

Avoid back strain- what to look for in a school backpack

Just in time for the fall sales, physical therapist Dr. Deborah Stack returns to give us the low-down on backpacks.

☒ Believe it or not, there are only a few weeks left before school starts for the fall. As I look at last year's first day of school photo, I notice my not-quite-100-pound child bending in half under the weight of a backpack, trombone, lunchbox and art portfolio. This year, I quietly decree, that scenario will not happen again. To make sure it does not happen at your house either, consider a few tidbits as you plan your back-to-school purchases:

-A traditional backpack with **two shoulder straps** distributes the weight more evenly than a pack or messenger bag with a single strap.

-Look for **wide, padded straps**. Narrow straps can dig in and limit circulation.

-A **chest or waist strap** can distribute weight more evenly.

-Look for a **padded back** to protect your child from pointy pencils etc.

-Look for a **lightweight pack** that does not add much overall weight.

-**Multiple compartments** can help distribute weight.

-**Compression straps** on the sides or bottom of a backpack can compress and stabilize the contents.

-**Reflective material** allows your child to be more visible on

those rainy mornings.

–**A well fitting backpack** should match the size of the child. Shoulder straps should fit comfortably on the shoulder and under the arms, so that the arms can move freely. The bottom of the pack should rest in the contour of the lower back. The pack should “sit” evenly in the middle of the back, not “sag down” toward the buttocks.

How much should your tike tote? Experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Physical Therapy Association, recommend kids should not carry backpacks weighing more than 15-20% of the kid’s weight.

Here’s a chart to give you an idea of the absolute maximum a child should carry in a properly worn backpack:

Child’s Weight (pounds)	Maximum Backpack Weight (pounds)
50	7.5-10
60	9-12
70	10.5-14
80	12-16
90	13.5-18
100	15-20
110	16.5-22
120	18-24
130	19.5-26

Here are some ideas to help lighten the load, especially for those middle school kids who have a plethora of textbooks:

-Find out if your child's textbook can be accessed on the internet. Many schools are purchasing access so the students can log on rather than lug home.

-Consider buying an extra set of books for home. Used textbooks are available inexpensively online.

-Limit the "extras" in the backpack such as one free reading book instead of five. I am not exaggerating; one day I found five free reading books in my child's backpack!

-Encourage your child to use free periods to actually study, and leave the extra books in his locker.

-Remind your child to stop by her locker between classes to switch books rather than carrying them all at once.

-Consider individual folders or pockets for each class rather than a bulky 3-ring notebook that holds every subject.

You may need to limit the load even further if your child is still:

-Struggling to get the backpack on by herself

-Complaining of back, neck or shoulder pain

-Leaning forward to carry the backpack

If your child complains of back pain or numbness or weakness in the arms or legs, talk to your doctor or physical therapist.

When used correctly, backpacks are supported by some of the strongest muscles in the body: the back and abdominal muscles. These muscle groups work together to stabilize the trunk and hold the body in proper postural alignment. However, backpacks that are worn incorrectly or are too heavy can lead to neck, shoulder and back pain as well as postural problems. So choose wisely and lighten the load. Happy shopping!

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