

# Backpack Safety: Pack it light, wear it right!

A reference card for administrators, teachers, parents and students to promote and support backpack safety in the Howard County Public School System



## Introduction

Backpacks are a practical way for students to carry schoolbooks and supplies. They are designed to distribute the weight of its contents among some of the body's strongest muscles; therefore, when used correctly, backpacks can be a beneficial way to carry the materials needed for school.

In recent years, the weight of student backpacks has become a public health concern. Recommendations coming out of recent studies on backpack safety encourage school systems to do what they can to lighten the load for students and that students, parents, and staff become educated in backpack safety.

The Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) recognizes its responsibility to provide a safe and healthy learning environment for all students and acknowledges the necessity to ensure that the school environment promotes and protects students' health and well-being. Schools, parents, and students each bear responsibility for backpack safety. Collaboration between the school and the home is needed to help students develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes regarding backpack safety.

## Suggested Strategies for Administrators

- Utilize a variety of venues to share information periodically on backpack safety with parents, students, and staff such as PTA newsletters, e-schoolnewsletter, and school webpage.
- Print backpack safety tips on the back of the school supply lists that are distributed to families.
- Provide parents and families with information at Back to School Night.
- Promote National School Backpack Awareness Day in September.
- Ask students for their suggestions for lightening their backpack loads.
- Educate students on backpack safety through morning, homeroom, or advisory announcements.
- Ask staff members to support students who need additional assistance with organizing backpacks.
- Encourage locker use.
- Implement periodic school-wide "Cleanout and Recycle Days" for student backpacks and lockers.
- Provide sufficient time at end of the day for students to pack only what they need to take home.

## Suggested Strategies for Teachers

- Collaborate with team members on the school supplies list to encourage efficient use of materials and reduce overall weight of a student's backpack.
- When developing school supply lists consider the weight of textbooks, notebooks, and supplies that students are required to carry for other classes.
- Communicate with parents and students about what needs to be brought home each day and what supplies and materials may be kept at school.
- Teach backpack safety skills to include demonstration of proper use of back "packing" as part of the essential health education curriculum at all school levels.
- Teach students organization skills emphasizing how and what to pack in a backpack.
- Review and purchase materials of instruction to support instruction on backpack safety in appropriate classes.
- Identify class projects and student research investigations to educate peers about backpack safety as appropriate.
- When available, provide an extra set of textbooks in core classes to be kept at home.



# Backpack Safety



## Suggested Strategies for Parents

- Purchase a backpack that is the correct size with adequate back padding and wide straps.
- Talk to your child about backpack safety.
  - a. Loading a Backpack
    1. Load heavy items close to the back (the back of the pack).
    2. Don't overload.
    3. Distribute contents evenly.
  - b. Wearing a Backpack
    1. Wear both shoulder straps.
    2. Adjust shoulder straps so the backpack fits snugly against the back.
    3. Fasten belt and adjust strap length to secure and distribute the weight evenly.
    4. The backpack should rest in the curve of the lower back and not more than four inches below the waist.
- Monitor what your child is carrying to school each day to help him or her avoid carrying unnecessary items which add weight to the backpack.
- Periodically check to see if your child is wearing his or her backpack correctly.
- Assist your child with cleaning out and organizing the backpack weekly.

- If the backpack weighs more than 15% of your child's body weight have child carry a heavy book or two under his or her arm.
- Ask your child if he/she has any discomfort during or after wearing the backpack.
- Encourage children to exercise to strengthen muscles in the torso, including the lower back and abdominal muscles.
- Help your child file work at home so he/she only needs to bring required work to school each day.
- Talk to your child and teachers about ways to reduce backpack weight.
- Share any concerns about backpack weight with your child's teacher or administrator.

## Suggested Strategies for Students

- Load heavy items close to the back.
- Only pack items necessary for the day's activities.
- Clean out and organize backpack on a weekly basis.
- Ask teachers what materials and supplies can be kept at home.
- Carry heavy books under the arm.
- Wear backpack properly with both shoulder straps and not more than four inches below the waist.
- Inform a parent of any discomfort from wearing a backpack.
- Share ideas for reducing backpack weight with parents, teachers and administrators.
- Exercise to strengthen muscles in the torso, including the lower back and abdominal muscles.

