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“Back” to school

Written by: Elvira Gaudio

BA, BE.d, Certified Personal Trainer and Fitness Instructor

It is hard to believe that the summer is quickly coming to an end and the start of a new school year is underway. The hustle and bustle of getting things in order for your child will be on your “to do list.” As a parent, you may think to yourself, “What are the best types of supplies that I can buy for my child in order for him/her to be successful in school academically?” But, have you ever thought of your child’s back health? Discussed below are things to think about in preventing your child’s back from hurting: the type of backpack, proper posture and being physically active and having a nutritious diet.

BACKPACK

This is an item that your child will be carrying throughout their day. It is very important that you buy your child a backpack with good support to help protect them from a back injury.

What features to look for in a back pack

Essential backpack features to look for are: “A lightweight material backpack made from canvas as opposed to leather, two padded-wide (2-inches) adjustable shoulder straps, a padded back, individualized compartments, hip strap, waist belt or frame to redistribute the weight.”¹ All of these features can help reduce the load on your child’s body.

POSTURE

Maintaining proper posture is essential in helping to prevent future health conditions. “Not only does poor posture have aesthetic implications but can also have long standing health consequences of improper bone development and spinal curvature. Poor posture is on the rise and nearly 39% of



children are diagnosed with bad posture per year. The issue can start as early as seven years old with almost 35% (ages 7 to 11) suffering from spinal curvature issues.² As parents it is essential to teach your child about good posture.

According to Gail Melamed, Physiotherapist at Pro Motion Physiotherapy, children are sitting for extended periods of time in school. Their posture is usually flexed (bent over) leading to muscle imbalance. A thorough assessment by a physiotherapist will identify your child’s particular concerns. A comprehensive exercise program will then be provided to strengthen weak muscles and stretch tight ones. In addition, education in correct sitting and dynamic postures will instill a sense of balanced posture for the future.

What is “Good” posture?

“Posture is the position in which you hold your body and limbs. To have good posture means that you need to be aware of holding yourself in a way that puts the least strain on your back.”³

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How to maintain "Good" posture while wearing a backpack.

When discussing with your child how to maintain proper posture while carrying their backpack there are general tips for proper use of backpacks:

- Wear both shoulder straps so weight is evenly displaced on the body.
- When removing the backpack avoid excessive twisting.
- Wear backpack over the strongest mid back muscles.
- "Keep the load of your backpack a maximum of 10-15% of your body weight." ⁴ For example, if your child weighs 80 lbs, then 10% of their body weight would be $80 \times .10 = 8$ lbs.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION

Regular physical activity and proper nutrition can improve your child's back health and other areas of their life. "During childhood and adolescence the body is growing at a fast pace and due to these rapid growth spurts, especially between the ages of 12-13, children are more susceptible to low back pain and stresses placed on it." ⁵

What are the benefits of being physically active and eating nutritious meals on posture?

Children who are regularly active and eat nutritious meals have increased concentration, better academic scores, stronger heart and bones, have more self-confidence, are physically stronger, and have improved posture and balance. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, children aged 5-11 should do at least one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily. But more is even better! ⁶ It is also essential for children to eat foods from the four food groups: "vegetables and fruit, grain products, milk and alternative and meat and alternatives to ensure overall good health." ⁷ The balance of exercise and proper nutrition will help prevent future health concerns.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Finally, the back health of your child is important as it supports them in their daily lives. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the backpack type, proper posture and being physically active and eating nutritious meals. Following these considerations will help your child be prepared to go "back" to school. Further, if your child does have back pain you should consult a registered physiotherapist who can help correct back problems.

TIPS

- Pack heavier items closest to the center of the back.
- Download school textbooks on a tablet or Kindle. Also, ask the teacher if the textbook can be found online.
- Buy a backpack that is appropriate for your body size.
- To put on your backpack properly: face the pack, bend at your knees, then lift with your legs and apply straps one shoulder at a time.
- Weigh the backpack and contents on a scale to really know how much the child is carrying.

Student Accident Insurance (SAI)

Each September parents/ guardians are inundated with a barrage of papers sent home with their children. One of these papers to which you may want to pay attention is an application for Students' Accident Insurance (SAI) from an insurer selected by your board of education. There are a variety of insurers who provide this coverage so parents may want to do a bit of homework to compare plans offered to Ontario students. Most plans offer coverage for rehabilitation services, such as physiotherapy when required as the result of an accident. Even if one or more parent's/ guardians have extended health coverage you may be able to access the SAI to supplement your existing plan. The SAI plans are offered at very affordable premiums and, in addition, most companies offer multiple plans so you can select the one that best fits your family's budget.

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CONTACT

Pro Motion Physiotherapy
Level 3, The Promenade
1 Promenade Circle, Thornhill
Ontario L4J 4P8

Tel: 905.731.1991
Fax: 905.731.2884

Email: staff@promotionphysiotherapy.com
Facebook: www.facebook.com/promotionphysio
Twitter: @ProMotionPhys
www.promotionphysiotherapy.com
www.osteocircuit.com

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