

Kids Packs 2007

Contributed by Lance Riek
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We've all experienced the pain vicariously—watching a 60-pound fourth-grader struggling to haul 20 pounds of books in a "backpack" that has all the body-hugging fit of a bowling ball. Just imagine toting a full third of your body mass on your next ski tour—hung by two skinny straps cutting into your shoulders.

Half-Pints Packs

The problem here is twofold: most kid packs are nearly worthless; and many times, kids are lugging far too much. To address the second issue, kids should carry less than 10% of their body weight, maybe as much as 15% for older kids.

To manage the first issue, track down a good pack. For teenagers, a full-featured small-sized adult pack will usually do well, whether carrying books; or lunch, water, and a shell on a ski tour. But, what about packs for younger kids? As a gear geek, I can't let my three and five year olds run around with just any old bag with straps. I scanned the latest Outdoor Retailer Show with that question in mind. When I considered quality, performance features and price, two packs clearly stood out.

Bergans Nordkapp Jr 12L

1 lb, 1 oz \$40

18L 1 lb, 5 oz

\$48

www.bergans.com

It makes sense that the tiniest full-featured pack originates from a country, and culture, that values the outdoor experience for the entire family. The Norwegian 12 Liter Nordkapp Jr fits kids as young as two to three, and will work for five to six year olds. The larger 18 L is sized for five to nine year olds. When I say "full-featured," I mean it. This top-loader features a wide, padded waist-belt, four compression straps, contoured padded shoulder straps, sternum strap, zippered lid pocket, and padded back panel with a thin, flexible frame sheet. It even has an ice axe loop, which begs the question, "What is an ice axe loop doing on a pack for a four year old?" When you think about it for a minute, the answer is clear. Kids feel valued and important when they are completely included in an activity. Having a pack that looks and functions just like mom or dad's is a great way to tell them that their backcountry experience matters. I loaded a massive three-pound ballast into the 12L version and strapped it onto my three year old for a hike around the block. It was smiles all around, and it brought a tear to my eye—a little gear-tester in the making.

Lafuma

Nanga Jr

16L 1 lb, 3 oz

\$50 www.lafumausa.com

Also from Europe, the Lafuma Nanga Jr. is a well-constructed top-loading pack includes contoured padded shoulder straps, sternum strap, zippered lid pocket, a padded back panel and an unpadded waist-belt. It also features zipper access to the bottom of the pack and an internal hydration bladder pocket. The Nanga is sized just right for five to eight year olds. After a month of carting library books, lunch, and bulky winter recess clothes back and forth to school, my kindergartener loves it. When I asked her about specifics, she said, "It's great; the straps don't slide around. I like it way better than my old pack." With further questioning, she paused and said, "Well, there is one problem: my one friend said she thinks it's a stupid pack." Ahh, a sure sign of kindergarten gear envy.

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