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Stretching Minds, Bodies in Class

Katie Dean 09.30.02 | 2:00 AM

Puberty is the scourge of parents, teachers and schoolroom desks.

As more kids use computers in schools, desks must be adjusted to fit both the 6-foot-tall seventh-grader who shot up like a dandelion over the summer, and the 5-foot classmate still waiting for his growth spurt.

That's the message that the [American Occupational Therapy Association](#) (AOTA) is hoping to get across by issuing a set of ergonomic [strategies](#) for parents, teachers and kids.

"We're concerned with the health and well-being of children," said Brynda Pappas, a spokesperson for the AOTA. "Since over a fourth of our members work in schools with children, we see that these ergonomic problems have the potential to negatively affect their development."

The Strategies for Schools program offers common-sense suggestions like purchasing adjustable desks and chairs to accommodate growing students, allowing time for stretch breaks when kids use computers, placing monitor screens at eye level and making sure students' feet rest on the floor or providing them with a footrest.

It's an effort to prevent debilitating injuries like [repetitive strain injury](#) (RSI).

"One size does not fit all," said Karen Jacobs, an occupational therapist and professor at Boston University who has worked with a number of middle schools to implement healthy ergonomics. "Adjustability is the name of the game."

Following these tips will help alleviate stress on kids' wrists, necks, legs and backs, according to the AOTA. The guidelines also include ways to lighten kids' backpacks, yet another source of strain.

"One reason that we think this is so important is that this is the first generation that will have used this technology since they were tiny," Pappas said. "There's really not that much research that shows the effect on children over the long term."

Jacobs has developed a free software program that reminds kids to take stretch breaks and demonstrates a variety of stretches every 30 minutes or so. It's available on her [website](#).

So far, ergonomics have not been a priority for schools, say some teachers.

"The money goes to purchase the technology and not the equipment that goes with it," said Carolyn Hinshaw, a fifth-grade teacher at [Birchwood Elementary School](#) in Bellingham, Washington. "You just run out of the darn money."

Often schools work with vendors who provide computers, but peripherals like smaller keyboards for little fingers cost extra, she said.

Shelley Chamberlain, coordinator of educational technology for the [Lexington Public Schools](#) in Massachusetts said schools need to start thinking about ergonomics when they purchase furniture.

Often, adjustable desks and chairs are more expensive, and schools don't want -- or can't afford -- to spend the money.

Classroom and computer lab design is also important, Chamberlain said.

"We had an instance when someone built a lab for us and the counter was too high for the kids and too narrow to hold the computer and keyboard," she said. "Generally, if that happens, you live with it."

In that case, the school was eventually renovated anyway, so the ill-proportioned computer counter is no longer a problem she said.

But Jacobs emphasized that many changes can be made without spending a lot of -- or any -- money.

Schools can use phone books to raise monitors to eye level and serve as impromptu footrests. An old towel can double as :

backrest.

Jacobs had also worked with several middle schools in Lexington to help kids and teachers develop good computer use habits.

"I'm hoping that in the classes (Jacobs) worked with, the teachers will integrate some of these (ergonomics) lessons with the kids," Chamberlain said.

Monna Greenstreet's computer literacy classes at [Hillside Middle School](#) in Manchester, New Hampshire, also learned good ergonomic strategies and it's made students more aware of good posture and taking breaks.

"I'm not sure that the problems would crop up in a 40-minute period, but that doesn't mean that we can't make our students aware," Greenstreet said.

One RSI expert said the suggestions are a step in the right direction.

"I think it's wonderful that the association has come out with these guidelines, and I hope that it leads to more awareness," said Deborah Quilter, author of *The Repetitive Strain Injury Recovery Book* and administrator of [RSIHelp.com](#).

But, Quilter added: "People still need to avoid computer use."