Backpack Safety: It's Time to Lighten the Load

When you move your child's backpack after he or she drops it at the door, does it feel like it contains 40 pounds of rocks? Maybe you've noticed your child struggling to put it on, bending forward while carrying it, or complaining of tingling or numbness.

If you've been concerned about the effects that extra weight might have on your child's still-growing body, your instincts are correct.

Backpacks that are too heavy can cause a lot of problems for kids, like back and shoulder pain, and poor posture. The problem has grabbed the attention of lawmakers in some states, who have pushed for legislation requiring school districts to lighten the load. While we wait for solutions like digital textbooks to become widespread, there are things you can do to help prevent injury. While it's common these days to see children carrying as much as a quarter of their body weight, the American Chiropractic Association recommends a backpack weigh no more than 10 percent of a child's weight.

When selecting a backpack, look for:

- An ergonomic design

- The correct size: never wider or longer than your child's torso and never hanging more than 4 inches below the waist

- Padded back and shoulder straps

- Hip and chest belts to help transfer some of the weight to the hips and torso

- Multiple compartments to better distribute the weight

- Compression straps on the sides or bottom to stabilize the contents

- Reflective material

Remember: A roomy backpack may seem like a good idea, but the more space there is to fill, the more likely your child will fill it. Make sure your child uses both straps when carrying the backpack. Using one strap shifts the weight to one side and causes muscle pain and posture problems.

Help your child determine what is absolutely necessary to carry. If it's not essential, leave it at home.