



How best to carry books; to retrieve something at a low level; to use a tablet while sitting at a desk; and best posture when using a computer

More and more children and young people are experiencing back and neck pain.

**Lorna Taylor**, a paediatric physiotherapist from Jolly Back, explains why changing lifestyles are affecting young, growing spines and offers practical tips to help you and your child.

RECENT research shows that 72% of primary aged children and 64% of secondary aged pupils have experienced back and neck pain in the past year. Back pain in children is becoming more common, but it should never be considered normal. All episodes of back pain lasting more than two weeks should be reported to a GP.

As a society we have become increasingly sedentary. ICT now plays a huge part of our children's lives at school and at home. However, little consideration is given to the postures children frequently adopt – hunched over handheld mobile devices, working at laptops while sitting on the floor, sitting on one-size-fits-all furniture, spending more time sitting in the car going to structured activities and to/from school because of safety fears. For younger children, there is less opportunity to simply play

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and develop the strong core muscles they need to maintain a healthy spine.

Studies show that children who suffer back pain are four times more likely to experience it as an adult. Prevention through the formation of good, healthy habits early on is essential.

#### So how can you help keep your child's back strong and healthy?

**1) Remember healthy posture.** A healthy spine from the side looks like a letter "S" with three curves – rather than a curved, damaging "C" shape. From behind, a healthy spine is straight upright. It's important to remember this throughout all our daily activities. Think "tall" when sitting, standing and walking.

#### 2) Encourage physical activity.

To help build up the core muscles to help protect the spine, a healthy spine likes to move. Movement is also needed to increase blood flow to remove the build-up of toxins and to nourish the spine. Can you walk/cycle/scooter all or part of the way to school? Ensure schools are offering PE sessions and break-times, rather than keeping children in for extra work. Children who play sport should also ensure they have good technique, supportive footwear and warm up/cool down adequately.

**3) Support healthy sitting.** Encourage your child to arrange their workstation so they are comfortable before they begin. When working at a laptop/

computer: sit at a desk which is level with your forearms (with elbows bent to 90 degrees). Ensure that the top of the screen is level with your eyes and that if using a laptop, you use a separate keyboard. Ensure your feet are supported. When using a tablet, make sure it has a stand so that it is not used on a flat desk. Complete the free [www.ergonomics4kids.co.uk](http://www.ergonomics4kids.co.uk) course online to learn more about healthy ICT use for children and share with your school.

When sitting at school: encourage your child to tell you or their teacher if they are uncomfortable at school. School is the "workplace of the child", children should be comfortable and be able to concentrate and limit damaging postures with associated back/neck strain. Check if your child has a clear view of the board, or do they have to twist around to see it?

Can they turn their chair around or move position? 30:30 stretch and wriggle: encourage your child to get up and move for 30secs after sitting for 30mins.

**4) Eat sensibly and stay hydrated.** The shock-absorbing discs of the spine are 90% water, so regular hydration helps keep them in tip top condition. A healthy weight limits extra stress on the many joints and muscles of the spine.

**5) Remember safer lifting.** Bend your knees and not your back when you pick something up and put it down. Get close to the object, get a good grip and avoid twisting and stooping because, over time, this will make your back very unhappy. Children should limit lifting siblings and other children.

**6) School bag considerations:**

- Design: a mono/single strap bag should be worn across the body (not on one shoulder) and

remember to swap carrying sides regularly. A rucksack should be worn over both shoulders – this will keep the spine symmetrical and upright.

- Correct adjustment: a mono strap bag should be adjusted so that the top of the bag is level with the hip/belt. A rucksack should be worn close to the body and higher up the back (so that the bottom of the bag is level or above the waist). A chest and waist strap will help if walking long distances.

A wheeled trolley bag or lightweight wheeled backpack can be useful purchases if your child's school has few stairs.

- Packing: keep the bag balanced, with heaviest items packed first and closest to the spine. It's important to carry only what is needed, so repack the bag each evening to keep it as light as possible. School bags should weigh approximately 10% of a child's

body weight. It has been suggested that above 15% will be damaging (BackCare.org). Talk to your child's school to ensure they do not get into trouble if they accidentally forget a book. Detentions for forgetting a book or piece of equipment are not helpful as this encourages children to overpack their bags. Can current work be placed in lighter folders, rather than carrying all work?

Lockers and safe storage areas are beneficial, especially once in secondary school. This is particularly helpful for Year 7 pupils who are often lightest but have to carry similar amounts to larger Year 10 pupils. Can "school bag advice" be given during Year 6 transition to help pupils and their families prepare best?

Remember to safely lift and put down your bag too!  
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