PROVIDER

Risk Control for Childcare Professionals

A PROVIDER'S GUIDE TO PREVENTING BACK INJURIES

Back injuries are one of the most common types of accidents. That 's because no matter what people do, they constantly use their backs -- to support their bodies, to bend, to sit, to stand, even to lie down. All of these activities -- and many others -- put stress on the back. The back, however, is most prone to injury when people are lifting. If you help your employees to understand how the back works, you can help them avoid unnecessary strain and potential injury.

The back consists of moveable bones -- the vertebrae -- and discs, which act like shock absorbers, between each vertebra. Ligaments and muscles support these structures and help keep the back aligned in three balanced curves. The back is in correct alignment when the ears, the shoulders, and hips are in a straight line. If the alignment of the back is not correct, both back injury and pain may result.

What You Can Do:

Watch your employees as they lift. If they bend at the waist and extend the upper body to lift a child or an object, they upset the alignment of the back and their center of balance. They also force the spine to support the weight of their body and the weight of the child or object they are lifting.

Here are some tips you can give your workers that will help them avoid back injuries:

- Maintain good body mechanics:

  Support your back adequately. Stand with your feet at least a shoulder width apart. This will give you stability and reduce the stress on your muscles. Distribute your weight evenly throughout the soles of both feet. Whatever you are doing, always feel firmly planted, with your center of gravity in your abdominal cavity.

  Tighten abdominal muscles. The abdominal cavity, our center of gravity, consists of the abdominal muscles in front, the diaphragm and ribs above and the pelvic floor below. If you pull the abdominal muscles back and up toward your spine and curl your tailbone under slightly, you will create a pressure in the abdomen that helps share the loads placed upon the spine.

  Also, always lower the crib side before lifting the child out.

  Bend from the knees. Bending from your waist places tremendous pressure on your vertebrae. It also makes you lock your knees. Locked knees tighten the hamstring muscles and force the pelvis into an unbalanced position. Bend from the knees instead. When you do, your legs act as shock absorbers for the body. Slightly bending the knees balances the pelvis over the hips. When you bend your knees, your thighs and hips carry any weight first.

  

  Maintain a balanced spine. A balanced back, with its normal curvature, keeps the spinal muscles active so they can share the load placed on the bones, ligaments and discs. To reduce the force placed on the spine, align your shoulders and chest properly over the lower spine.

  - Think before you lift anything. Ask:
    "Can I lift it alone?"
    "Do I need help?"
    "Is it too big or too awkward?"

- Always bend at your knees when you lift, hug the load close to your body, and use the string muscles in your thighs to raise yourself up.
- Always check the path of travel to make sure it clear of obstacles before you begin the lift.
- Never twist while lifting. Instead, move one foot at a time in the direction you want to go and then turn with your leg muscles.

If you encourage your staff members to practice these techniques, using them will become second nature.

Additional Steps:

Examine your center for other ways to help your workers reduce the potential for back stress and injury. Some suggestions are:

- Providing adult furniture for staff; providers should not use child-sized chairs, tables, or desks.
- Providing adult-height changing tables.
- Proving a ramp or a small, stable stepladder that allows children -- with constant supervision -- to climb up to the changing table or to other places to which they would ordinarily be lifted.
- Providing convenient equipment for moving children, reducing the necessity for carrying them long distances. An example is using a multi-seat carriage to transport children to a nearby park.
- Having comfortable chairs with back support (rockers, gliders, etc.) for holding children for long periods of time.

Your Reward

Your efforts to reduce injuries will have long-term benefits for both your workers and your facility. Your workers will avoid the pain that back injuries cause. They will avoid missing work. Your center will benefit through a reduction in workers' compensation claims and administrative costs. Fewer injuries also means fewer lost work days, fewer scheduling problems, and an increase in employee morale and productivity.