

Tip of the Week



Extension Tip of the Week

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Tips to Trim Back-to-School Costs

Back-to-school shopping is, in itself, a teachable moment, said Carol Young, Kansas State University Research and Extension financial management specialist.

“Ideally, parents might estimate annual school costs per student, divide by 12 and save that amount each month to cover costs without stressing the family’s late summer budget,” Young said. For example: Divide the estimated annual cost per child (\$300) by 12 to determine a savings goal of \$25 a month per child.

While that may be a good recommendation for next year, this year’s school enrollment fees are coming due in the days and weeks ahead, and the pressures to spend are real. Children typically want what they think others will have, she said. Stepping back and asking the kids to help you make spending decisions can be a lesson in money management. Even three-year-olds can understand concepts, such as “We can’t buy everything so we make choices” and “Once we spend the money, it’s gone.”

Before shopping, talk with your children so that each one has a clear understanding of the items needed and the amount of money available to cover costs, Young said.

Learning to make choices – some good and maybe some that aren’t so good – and learning to live with the results are important life lessons, she said.

If, for example, a child chooses to overspend for a trendy shirt or pair of shoes, he should understand that he will have less money to buy all the other items on the list, she said. Counsel children, but allow them to make some of their own choices on items they feel strongly about. The results can often be good discussion for planning the next shopping trip.

Also, remind children that not all items need to be purchased on one shopping trip, said Young, who offered cost-saving tips:

- * Check school enrollment dates and fees, such as book rentals, band instrument rental or athletic fees, and required immunizations. List these fixed costs in the “must have” category.
- * Check school food costs and weigh the cost (and convenience) of purchasing school meals versus packing a lunch. Either way, food costs should go into the “must have” category.
- * What is the cost of getting the child to and from school? Is there a charge for riding the bus? Can you carpool with a neighbor? This cost also should go in the “must have” category.

* Check to see if your family qualifies for reduced school fees or programs, such as reduced prices on school lunches.

* Supplies? Round up notebooks, pencils, backpack, lunch box or carrier, etc. from last year, and take inventory. Compare your inventory with the school supply list (provided by the school district) and buy only what is needed.

* Check the school's dress code before scheduling try-on time to check clothing and shoes to see what fits and is still wearable.

* Prioritize the shopping list, and plan to put the money where it matters most. Shopping consignment shops that offer gently-used items, thrift stores and garage sales can yield a savings on jeans or khaki pants others have outgrown, but not worn out. Put the money into shoes that fit.

* Spread out spending. If a child is growing rapidly, it may make more sense to buy two pairs of jeans or khakis and rotate them, rather than buying several pairs at one time. Waiting to buy a winter coat until fall and pre-season sales allows time for the child to grow and a savings.

* Branded merchandise? If a child wants designer label shoes or clothing, ask him to make up the difference between regularly-priced merchandise and a more expensive item.

A child's buy-in – working for and contributing to what he wants – teaches money management.

* Don't spend money you don't have. Try to pay cash, rather than charge back-to-school expenses. If using a credit card, try not to charge more than you can pay off in one billing cycle, as interest on a credit card balance will erode any potential savings on sale merchandise.

* Check sales flyers, but know that one store isn't likely to have the lowest price on everything on your shopping list. Weigh price and the time and money required to drive from store to store in evaluating total purchase prices.

* Shop with a list for each child, and stick to it. Also, ask the child to help you keep track of expenditures so everyone knows when it's time to stop shopping.

* If you can estimate children's sizes, shop for clothes during the off-season at a substantial – sometimes 50 to 75 percent – savings.

* Shop when stores are least crowded, during early morning or later in the evening and on a weekday, if possible.

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