

CHILDREN AND POSTURE

By Simon Burley Physiotherapist

My young niece and nephew, Isobel and Lachlan, recently holidayed with their parents at our home. This brought me to consider the posture of children and when should good posture begin to be taught and re-enforced.

As a physiotherapist we often treat adults and children with painful spinal and other conditions such as headache and shoulder injury that have their origin in poor postural patterns. These patterns are learned very early in life.

Watching young 4 1/2 year old Lachlan he tended to self select good posture and tended to sometimes adopt poor posture when he mimicked adults around him. As soon as a child is old enough to understand sitting straight, say 3 to 4, it is necessary to correct him or her when they slump.

Encourage a variety of sitting postures on the floor such as cross legged, sitting, kneeling, side sitting, but always with good back position. Remember that inevitably they will copy those around them they love and admire so if their parents slouch into the couch, probably the child will learn to also.

As a child learns postural patterns it is important that he or she has chairs and tables that 'fit'. A rough guide for adequate chair size is that with the child's feet on the floor the hips and knees should be at right angles. The seat depth should stop 3 to 4 inches short of the back of the knees to prevent discomfort. The child's back should be held straight with his bottom well back in the chair.

Watch for slouching middle or lower back, a chin that protrudes excessively forward and shoulders that slump forward.

All of these require a quick word and demonstration of the correct position. If the child is sitting at a desk, the elbows should be able to rest comfortably on the table top so that the shoulders are not hunched. To measure it accurately place your child's upper arms by their side, then with the forearms on the desk the elbows should be at an angle between 80 to 100 degrees.

As with your own spine, sleeping on a medium/firm to firm mattress is best (except in a few specific cases) and a low to medium thickness pillow (only one). Unless a medical condition requires head elevation.

Poor postural patterns learned early in life will be difficult to change later in life. Partly because of the entrenched habit but also repeated poor posture can lead to muscular imbalances that can cause structural deformity. It is well worth making the extra effort early on.

If, despite a little effort postural problems persist or if you notice some unusual unevenness with one side compared to the other, it is time to see your physiotherapist.

Elizabeth Burley at Maroochydore Physiotherapy Centre (5479 1777) is a paediatric physiotherapist with a special interest in designing the correct stretching / strengthening programs appropriate for young children.