

Ten steps to keeping your back healthy

Lorna Taylor provides best-practice back saving tips for 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 the learning and health needs of teaching staff, support staff and young children throughout each and every school day can be quite a headache.

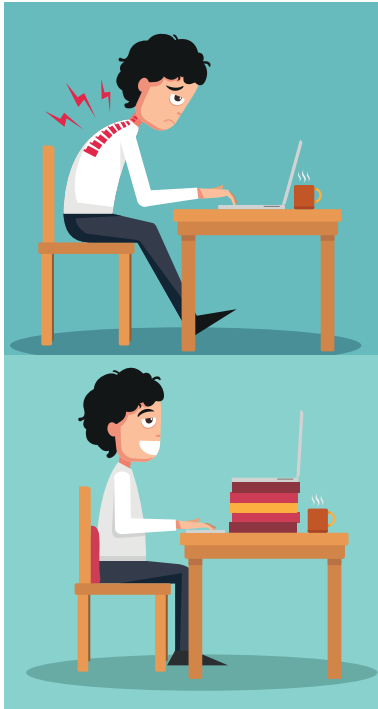
Here are some “trade tips” to address some of the most common challenges experienced by staff working at low heights. Each one should help improve staff health and comfort and reduce absence.

1 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 over-bed table are good, affordable options.

When working at a computer/laptop, the screen should be level with the top of your eyes

2 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. 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.



3 If you're regularly using a computer, laptop or mobile device for work, a DSE risk assessment is required by law. This explains the concept of "ergonomics" and helps prevent injury. Your school health and safety officer will be able to advise.

4 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 learning environments to ensure stooping, bending over and awkward postures are reduced to a minimum. For example, move bookshelves which obstruct the interactive whiteboard and ensure cupboards have clutter free access. Ask yourself questions such as, can washing up happen in an adult height sink or in a raised bowl?

5 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.

6 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. Table leg raisers can be easily found through an internet search. Children can work in standing at the slightly higher tables for part of their day.

7 Ask students to access their own resources, especially if low down, to reduce staff stooping and bending over wherever possible. It's OK to stand upright when talking with young children at points throughout the day rather than bending to their height every time.

8 When using a whiteboard, if it's located high on a wall, a whiteboard step can assist use and reduce overstretching. A remote white board pointer and controller can also help staff as this can be used to operate the equipment whilst standing.

9 Lifting and carrying books and resources needs careful 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

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similar weight carried in each hand or a rucksack worn on both shoulders are also good options. Try to repack your bag every night so you are only carrying what you need.

10 Back pain and emotional wellbeing are interlinked. It's essential you feel supported at work and can voice concerns if you're feeling cumulative strain injury (aches and pain increasing over time). If you are finding an activity difficult for your back, it's highly likely colleagues will be too. Prevention of injury is key.

Rest and movement breaks are essential to health. A supportive leadership team and workplace culture are crucial. Sadly, this is a challenge in itself to change, but if certain work activities are causing discomfort, speak with your line manager. There are always solutions. A risk assessment can be requested and recommendations made and implemented which can hugely improve your working environment. **SEN**

Further information

Lorna Taylor is a paediatric physiotherapist who runs Children First Physiotherapy and the Jolly Back company:
www.jollyback.com