

Buy the best backpack for your child

Getting a proper fit outweighs getting the right look

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Students enrolled in every grade from pre-K to a Ph.D. program need a sturdy backpack that fits. It's best to try one on in the store whether you're shopping for a designer backpack at Bloomingdale's or a kiddie pack with a cartoon theme from Target. If the backpack doesn't sit comfortably on the shoulders, your student can end up with back, neck or shoulder pain that persists into adulthood.

Nearly 28,000 backpack-related strains, sprains, dislocations, and fractures were treated by medical professionals in 2010, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Often the injuries come from overloaded backpacks that exceed 10 percent of the person's body weight, the recommended limit. "A child wearing a backpack incorrectly or one that is too heavy can be contributing risk factors for discomfort, fatigue, muscle soreness, and musculoskeletal pain especially in the lower back," says Karen Jacobs, an occupational therapist, clinical professor at Boston University and spokeswoman for the American Occupational Therapy Association.



Find the right fit. When trying on a backpack, the place where the straps meet the pack should rest one or two inches below the top of the shoulders. The bottom of the backpack should rest in the curve of the lower back but not more than four inches below the waist. For younger children or people with small frames, the distance between the shoulders and waist can be very small, limiting your choices significantly.

Get comfy straps. Wide, padded, contoured straps are best for comfort and a waist strap can redistribute the weight from the neck and shoulders to the waist and hips.

Pack it correctly. When loading the backpack, put the heaviest items, such as text books, closest to the back and balance lighter items away from the back or in the outside pockets.

Wear it right. Even though it's tempting to throw a backpack over one shoulder, it's best to wear both shoulder straps so the load is evenly balanced. When adjusting the straps, make sure they're the same length. Here are some other features to consider.

- **Zipper pulls.** These make it easier to find and unzip the zipper—useful when you're in a rush and easy for small hands to grasp.
- **Covered zippers.** In our past backpack tests, covers kept water from seeping into the backpack, compared with uncovered zippers.
- **Reflective strips.** These add visibility—a safety plus, especially on short winter days.

Check our [backpack buying guide](#) for more information.

Carry a lighter load

To prevent injury, the AOTA recommends that your child's backpack weigh no more than 10 percent of his or her body weight. If it weighs more, try to keep some supplies at home or school to lighten it up. The less your child carries, the better for her back. (See our [backpack weigh-in](#) video.)

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