

Is your child's back pack weighing them down?

By Dr Naomi Draeger, Chiropractor

Whilst waiting at a red light during my drive to Clinic this morning, I watched with alarm as a young girl around 10 years of age walked across the road in front of me. She was carrying a back pack larger than the size of her torso, ill fitted to her back and clearly overladen with books. The weight was so excessive that it caused her head to jut forward, giving her the posture of an old woman. This isn't the first time I've witnessed this. I remember once seeing a young boy around the same age, with a huge back pack on his back, and one on his front to try to counter balance the weight!

As a parent, we want to do the right thing by our kids, but there is always so much conflicting information out there about what is too much and what is okay. We do know that a poorly positioned backpack can modify posture and gait, as the posture of the spine changes when the weight of the backpack increases.

From the extensive research out there today, I've tried to separate the real evidence from speculation and summarise **three key points to remember:**

1. The back pack and contents should be no greater than 20% of their body weight. Some researchers even recommend no more than 10%. The thing to think about here is how long they carry the load. If they are walking to school or the bus stop over a reasonable distance, the load needs to be less.
2. Make sure whatever back pack your child uses, it is fitted snugly to their back by tightening the straps.
3. Now here's an interesting thing, back packs have two straps, although most kids, especially adolescents, only ever see one! They need to wear their back packs over both shoulders to evenly distribute the weight.

So just what is the real risk of a child developing back and/or neck pain as a result of carrying excessive weight over sustained periods of time? Well it depends on a number of things. Other factors that can contribute to the development of pain include:

- Being female
- Family history of back pain
- Poor general health
- Poor posture
- Time spent watching television or using electronic games
- History of spinal trauma
- Intense physical activity
- Practicing competition sports
- Age (more frequent in adolescents than children).

If you have any concerns about your child's spinal health, consult your Chiropractor for further advice.

References:

Cottalorda J, Bourelle S, Kohler R. *Backpack and spinal disease: myth or reality?* Rev Chir Orthop Reparatrice Appar Mot. 2004 May; 90(3): 207-14
Korovessis P, Koureas G, Papazisis Z. *Correlation between backpack weight and way of carrying, sagittal and frontal spinal curvatures, athletic activity, and dorsal and low back pain in schoolchildren and adolescents.* Spinal Disord Tech. 2004 Feb;17(1):33-40