

by Zara Harris, MS, OT

Backpack

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, WILL BE THE ANNUAL NATIONAL SCHOOL BACKPACK AWARENESS DAY.

All across the country, backpack events will educate parents, students, educators, and school administrators about the serious health effects heavy backpacks worn improperly have on children. In 2007,* more than 2,000 backpack-related injuries were treated in hospitals and clinics. Countless students display stooped posture and complain of aching backs and shoulders and/or tingling arms. Too much weight improperly supported over time can cause long-term problems for developing spines. According to a Boston University study,** approximately eighty-five percent of university students self-report discomfort and pain associated with backpack usage. Good habits need to be set during the school years.

ADHD and backpacks

For those of us whose children have ADHD, more often than not we are more concerned that our kids have remembered their backpacks and have the right books in them than that they are carrying them correctly.

For students with organizational challenges, taking everything with them all the time seems like the best strategy. But the weight soon adds up. Using their lockers between classes to switch out books is often a step too far in time—and that locker has its own organizing challenges. So, what do we do?

Start out right

At the beginning of the school year, pick the best backpack for your student (see guidelines in the sidebar). If your student carries a laptop or tablet to school, consider getting a backpack with a special padded compartment that can be accessed from the outside without disturbing all those bits of paper. Buy a second (labeled) power cord that can either live at school or in a compartment in the backpack. Keep the other one permanently plugged in at home.

When possible, have a set of duplicate textbooks that lives at home. This both reduces the weight of the backpack and the frustration of not bringing home the right books. Label these

* U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) database (2007).

** Hu, J., Jacobs, K., Backpack usage and self-reported musculoskeletal discomfort in university students. Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting (September 2008) 52: 702-705.



Awareness



CHOOSING A BACKPACK

- To fit the student, the bottom should rest in the curve of the lower back and NEVER more than four inches below the waistline (two inches for smaller kids).
- Broad, well-padded shoulder straps and back of pack.
- Adjustable straps to fit the pack to the child and to allow for growth during the year.
- If possible, find one with waist and chest straps to secure the pack to the child's body.
- If a younger child has to carry many books, then consider a wheeled bag with a handle long enough that he or she can pull it without stooping.
- If carrying a tablet or laptop, consider choosing a backpack with a special pocket that opens to the outside (handy for airports too!).
- Label it well!

THE GOLDEN RULE

To ease those dreadful morning scrambles, load the backpack the night before and place by the door!



PACKING IT LIGHT

- A full backpack should not weigh more than ten percent (fifteen percent absolute maximum) of the child's body weight.
- Load the heaviest items closest to the child's back.
- Arrange books and materials so that they don't slide around in the backpack.
- If the backpack is too heavy, consider having the child hand carry a book or lunch box. It can be useful to have one that clips to the backpack for storage in school.

WEARING IT RIGHT

- Distribute weight evenly by using BOTH straps. Wearing a pack slung over one shoulder can cause a child to lean to one side, curving the spine and causing pain or discomfort.
- Wear the waist belt and chest strap if the pack has them. This helps distribute the weight more evenly.
- Adjust the shoulder straps so that the pack fits snugly on the child's back. The bottom of the pack should rest in the curve of the lower back and not below the waist. A pack that hangs loosely can pull the child backwards and strain muscles.
- For more information, visit aota.org (the American Occupational Therapy Association) and read the section on Backpack Awareness.



books well so they do not creep back into school later in the year. When buying school supplies buy the jumbo packs, keep a supply in the backpack, a set at home for homework, and keep the rest in a closet ready for when the first lot go missing.

Most students with ADHD struggle to use ring binders effectively and do better with an accordion file so that papers can just be dropped into the well-labeled pockets. Beware, though, that these fill fast. Beware also that if the accordion file is dropped, it is a paper disaster. Get a tabletop box of hanging files (with the same labels) and plan to transfer papers once a week from the accordion file to the box file.

After-school activities or subjects like music or sports that require special clothes or equipment on special days present extra challenges. Consider having a separate bag with those items that can either be carried separately or inserted into the backpack on those days. At one time I had a Monday bag, a Tuesday, bag, and so forth. It might be useful way of recycling last year's backpack.

Privacy issues

As students gets older, the contents of their backpacks become increasingly "personal." Before school starts, make a plan to manage the organization at a regular time and give the student time to remove any

"personal" items before you sort it together.

If you can, arrange for a regular locker sort, too. This may be done with the help of the teacher or work out a system with another, better organized student. Make sure that your student can use the padlock provided for the locker and that he or she can reach the hooks within. Invest in some locker shelves and organizers to help him or her see belongings more easily.

We know that the older the student, the more he or she "should" be responsible for his or her own belongings. Backpacks fall into the "must-be-done" category, however, often for health reasons—those week-old sandwiches under the social study book, to say nothing of that completed science project that he "forgot" to hand in. A regular weekly backpack and locker sort can be an essential tool for school success. 🗑️

Pediatric occupational therapist Zara Harris is based in the Washington, DC, area. Licensed in both the United States and the United Kingdom, she has more than thirty years of experience. Harris has worked with international schools on three different continents and is in a unique position to understand the special needs of today's mobile families. She specializes in helping students who are struggling with handwriting, homework, attention, time management, and organization.

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