



8 YEAR-OLD LIFTS 18 TONS

Parents Often Underestimate the Importance of Backpack Safety

Why Your Child Needs a “Backpack Buddy”

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Fact #1

Depending on which year, over the past decade anywhere between **5,000 and 12,000** children visit hospital emergency rooms in the U.S. each year due to injuries from backpacks.

Fact #2

Studies in Canada, the U.S. and even New Zealand show **75%** of children will experience a musculo-skeletal injury. This means there is only a **25%** chance that your child won't.

Fact #3

There has been a **30%** increase in back pain in children since 1990 – largely attributed to backpacks.

Fact #4

A 20 pound backpack lifted on and off just 5 times in a day equals 10 lifts. 10 lifts times 20 pounds equals 200 pounds a day. Multiply this by 180 school days in a year and your 8 year-old has just lifted 36,000 pounds or 18 tons in one year.

While some parents are beginning to realize the importance of backpack safety, many still don't realize that it is imperative that they invest the time to ensure that their children's backpacks are safe and appropriate. Ill fitting backpacks result in back pain, neck pain, headaches and shoulder pain not just now but in the future. As a result both decreased activity and energy levels may be present. Prolonged use leads to postural changes, altered gait, spinal damage and even nerve damage. It may also aggravate scoliosis, especially prevalent in teenage girls. The high number of emergency room visits is also due to a significant increase in falls from heavy or unbalanced packs, including tripping over them or falling down stairs. Remember that many of these childhood problems turn into chronic conditions in adults. Most importantly, remember that all this is happening to a growing spine.

HOW MUCH SHOULD MY BACKPACK WEIGH?

A backpack for high school students should weigh no more than **15%** of their body weight and a maximum of **10%** for elementary students. This means your 50 pound 8 year-old's backpack should weigh no more than 5 pounds while a 15 year-old who weighs 120 pounds should carry a maximum of 18 pounds.

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WHAT SHOULD PARENTS AND KIDS LOOK FOR IN A BACKPACK?

- Proper size – Bigger is not always better. The top of your backpack should be no higher than your shoulders and the bottom no lower than your waist.
- Choose canvas or vinyl over leather as it is lighter.
- Wide padded adjustable shoulder pads are a must.
- A hip or waist strap is essential to keep the weight close to your body.
- Individualized compartments help balance the weight.
- Built in back supports or even wheels may be a consideration.

HOW SHOULD IT BE WORN?

- Always over both shoulders. Hanging a backpack over one shoulder will cause significant imbalance and future problems.
- Straps should be snug but not too tight.
- Close to the body with the heaviest objects closest to the body.
- Evenly distributed.
- Watch out for pointy objects.
- Don't take what you don't need.

HOW DO I PUT IT ON – YOUR BACKPACK BUDDY

Even with all this advice, now imagine if instead of a backpack you were holding a 20 pound box of bricks in front of you that you now had to swing and twist around onto your back. There would be no better way of trying to hurt yourself. When putting it on or taking it off, use both hands, bend at the knees, lift with your legs and ideally place the pack on a desk. Don't twist. Better yet, have a **“backpack buddy”** - a friend who holds it for you while you put it on and vice versa.

PREVENTION IS KEY

The above will work only if it is practiced. Talk to your child about proper use and its importance. In addition, good posture and core strength is invaluable. Lastly, spinal check-ups are essential to ensure proper alignment before you ever put your backpack on your spine. You would never think of not taking your child for an eye exam or dental exam, why on earth would you not take them for a spinal exam by your family chiropractor?

Remember that those 18 tons are in a single year. Carrying that backpack for 15 years is 270 tons and that's just the time lifting it, not the time carrying it. It's little wonder then that 75% of kids suffer a musculo-skeletal problem. Don't roll the dice – beat the odds by following all of the above for backpack safety and the health of your child.

Dr. John Zielonka is one of Canada's best known Health and Wellness experts. He is the director of Health & Wellness Canada as well as the owner of the Ottawa Chiropractic & Natural Health Centre in downtown Ottawa. Both a best selling author and lecturer, he is also a regular contributor to CTV Morning Live. Dr. Zielonka may be contacted at www.excellenceinhealth.com, www.drzonline.com, www.facebook.com/excellenceinhealth or (613) 688-1036 in the World Exchange Plaza in downtown Ottawa.