



## At School with the 21st Century Child

Life was quite different for the school child forty years ago.. Most walked to school carrying a couple of books and when they arrived at school, the tools they used to learn were limited to books, chalk and a chalkboard. Today, a child's school experience is radically different most are driven or bussed to school, carry heavy backpacks and use computers in the classroom.

So, how does today's lifestyle impact our children and their overall health specifically their general posture and spinal health? Dr. Patti Hort, a member of the College of Chiropractors of Alberta, says she's seeing more and more children with spinal problems. Carrying backpacks, poor posture in school, time at a computer and playing video games is leading our children into a future of back pain. It is truly a new generation of poor spinal health and we need to do more about it.

One culprit is the all convenient storage device the backpack. Children use backpacks like luggage. They carry their Game boy, lunch bag, shoes, outerwear and books in their pack every day. Parents often don't realize how much weight their child is carrying on their back and how it impacts the health of their spine. According to the College of Chiropractors of Alberta, backpacks should never exceed 15 percent of a child's body weight (i.e.: a 90-pound child should not carry more than 14 pounds in a backpack). For elementary school children the weight in their pack should never exceed 10 percent of their body weight. It doesn't take long before the weight adds up. Parents might lift the pack and think it's not heavy, but for a six-year old, 10 pounds is too much, states Dr. Hort. The long-term effects of carrying an overloaded backpack on a growing spine range from poor posture to neck, shoulder or back injury. Parents need to be conscious of how much their child is carrying on their back and help lighten the load.

Even if your child is using his backpack properly, he may not be immune to back problems. Think about how often children use computers on a daily basis and how sitting at a computer affects their posture. A recent study from the U.S Department of Education shows that 90 percent of children and adolescents aged five to 17 use computers. In fact, of the younger age group, about three quarters of five-year olds now use computers. Most home computers are set up for adult use. Children sitting at computers set up for an adult cant properly reach the keyboard, don't fit in the chair, their feet can't reach the floor, and they have to look up to see the monitor. Combine home computer with school computer workstations that are not set up to adequately support a child's back, and it's easy to see why and how children develop back problems.

So, what can parents do to address these issues? It may seem that parents do not have a lot of control over some of these circumstances, but according to the College of Chiropractors of Alberta, both parents and kids can do a lot to prevent spinal problems including:

1. Purchase a backpack that fits your child. The backpacks top should not extend higher than the top of the shoulder and the bottom should not fall below the top of the hipbone.
2. Weigh your child's backpack. If the weight exceeds 10-15% of their bodyweight, eliminate unnecessary items from the pack.
3. Help your child lift and put on their pack. Most children swing their packs over their shoulders causing them to twist their spine which can lead to strain or injury.
4. Assess your home computer station. Watch how your child uses the computer and how they fit on the chair. Adjust the chair so your child can reach the keyboard, place a footrest under their feet, and lower the monitor so it is eye level for them.
5. Take a look at your child's posture, says Dr. Hort. Is one shoulder higher than the other? Does your child seem to have a hunch in the middle of their back? These are all signs that problems are already there.
6. Get regular spinal checkups for your child just like dental checkups. Chiropractors can identify developing postural weaknesses and potential spinal problems that could affect children as they grow.

In the end, our modern conveniences are not without consequences, especially in terms of our children's health. However, parents help ensure their children have proper fitting equipment along with a healthy balance between static and physical activities. Visit [www.alberta-chiro.com](http://www.alberta-chiro.com) for more information about chiropractic and spinal health.