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Taking Care; Another Reason To Sit Up Straight

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ACCORDING to Dr. Alan Hedge and other ergonomics researchers at Cornell University, children need to adhere to the same ergonomic rules as adults. The angle formed by the back and thighs should be greater than 90 degrees, as should the angle formed by the shoulder, elbow, and wrist and the angle formed by the hips, knees and feet.

Wrists must be relatively straight in relation to the forearm, bent less than 15 degrees. While sitting and typing, a child or adult should have the upper and lower back well supported by the chair and the feet planted flat on the floor. The upper body position should be relaxed and upright, with the arms close to the body.

The computer monitor should be directly in front of the user (to discourage neck twisting), and it should be placed about an arm's length away. At the correct height, the user's eyes are in line with a point on the screen two to three inches below the top of the monitor. It is also important to take regular breaks.

Children also have some unique needs. Here are some highlights from ergo.human.cornell.edu, a Cornell Web site that has a lot of information about proper ergonomic practices for both children and adults:

- * Children may not be very aware of the position of their extremities so it can be important for an adult to notice and correct the child's posture.
- * Since children may respond more to images than to writing in learning about the ideal workstation posture, parents can try showing them "before" and "after" pictures of workstations. Or parents can post near the computer a picture showing good posture.
- * A smaller keyboard may be better for some children, and some children like to use a trackball rather than a mouse. A small mouse can be just as good. Among the small keyboards on the market, the Little Fingers keyboard (www.datadesktech.com) also includes a trackball.
- * Parents can keep track of a child's time on the computer and remind the child when it is time to take a break. Software called ErgoPal (www.magnitude.com) monitors keyboard use and alerts users to take a break when it starts detecting more errors, a sign of fatigue.
- * Children should be taught how to adjust chairs, monitors and other equipment to be comfortable. Adjustability is essential when a family shares a computer workstation.

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