

# Heavy school bags

The health, safety and wellbeing of students is a priority for the department. Carrying heavy school bags is a concern for some students and families. The prevention of back pain and other musculoskeletal injuries is important for students' current wellbeing and their long term health.

Students may experience:

- Fatigue
- Muscle strain
- Back pain
- Distortion of the spine's natural curves
- Rounding of the shoulders.

Schools implement a range of strategies to minimise carrying heavy bags including:

- Alteration of timetabling to minimise number of books taken to school e.g. block scheduling
- Investigating shared or 'class sets' of resources
- Utilising 'port racks' outside classrooms to limit distances school bags are carried.

Research shows that, where possible, backpack weights should be less than 10% of the student's body weight. Schools and parents should work together to achieve this goal.

## What can we do to reduce the risks?

### Reducing the load

- Investigate if students can store books at school and only carry home those needed for homework.
- If your child insists they need to bring home more books than they can comfortably carry, consult with their teacher.
- Regularly clean out the school bag, since your child may be storing unneeded items.
- Regularly ask your child if their backpack is causing fatigue or pain. If so, lighten the load and adjust the fittings.

### Backpacks

Backpacks, rather than traditional school bags or sports bags with handles, allow the load to be carried more evenly over both shoulders. The purchase of well-designed back packs and their correct use is an important factor to promote good posture and minimise effort in carrying school bags.

Backpacks with compartments, padded straps and a hip strap assist in distributing the load evenly throughout the bag and on the student's body. *See next page for tips about correct selection and use.*

### What about lockers?

The installation of lockers at schools is often raised as a solution to carrying heavy school bags. One limitation is that lockers will not eliminate the carrying of books to and from school if required for homework or study. The installation of lockers is a school-based decision dependent on funds, space, supervision, security and maintenance. This can be raised with your school principal or through the school's Parents and Citizens' Association.



## Other options and future considerations

Rolling bags with an extendable handle and wheels are an option for students however, these must be lifted up stairs and can cause trip hazards during transit in crowded areas and when left in access ways. Rolling bags may not be suitable when traversing uneven terrain.

Technology has changed the way our students learn and play. Increased use of electronic learning tools does offer alternatives to heavy text books including CD options and online content. The negative aspect of increased engagement with technology however is extended computer use and a concurrent increase in sedentary activities. These are common factors in the lives of many children and adults. Keeping active is an important part of forming and maintaining a healthy body for later life and the department is committed to promoting a balanced approach to life and learning for our students.

## Tips for selecting a backpack

- Look for a backpack endorsed by an Australian professional organisation, such as the Australian Physiotherapy Association or the Chiropractors' Association of Australia.
- Don't try to save money by buying the biggest backpack you can find – make sure the backpack is appropriate to your child's size.
  - When the shoulder straps are adjusted the bottom of the backpack should be just above the child's waist – the backpack should not be hanging low over the buttocks
- Look for features such as:
  - Adjustable shoulder straps
  - Moulded frame and/or adjustable hip strap, so that the weight of the filled backpack will rest on your child's pelvis instead of their shoulders and spine
  - Rear of the backpack is padded for comfort
  - Separate compartments to help with packing.

Children are fashion conscious and vulnerable to peer pressure. Your child will need to like the backpack so let them help choose it. This will help their acceptance and improve the chances of your child wearing the backpack appropriately. If the style you choose is 'uncool', your child may compensate by carrying the backpack in a 'cool' way, such as over one shoulder.

## Reminders about correct use of a backpack

- When fitted correctly, the backpack should contour snugly to the child's back, rather than hang off their shoulders.
- Pack the heaviest items closest to the student's spine – this will help with comfort and balancing the load.
- Use the backpack's compartments to pack items securely and minimise the load moving around during transit. This keeps the load balanced.
- Remind (or help) children to clean out their bag regularly so they are not carrying around unnecessary items.
- Remind your child to wear the pack over both shoulders.
- When loading a backpack onto the shoulders and unloading a backpack from the shoulders this should be done at bench height whenever possible to avoid twisting the spine.
- Warning signs that a backpack is too heavy include a change in posture when wearing the pack; struggling when putting on or removing the pack; pain when wearing the pack; tingling or numbness in arms; and red marks on shoulders. See your doctor if your child complains of back pain.

## More Information:

<http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/positive/learning/backpack.html>