

WEIGHTY SCHOOL BAGS

Give backs a break, says prominent chiropractor

Sphelele Ngubane

PARENTS and teachers must be mindful of the weight of the school bags pupils carried to school every day, as a heavy weight could alter the alignment of a child's posture and increase the strain on the spine.

The weight of the backpack might also damage the muscles of the upper shoulders because of compression.

This is according to Dr Robert Delgado, a corrective care chiropractor and lifestyle coach at Delgado Chiropractic and Wellness Expert in Cape Town.

"Carrying heavy weighted and oversized school bags full of heavy books can cause young children to develop serious spinal deformities," he said.

Delgado recommended that South African education departments follow the example of the Indian state of Maharashtra which has now imposed a regulation that schoolchildren may not carry school bags that exceed 10% of their body weight.

He said the issue had been raised by various chiropractors over the years.

"The issue has been receiving attention internationally, in the US, and should be considered in South Africa too."

He explained that by carry-



ing heavy school bags children were developing forward head posture as they were leaning forward at the hips to compensate for the heavy weight on their backs.

"This strains the muscles and pushes the body to go into an unnatural posture alignment.

"While children might not experience pain straight away, in the long term they are developing imbalances in the body which can affect the health of the nervous system," he said.

Delgado said short-term

effects included spinal stress and possible pain and discomfort.

"Damage to the tissue is not always accompanied by conscious pain, though, which means it can go unnoticed.

Carrying heavy books in their bags could also interfere with the children's brain performance.

"When the alignment of the spine is imbalanced the communication between the brain and the body is negatively affected.

"Proper alignment and movement of the spine is essential to brain health. Impulses created by spinal movement charge the brain like a battery. This is why people feel energised after exercise and tired after sitting all day."

Delgado advised parents to ensure that their children had high-quality backpacks, with shoulder pads, that could be carried on both shoulders and not just one.

A spokesman for the Department of Basic Education, Elijah Mhlanga, did not respond to The Mercury's requests for comment.

Delgado's study has also been supported by the Chiropractic Association of South Africa, which says improper school bag or backpack use is an often-overlooked cause of back pain. The association also suggests that pupils' bags should not hang more than

10cm below their waistline.

"Urge your child to wear both shoulder straps. The straps should be adjustable so the school bag can be easily fitted to your child's body."

The association's website has a number of studies related to carrying of school bags.

The headmistress of Thomas More College, Barbara Taljard, said they were mindful of the weight pupils carried on their backs.

"We have, in the past, invited a biokineticist to educate the children in an assembly during national back week. Teachers constantly ask children to check that they are only taking books home that are essential.

"Every child has a lockable locker to look after their belongings. We keep on investigating the quality of the school bag to ensure that it is compliant with good health issues and only such are stocked in our stock shop. The children are also welcome to use school bags with wheels," she said.

Durban Girls' College headmaster Thomas Hagspihl said they were aware of the problems heavy bags could cause, particularly if they were carried incorrectly. He said having lockers was one of the solutions. "Also, with the introduction of iPads at schools, one hopes the girls will be able to replace many of their text books with the digital equivalent," he said.