Occupational Therapy National Awareness Campaign to Promote Health in Student Backpack Users

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INTRODUCTION
In the United States, it is estimated that more than 40 million youths carry their school materials in backpacks. Everyday these youths carry backpacks filled with books, bottles of water, laptop computers, athletic equipment, and other items that create a strain on their growing bodies. While there is a paucity of research on backpacks and students, there is much anecdotal reporting on the extraordinary problems that children are reporting as a result of their backpacks. While more research is underway to study the issue, the dangers of taking no action would be irresponsible. And while some public information and education efforts have been undertaken by several health organizations, the sustained educational efforts on the part of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) on this issue has begun to make a marked difference in public awareness.

COLLABORATION
The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), based in Bethesda, Maryland, first spoke out on school backpack awareness in August 1997, when the issue was included as a topic of interest in a back-to-school media advisory about how occupational therapy helped children with their ‘occupations’ as students. The topic generated strong interest from reporters all around the country. In 1998, 1999, and 2000, AOTA's public affairs office increasingly promoted the information in a web-based (www.aota.org) tip sheet as a resource to media all year round, but especially in the fall as a back-to-school item. Each successive year resulted in more mentions of AOTA or occupational therapy in conjunction with stories about backpack use by children. Backpack information was also included in AOTA's April Of Month materials, and AOTA members were encouraged to use the issue as a focal point for promoting occupational therapy’s role with children’s health issues.

Concerned that increasingly heavy school backpacks may be putting schoolchildren at risk of long-term health problems, in 2001, AOTA teamed up with the L.L. Bean Company, of Freeport, Maine to raise awareness about safe and healthy school backpack use. L.L. Bean, Inc., founded in 1912, is a leading retailer of apparel and gear, such as school backpacks for men, women, and children.

AOTA, Inc. was a natural choice for the partnership with L.L. Bean because so many occupational therapy practitioners are already working with and are familiar with health issues facing children and the company had become concerned that loading too much into a school backpack could potentially lead to injuries or just be uncomfortable to the user.

The American Occupational Therapy Association was founded in 1917 and about 40,000 occupational therapy practitioners and students are members. One-fourth of AOTA's members work with children, in schools and pediatric units of hospitals on a daily basis, bring practical solutions to ergonomics issues. Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping children with a broad range of issues. In addition to proper school backpack use that can affect a child's performance and health, occupational therapy practitioners address proper computer use, handwriting, and behavioral problems.

Outcomes of the Collaborative Process
As part of the partnership between AOTA and L.L. Bean, both organizations in the fall of 2001 launched a more intensive public information and education effort to promote the safe use of school backpacks. The national public information campaign on promoting healthy backpack use began with the development of a brochure, hangtag, video news release, sample talking scripts for presentations, and sample press releases for the print and broadcast media. AOTA and L.L. Bean collaborated to produce a brochure with tips for properly selecting, loading, and wearing a backpack (Figure 1). This brochure has been distributed in L.L. Bean stores, mailed with their catalogs, and placed on both organizations’ web sites for easy download: www.llbean.com and www.aota.org. A consolidated version of the brochure appears on all hangtags attached to L.L. Bean school backpacks.

Audience Viewers for Television
In the fall of 2001, AOTA produced an approximately 2-minute video news release (VNR) on backpack safety with partial funding support from L.L. Bean. The VNR was released nationally and aired on 81 local and national broadcast stations to 3,799,500 viewers (AOTA, 2002). The VNR aired in 5 of the top 10 major media markets including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington, DC (AOTA, 2002).

Audience Viewers for Newspapers
AOTA also promoted the issue of school backpack safety in small and mid-sized newspaper markets through paid media. The Association wrote an educational article about school backpack safety—an article that was placed in 212 local and national newspapers, including daily, weekly, monthly and special interest publications. The total readership was 18,539,804 (circulation not available for some newspapers). The placement was in 30 of the top 50 markets.

Content Analysis
In total, the national public information campaign on promoting healthy backpack reached approximately 23 million people through coverage in 212 newspapers and 81 television stations. Approximately 91% of the newspaper articles included the campaign message that: Backpacks that are excessively heavy or carried incorrectly may cause significant pain and injury to growing bodies and that to reduce the risk of injury, parents should monitor the weight of the backpack and how their children load and carry them. Nine percent were clips that directed the reader to view AOTA, Inc. and L.L. Bean's web sites for more information on backpack safety tips.

NATIONAL SCHOOL BACKPACK AWARENESS DAY
To build on the success of the 2001 backpack campaign and to broaden the educational reach of the effort more directly to students, parents, and schools, AOTA developed and implemented National School Backpack Awareness Day in September of 2002. National School Backpack Awareness Day was conceived as a 1-day event to educate parents, students, school administrators and teachers, and the general public (through the media) about the proper use of backpacks.
The event consisted of “weigh-ins,” where students and their backpacks were weighed to see whether backpack weight was in the recommended range (no more than 15% of student bodyweight). Educational materials were provided on the proper use of backpacks to avoid pain and injury for parents, students and schools.

Desk side briefings were held 10 days before the National School Backpack Awareness Day to alert national print and internet-based media of the upcoming event and to educate them on the larger set of ergonomic risk factors facing school children today.

AOTA initiated and drove events in schools in 4 major media markets. Additional events, initiated by individual occupational therapy practitioners and students, were held in other cities and states in schools and community venues. The event was held on September 25, 2002 to coincide with back-to-school issues. Events were held in 29 states plus the District of Columbia and the island of Bermuda, and in 98 locations. Although National School Backpack Awareness Day focused on a single day, it also sparked educational events by occupational therapy practitioners and students for months following the event.

The National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA) was approached to partner with AOTA in distributing Backpack Awareness Day educational materials to their membership, and lending the name of their organization to the initiative. They provided communications support including on-line information to their membership.

**Audience reached (as of October 16, 2002)**

Total measured circulation of publications placements comes to more than 1,096,000 readers. On-line coverage resulted in more than 26 million page views. Broadcast coverage (not tracked) added millions more individuals reached.

**Media messages**

AOTA and occupational therapy were given high/frequent mention in the media. National School Backpack Awareness Day was given high/frequent mention in the media. Backpack strategies for parents and children and for schools were given strong mention and were included as lists in the bodies of stories or as sidebars to stories.

**Web Site Visitor Sessions (excluding in-house AOTA usage)**

Of the 60,407 visitor sessions to the AOTA website in September 2002,

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The brochure was designed to address 3 important factors in school backpack use: selecting a pack, loading a pack, and wearing a pack.

**Selecting a pack**

Choose a pack that’s appropriate to the child’s size and age. School backpacks come in different sizes for different ages.

Select a pack with well-padded shoulder straps. The shoulders and neck are rich in blood vessels and nerves that when constricted can cause pain and tingling in the neck, arms, and hands.

Choose a pack with a waist belt to be fastened for extra support and to help transfer the weight from the shoulders to the body’s trunk and hips.

Consider a pack with reflective trim to increase visibility of kids who carry the school backpack in the evening.

Pack items neatly and organized to keep books and materials from sliding around in the pack, shifting the weight.

If a pack is too heavy, consider using one on wheels.

**Wearing a pack:**

Always wear both shoulder straps to distribute weight evenly.

Wearing a pack slung over one shoulder can cause a person to lean to one side and curve the spine.

Adjust the shoulder straps so that the pack fits snugly to the child’s back. A pack that hangs loosely from the back can pull the child backwards and strain muscles between the shoulders.

The bottom of the pack should rest in the curve of the lower back. It should never rest more than four inches below the child’s waistline.

When shopping for a school backpack, take along books and other materials that the child would carry to judge how each pack varies when fully loaded.

**Loading a pack**

Never allow a child to carry more than 15% of his or her body weight. That means a child who weighs 100 pounds should not carry a school backpack that weighs more than 15 pounds.

Load heaviest items closest to the child’s back.
approximately 7,500 (12.4%) of those
visitor sessions were to the School
Backpack Awareness Day microsite.

There was a modest increase of visitor
sessions during the week of the
September 25 event, up approximately
300 from the previous week. However,
the greatest activity on the microsite in
terms of visitor sessions overall was from
mid-August through mid-September (the
speculation is that this is the period of
time people would have been reading
the materials to decide whether or not to
hold an event, and then revisiting to
download or print the materials to use
for the event).

Within the Backpack microsite, the
Community Toolkit was the most fre-
quently viewed item. From mid-August,
when the section was first promoted in
AOTA’s OT Practice and in the AOTA One-
minute Update, an electronic news
update for AOTA members, through the
end of August, there were 1,200 visitor
sessions in the Toolkit. The Spanish-lan-
guage student permission letter ranked
16th out of 31 most requested pages in
the Toolkit in viewer sessions the week
before the event. During the week of the
event, the Event Art area of the Toolkit
was the second most accessed area of
the microsite. The week before the event,
it was the sixth most accessed area; the
week following the event it was the third
most accessed area.

**Partnership Results**

L.L. Bean installed a link from the llbean.com site to the National Backpack Awareness Day site at www.aota.org. The link remained on the site until September 25, 2002. The link also was installed on the backpack guide, one of the most pop-
ular areas of the llbean.com site during the back-to-school and fall season.

On September 16th, L.L. Bean in-
stalled graphics based on the AOTA
Backpack Day posters in the backpack
areas of their 5 retail stores, prominently
displayed. The stores are located in
Freeport, Maine (the flagship store and
L.L. Kids Store); Tysons Corner Center,
McLean, Virginia; The Mall in Columbia,
Maryland; and The Promenade at
Sagemore in Marlton, New Jersey.

**The National Parent Teacher
Association (NPTA)**

NPTA sent a message about National
School Backpack Awareness Day in their
weekly e-mail newsletter in mid-
September that reached 12,000 Parent
Teacher Association (PTA) affiliate mem-
bers. The message included a link to
AOTA’s Backpack Day website. NPTA
placed backpack information on their
“Parent Involvement: Health and Safety”
section of their website and also includ-
ed a link to AOTA’s site. Finally, they
provided a statement expressing support for
educating parents and schools on the
issue for AOTA to include in the
Backpack Day media releases and other
media materials.

**CONCLUSION**

The partnerships established between
AOTA, L.L. Bean, and NPTA are good
examples of the fruits borne by a social
marketing, an approach that one uses to
effect behavioral change on the part of
the target audience. Free tips on back-
pack safety are available on the AOTA, L.L.
Bean, and NPTA web sites, brochures and
hang tags on L.L. Bean school backpacks,
a video news release on backpack safety,
and a syndicated news release on pro-
moting backpack safety. Schools, parents,
and students are provided with tips for
choosing, loading, and wearing back-
packs in ways that are safe and healthy.

National School Backpack Awareness
Day also served as an opportunity to
broaden awareness of occupational ther-
apy. The events served to put hundreds of
occupational therapy students out in the
community, promoting their profession
within a successful setting. Through the
media, millions of people increased their
awareness of the health impact of school
backpacks and made the link between
occupational therapy and the health and
well-being of children.

The campaign was conceived as a
first step in a larger effort to engage the
profession and communities in an event
to help safeguard their children, to build
brand for the event in future years, and to
use this event as a means of broadening
the national discussion about steps that
schools and parents can take to protect
the health and well-being of our nation’s
children.

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