpacks when full. Then, weight your children. The backpacks shouldn't weight more than 20 percent of their body weight.

Lighten up. Do your children carry a lot of unnecessary "stuff" in their backpacks? Check to see what really must go to school every day.

A place for everything. Show your children how to load their backpacks so that the heaviest items (books, notebooks) are next to their backs, with lighter things farther out.

Buckle up. Get your children backpacks with hip straps that connect in front like a belt. Have your children use the hip strap for additional support whenever they're carrying heavy loads.

A cushy solution. Look for backpacks that have wide, padded straps to help keep them from digging into your children's shoulders. Some packs even come with padded backs.

Rolling along. Older kids (the ones who need them the most) might balk at the idea, but backpacks with wheels are back-savers.

Two arms are better than one. While it may look "cool" to sling a backpack over one shoulder, it's a serious mistake when the pack is heavy. Instruct your children to always use both straps.

Make it fit. The bottom of the backpack should rest two inches above your child's waist. Adjust the shoulder straps accordingly.

Lift right. Teach your children how to lift with their knees, not their back muscles, when picking up heavy loads--backpacks included.

"And one, and two..." Exercise can help your children condition and strengthen their back muscles. Ask their P.E. teacher to suggest some good exercises.

Heavy investment. If one or two hefty textbooks seem to come home every night, you might consider buying a second copy of those books to keep at home. However, textbooks are expensive and extra copies simply might not be available.

Car pool. On days when your children have particularly brutal loads, try to drive them or find a ride to the bus stop--or all the way to school. The less time they spend hauling that weight around, the better.

