



How to Reduce Back Pain in Primary Teachers and Teaching Assistants

It's a notoriously difficult challenge - adults being comfortable whilst working at low heights with young children. Trying to accommodate learning and health needs of teaching staff, support staff and young children throughout each and every school day, it's not easy but here's **some ideas to help**:

- All primary and early years staff should have access to an adult height desk and chair for administration and regular computer /laptop use. If space is an issue, a height adjustable, mobile laptop table or overbed table are good, affordable options.
- When working at a computer/laptop, the **screen should be level with the top of your eyes**. A screen raiser, separate mouse and keyboard will be needed if using a laptop regularly. A height adjustable chair is required and can accommodate a variety of users. Chair arms are only required to assist users to get in and out of a chair and are not required for use at a desk. If chair arms are required, choose drop down arms so they do not obstruct the user getting close to the desk. **This applies if working from home too.**
- If regularly using a computer/laptop/mobile device for work, a DSE risk assessment is required by law. This explains the concept of "ergonomics" and helps prevent injury. Your Health & Safety officer at school will be able to advise.
- The Healthy Working Move initiative www.ergonomics4kids.co.uk is a free and easy place to start looking for straightforward ergonomics advice. The Healthy Working Move online programmes (apps: Move4kids and Move4Teens) offer simple and effective advice for educators, parents and children. It's recommended staff take a look at these for themselves and for their students.
- **The highest risk factor for experiencing back pain, is already having had it. This makes prevention essential!** Staff should be comfortable before they begin an activity and should STOP and move position if they start to feel uncomfortable. Arrange and organise classrooms and set up learning environments to ensure stooping, bending over and awkward postures are reduced to a minimum. Eg. Move bookshelves which obstruct the interactive whiteboard, ensure cupboards have clutter free access, can washing up happen in an adult height sink or in a raised bowl?
- All staff should have access to a low, mobile chair if sitting and working at low children's tables. The discs of the spine are extremely vulnerable to twisting and shearing forces which occur when sitting on low static chairs or children's furniture. The Jolly Back chair has been specifically designed for use in schools and nurseries. It is a low, mobile chair with height adjustable back rest and forward sloping seat which help users to get their legs under low tables and improves comfort.
- It's advisable in rooms with very low tables, where adults need to spend a period of time using the table that a couple are raised up with "furniture raisers". These can be easily found through an internet search. Children can work in standing at the slightly higher tables for part of their day.



A JOLLY BACK IS A HEALTHY BACK

- Ask students to access their own resources, especially if low down to reduce staff stooping and bending over wherever possible. A litter picker with magnetic pick up can help reduce repetitive stooping too. It's ok to stand upright when talking with young children at points throughout the day rather than bending to their height every time.
- When using a whiteboard, if it's located high on a wall, a whiteboard step can assist use and reduce over-stretching. A remote white board pointer and controller can also help staff as this can be used to operate the equipment whilst standing.
- Lifting and carrying books and resources need great consideration! A wheeled trolley case or crate may ease the manoeuvre of books and equipment if there are limited stairs. Use ramps to wheel equipment where available, it will only take a few extra minutes and can really help your back. It's beneficial to push trolleys rather than pull them. Ensure manual handling training has been completed and is up to date.
- If carrying a single strap bag (including a handbag), wear it across your body (not on one shoulder) and swap sides regularly. Two bags of similar weight carried in each hand or a rucksack worn on both shoulders are also another good options. Try to repack your bag every night so you are only carrying what you need.
- Back pain and emotional wellbeing are interlinked. It's essential you feel supported at work and voice concerns if you're feeling cumulative strain injury (aches and pain coming on over time). If you are finding an activity difficult, it's highly likely colleagues will be too. Prevention of injury is key, so it really does help to speak with your line manager.
- Rest and movement breaks are essential to health so it's important to take them. Try to limit sitting to 30 minutes before a stretch and move. Think 30:30 (30 minutes sitting to 30 seconds moving).
- A supportive leadership team and workplace culture are essential to protect and improve staff health and wellness. Does your organisation have a wellbeing or wellness group? or could you start one to discuss ideas and share new initiatives?
- There are always solutions! A classroom and workplace risk assessment can be requested (contact your Health and Safety officer) if you are experiencing pain. Recommendations can hugely improve your working environment when implemented.
- Download the free Jolly Back Musculoskeletal Health Toolkit which will help identify target areas for improvement within your organisation and offer simple suggestions to help improve back health.
- As with all areas of physical and mental health, back health is improved with good nutrition, exercise, adequate sleep and hydration – remember, you are important! Improved health and happiness gives us all the ability to cope with challenges and enjoy the day ☺.

All the best and as always if we can help further, we'd love to hear from you,
Lorna Taylor, Physiotherapist and Director, Jolly Back