

PROTECTING YOUNG BACKS - BACK CARE CAMPAIGN

Back pain is a condition that is usually associated with old people. This is a misconception. Nearly half of school children report back pain at some time. In 8% of children this back pain will affect their attendance, progress in school and future potential. 3% of children will experience chronic disability as a result of their back problem – that's one child in every class!

So why is back pain in children such an increasing problem? The weights that children carry to school on a daily basis and the way they carry them are two very significant factors.

Heavy school bags – These are a big problem! Carrying heavy bags full of books, sports kit, musical instruments etc can put huge straining on children's backs. 11 – 12 year olds are regularly carrying 12% of their own body weight and this can be up to 60% - imagine applying that to yourself and think how quickly you would try to change it. For a variety of reasons there is much reduced locker provision in schools which means that children and young students carry everything with them all the time. This is an issue that needs to be dealt with by schools but parents can help their children by sorting through their bags with them in the evening to ensure they only leave in their bags what they will need for the next day. One day's worth of books and equipment is usually more than enough; one week's worth is bound to cause problems.

In a similar way, do not just buy a standard schoolbag without thinking it through. Should a child in year 2 really be trying to carry a bag of the same size as a young person in year 6 or 7? "Official" school bags are usually of one size and this is usually far too big for the average key stage 1 child. Remember, if you give someone a bigger bag, they will just put more things into it.

It is not only the weight of the bag that leads to problems, it is also the way the bag is carried. A bag weighing maybe 10kg or more slung over one shoulder puts huge stresses on the neck and back and the child carrying it will be lucky to get by without pain.

Bags can be carried by a handle (like a brief case), hugged to the front of the body or worn properly over both shoulders.

The straps on rucksacks should be tightened so the bag does not bounce around on the back of the child's thighs. This low position of the bag causes the back to arch backwards, compressing the spine and increasing the risk of damage.

It is very difficult to get teenagers to do anything they may view as “uncool”, but if good habits are encouraged in younger children (from the first day they start to use school bags), it is much more likely these good habits will stay with them throughout their school career.

Finally, in relation to carrying heavy bags, it is worthy of mention that we have had legislation in Britain since 1992 (Manual Handling Regulations) designed to protect adults from the dangers of heavy loads, but no such legislation exists to protect children and huge numbers of them are regularly hauling loads to school that most of their parents would find difficult to carry.

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