

Healthy Computing for Today's Kids



Children and teens are spending more and more time sitting at a computer workstation to do homework, surf the Internet, and play video games. How they position themselves in a chair, and how they use the computer equipment can affect not only their comfort, but also their health.

Occupational therapists are trained to perform an “ergonomic” evaluation, or an evaluation that determines how well a person fits into his or her environment. A person who does not sit correctly in a chair or strains to use a computer could suffer back and neck pain, and eyestrain. Most computer equipment and workstations are built to fit adults, but a few adjustments can be made to a child’s work area to promote a healthy lifestyle free of pain.

What can an occupational therapist do?

- **Evaluate** a child’s current computer workstation setup to determine whether it is ergonomically correct to prevent unnecessary strain.
- **Advise** parents on what equipment can be used to create a healthy workstation, such as special keyboards, keyboard trays, document holders, footrests, and office chairs.
- **Educate** children, their parents, and school officials about proper posture and movement to prevent injury and strain.
- **Teach** stretching exercises to children to do at home that support a healthy back.

What can parents and families do?

- **Encourage** proper posture of the head, forearms, back, and feet: The **head** should be level with the monitor and the top of the screen at eye level. The **forearms** should be parallel to the keyboard and held only slightly above it. The **lower back** should be supported while sitting in front of a computer. Place a small pillow or rolled up towel between the back of the chair and the child’s lower back to provide back support. **Feet** should rest flat on the floor or on a footstep. If a child cannot reach a footstep, stack boxes under it to raise it until the child can rest his or her feet comfortably.
- **Arrange** computer desk and equipment so as to avoid glare from sunlight. Sit the monitor 18 to 30 inches away from the child.
- **Adjust** the chair to an appropriate height for the child. Have the child sit on a pillow or book if the chair is not adjustable.

Need more information?

If you would like to consult an occupational therapist about an ergonomic evaluation, talk to your child's teacher about whether a referral to occupational therapy is appropriate. Your physician, other health professionals, and your school district's director of special education may also be able to help.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping children with a broad range of issues in addition to ergonomics, such as good handwriting skills and developmental and behavioral problems.