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School's Back in Session – Pack Your Backpack Right!

By

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With students going back to school and parents rushing to buy back-to-school supplies for their children, parents may unknowingly purchase backpacks that could cause potential back problems. If your child complains of an aching back or shoulders, tingling arms, weakened muscles, or you notice your child's stooped posture, your child may be wearing a backpack that is too heavy or is worn improperly. In recognition of National School Backpack Awareness Day, the American Occupational Therapy Association offers some guidelines when choosing a backpack for your child in order to prevent injuries. Here are some things to remember:

- Choose backpacks that are in proportion to your child's size. Avoid the temptation that "bigger is better" when selecting the size of a pack for your child. If a backpack is too heavy, consider using a book bag on wheels if your child's school allows it and the hallways are not too narrow.
- Never let a child carry more than 10% of his or her body weight. This means a student weighing 100 pounds should not wear a loaded backpack heavier than about 10 pounds.
- Teach your child to wear both shoulder straps. This helps to more evenly distribute the weight of the pack. Wearing a pack slung over one shoulder can cause a child to lean to one side, curving the spine and causing pain or discomfort.
- Select a pack with well-padded shoulder straps. Shoulders and necks have many blood vessels and nerves that can cause pain and tingling in the neck, arms, and hands when too much pressure is applied. Also, adjust the shoulder straps so that the pack fits snugly to the child's back. A pack that hangs loosely from the back can pull the child backwards and strain muscles.
- The bottom of the pack should rest in the curve of the lower back. It should never rest more than four inches below the child's waistline.
- School backpacks come in different sizes for different ages. Choose the right size pack for your child as well as one with enough room for necessary school items.

In addition to these tips, load heaviest items closest to the child's back (at the back of the pack). Arrange books and materials so they won't slide around in the backpack. Check what your child carries to school and brings home. Make sure the items are necessary to the day's activities. Perhaps on days when the backpack is loaded too heavily, your child can hand carry a book or other item.

Hopefully, these suggestions will aid you in taking steps to help your children load and wear backpacks the right way to avoid any potential health problems. For further information you may want to visit the American Occupational Therapy Association's website at www.aota.org/backpack to read more about how occupational therapists are working with other health issues facing children besides backpacks. I wish all of the Hardee County school children and parents, teachers and administrators a successful and rewarding school year!