

National School Backpack Awareness Day



Pack It Light, Wear It Right

A public health
awareness event
sponsored by:



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Backpack Strategies for Schools

Help Students Ease the Backpack Burden

AOTA and The Fund To Promote Awareness of Occupational Therapy are working to educate students, parents, and communities about the potentially serious health effects from school backpacks that are too heavy or worn improperly. More than 40 million children in the U.S. carry school backpacks, and more than half of them may be carrying too much weight. Children carrying overloaded and improperly worn packs are likely to experience neck, shoulder, and back pain; adverse effects on posture and the developing spine; and compromised breathing and fatigue. The U.S. Consumer Product and Safety Commission estimates that more than 7,000 emergency room visits in 2001 resulted from injuries related to backpacks and book bags; half of these injuries occurred in children 5 to 14 years old—the age of elementary and middle-school students. The growing awareness of potential long-term problems to children has resulted in increased medical research, more coverage of the issue in the media, and proposed legislation in at least two states to address the issue of backpack weight in relation to student health.

Schools are under tremendous pressure, with limited resources, to educate children about far more than the traditional academic subjects. However, there are some things that teachers and school administrators can consider that will help reduce backpack loads to the recommended 15% or less of a child's weight.

- What are your students carrying in their backpacks?
- What can be done on a physical level, such as providing lockers or cubicles where books, supplies, and athletic equipment can be safely stored?
- Consider lightweight alternatives to recommended school supplies. Allow students to use spiral bound or composition books and pocket folders for note taking and organization rather than three-ring binders, and to divide class materials between two 1-inch binders rather than carry a large 2- or 3-inch binder.
- What can be done to lessen the backpack burden at the curricula level?
- Take into consideration the total weight of each day's class work—not only in educational content, but also in terms of textbook weight—to keep students from taking multiple heavy textbooks home one day and a very light load the next.
- Look at alternate methods of providing course information if your school has the resources to implement them, such as posting study guides and subject information online to be read and reviewed, handing out photocopied homework and review chapters, or providing duplicate textbooks. Consider other information dissemination methods that eliminate the need for carrying heavy textbooks between home and school every day.
- Clarify the due dates of all assignments and student work reviews. There is often a misperception among students that they can be asked for any of the semester's work at any time, so consequently they carry everything with them all the time. Enlist parents to help students file work at home monthly or by study unit so that only the required work needs to be brought to school.
- Ask children what suggestions they have for lightening their backpack loads.

The goal of occupational therapy professionals is the same goal as education professionals: to do everything we can to help children succeed in school.

Occupational therapy practitioners are trained in helping children with a broad range of issues in addition to ergonomics, such as good handwriting skills and developmental and behavioral problems, to help them to participate more fully in the "occupation" of living. Practitioners work with children in every school district in the nation to improve skills that will help them perform daily tasks at home, at school, and at play. The American Occupational Therapy Association, founded in 1917, is the membership organization of more than 35,000 health care professionals.

For more information on occupational therapy, visit www.aota.org.