

BACKPACK SAFETY

Backpacks filled with heavy textbooks, notebooks, laptop computers, and class projects can cause injury. Researchers around the world have found that the average weight of backpacks worn by students exceeds the weight limits that are recommended for adults. As you know, backpacks that are too heavy or are worn incorrectly can harm joints and muscles, cause back injuries and even lead to scoliosis.

According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, there are several guidelines regarding backpack safety. These include the following:

- Choose the right backpack.
- Select a backpack that is appropriate to the child's size and age.
- Wide, padded shoulder straps.
- Two shoulder straps
- Padded back (lumbar cushion)
- Waist strap
- Lightweight backpack
- Rolling backpack (for one story buildings only)
- Always use both shoulder straps
- Tighten the straps so that the pack is close to the body
- Pack light
- Organize the backpack to use all of its compartments
- Stop often at school lockers and remove items not needed, if possible
- Bend using both knees
- Learn back-strengthening exercises to build up the muscles used to carry a backpack
- Adjust contents in the bag so that the surface resting against the child's back is as flat as possible.

The International Chiropractic Pediatric Association confirms that the maximum weight of the loaded backpack should not exceed 15% of the individual's body weight. It is encouraged that students pack only what they need. If the backpack forces the wearer to move forward to carry, it is overloaded. It is also recommended that the heavier items be placed at the bottom of the backpack to keep the weight off of the students' shoulders and be able to maintain better posture.

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 6,000 children are treated in hospital emergency rooms each year for injuries related to shouldering backpacks. More than half of those involved children ages 5 to 14. Another survey performed by Simmons College found that one-third of fifth through eighth-graders carrying loads more than 15% of their body weight stated that have suffered back pain. The American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation states that nearly 60% of young people will experience back pain by the time they are 18 years old.

Students and parents need to be educated about the dangers of lugging too much weight. Most children are unaware of both the short- and long-term dangers associated with back strains. Over 50% of parents have expressed concern about backpack injuries to their children. Backpack injuries are real. These injuries mimic repetitive stress injuries that adults experience on the job. There is only so much the human body can take before it starts to send out warning signals. Backpack injuries may include neck pain, upper back pain, mid and lower back pain, shoulder pain, arm to fingers numbness, tingling and headaches.

It is the intent of Physical Education and health Literacy Program to enhance awareness of backpack safety to Miami-Dade County Public Schools elementary and secondary school students as well as administrators, teachers, and parents. The “Backpack Safety” component will be presented through Elementary, Middle, and Senior High School Teacher Training Workshops.