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School a 'pain in the back'

The new school year means back to carrying around heavy backpacks

Uncorrected postural issues, heavy school bags and poor lifestyle choices can all lead to spinal health problems as a child grows. Spinal health problems related to childhood often go unnoticed, as initial poor posture, back pain and "growing pains" can unfortunately develop into an accepted part of everyday life.

Many of the current bags children are using may be fashionable, but unless they allow for even distribution across the back, they can place unhealthy stress on a child's spine. School can be a challenging time for children, so ensuring they are as comfortable as possible is important to their physical and mental development.

According to the Chiropractors Association of Australia (CAA), the peak body representing chiropractors, 90 per cent of school children have bad posture when carrying their bags and could experience unwanted spinal stress and damage as a result. While 75 per cent are not wearing their school backpack's properly and ignoring the ergonomic features in some backpacks which are designed to provide better support and comfort. What's more, many Aussie kids are exacerbating the problem by wearing their backpacks too low on their backs (33 per cent) or slinging them over one shoulder (20 per cent). These alarming findings emerged from a CAA 'under cover' observational study conducted by chiropractors on high-traffic school commute routes in late 2011.

CAA Spokesperson Dr Billy Chow (Chiropractor) said these results are a major concern for the health of our schoolchildren.

"Despite the increased use of technology in schools to assist learning, schoolchildren are still overloading their backpacks with textbooks, sports and other gear or simply not wearing them in the correct way," he said. "Putting too much stress on a child's back at such an important stage of growth and development will result in serious spinal problems immediately and later on in life."

Some of the problems caused by bad posture at an early age include reduced mobility, possible early degeneration of bones and joints, increased vulnerability to injuries and unhealthy pressures on a child's nervous system.

Chiropractic care has been proven to be effective, and can restore correct function and relieve pain symptoms associated with the carrying of heavy backpacks.

The CAA and has provided these tips for carrying backpacks:

- Backpacks should be ideally no heavier than 10 per cent of a student's weight when packed.
- Put comfort and fit at the top of the priority list, rather than good looks

- Make sure the backpack is sturdy and appropriately sized - no wider than the student's chest, with broad, padded shoulder straps
- Use both shoulder straps - never sling the pack over one shoulder
- Use waist straps attached - they are there for a good reason
- Don't wear the backpack any lower than the hollow of the lower back
- Don't overload the backpack - use school lockers and plan homework well in advance
- Place all heavy items at the base of the pack, close to the spine, for a better distribution of the weight

Dr Chow says going back to school should not mean putting your back out.

“What these results show is that while nearly all schoolchildren have bad posture while carrying backpacks, there is a lack of knowledge about how to identify what is bad posture, and therefore how to improve it,” Dr Chow said. “By raising awareness among parents, teachers and the public about the importance of good posture for schoolchildren, we can help reduce the cases of spinal injuries we see now and in the future.”

Local CAA member chiropractors can also provide personal advice to help young spines better manage their heavy backpack load as well as assess and fit backpacks to suit the child’s current level of development.

To check your posture visit www.whatsyourposture.com.au for more information, or visit www.chiropractors.asn.au for more chiropractic tips.

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More information:

For further media enquiries or to organize interviews please contact the Chiropractor’s Association of Australia

Media Adviser

Kimberly Lennard
0429 999 160
(02) 4731 8011
media@caa.asn.au