

USE BOTH STRAPS!

Of course it's heavy; it's my backpack

A skinny 10-year-old boy, all 75 pounds of him, lurches lopsidedly down the street, a 30-pound backpack over one shoulder. A small girl bends to tie her shoe; her bulging backpack overwhelms her balance, and down she goes.

What kids are carrying to school these days can add up to a percentage of body weight—20, 30, even 40 percent—that would stagger an adult. Schools are hearing from concerned parents. Chiropractors and orthopedists say pain and soreness resulting from heavy backpacks are sending more children into their offices. And many specialists say the backpack burden, largely a product of more and heavier books, may be setting up children for serious back ailments in the future. "Improper backpack use can lead to a lifetime of health problems," warns Backpack Safety America, a Web site sponsored by chiropractors. Excess weight can strain muscles; using one strap, the only socially acceptable way for adolescents to carry a backpack, puts more strain on one side.

Much of the furor, however, is sheer hoo-ha. No one can say with the slightest authority what harm bulging backpacks are inflicting on children, now or in years to come, because

there have been no studies. Statistics kept by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission show that from 1994 through the first half of 1999, only 22 children up to 18 years old visited emergency rooms complaining of pain from heavy backpacks. Hundreds more came because of *other* backpack-re-

lated injuries. They tripped over them, got hit by them, and, in a few cases, swallowed pieces of them.

30 percent," says Charlotte Alexander, an orthopedic surgeon in Houston who has conducted the first survey of orthopedists and pediatricians on the subject. "Everybody has a number. No one can explain how they arrived at it."

Still, no one argues that children *should* lug back-

study of heavy backpacks as a science project. Of the recommendations that resulted, the group felt the most realistic was more locker stops. Cold Spring allots four minutes between classes. "We can make it to our lockers maybe three times a day if we budget our time and don't stop to talk," says Berenblum. But in the wake of shootings at Columbine and elsewhere, some schools no longer allow students to use lockers.

Moreover, it seems unlikely that much will happen to lighten the load to and from school. A few schools now issue two sets of textbooks—one for school, one for home—but that is expensive. You can complain to the school, but usually a child would have to have a back condition like scoliosis, not just pain, to get extra books. Some parents, like orthopedist Alexander, buy books on their own, but most families cannot afford to do so.

The Cold Spring group considered luggage carts yet discarded the idea as impractical

in buses and crowded corridors. And most kids refuse to carry backpacks with both straps. "It's pretty dorky," says Rachel Friedstein, another Cold Spring project member. But pressuring children to use both straps may be the only way to get a little relief for aching backs and worried parents. —Avery Comarow



HEFTY BAG. Fourth-grader Alex Draftz thinks his backpack is a pain.

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The numbers game. Even guidelines suggested by medical organizations for maximum backpack poundage as a percentage of body weight—10 percent to 15 percent is typical—are flimsy. "I've seen 5, 10, 15, 20,

packs that bend their bodies forward, backward—or, in keeping with the casual-cool one-shoulder style, sideways. Even some kids concede a problem. "We felt that they hurt," says Jessica Berenblum, a sophomore and one of four students at Cold Spring Harbor High School in New York who recently finished a two-year