

**Growing Concerns**  
**A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson**  
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Question: As our kids head back to school, they are hammering at us to buy them all the latest clothes, shoes and backpacks — way more than any kid needs. I know that their need to fit in with their classmates is very real, but how can we set realistic limits on their materialism?

Answer: Parents across the country are being bombarded this month with “gotta have it” messages from their kids. Between peer pressure and sophisticated advertising, even very young children get drawn into consumerism, feeling that they absolutely need whatever marketers have declared the latest style. But it is up to parents to put these demands in perspective and to help children make reasonable decisions during back-to-school shopping. As with so many parenting experiences, this situation presents not only a challenge, but also an opportunity to teach your children skills and attitudes for life. I hope these steps will be helpful:

- **ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR CHILDREN’S FEELINGS.** Sometimes it’s tempting to meet a child’s demands with a dismissing, “Oh, you don’t need that!” But that kind of response sets up a power struggle. Instead, you can keep communication open by simply saying, “Yes, I can see that you’d really like to have that.”
- **DECLARE A WAITING PERIOD BEFORE SHOPPING,** suggesting in the meantime that your children keep a running list of those “must have” items. Children and teens are impulsive; when they want something they want it right now. Yet, if they wait a week or two, the item they so desperately “needed” may barely be remembered – or already may have been declared post-peak by the peer group. It’s often smart to buy only one or two essential items before school begins, then wait a few weeks before doing major shopping.
- **SET UP A REALISTIC BACK-TO-SCHOOL BUDGET** and engage your children in comparison shopping to figure out what they can afford. Sometimes it’s helpful to get a feel for the market by looking through catalogs first. When children know their parents are serious about the budget, they often can make very wise choices about how to get the most for their money.
- **DIVIDE YOUR SHOPPING TRIP INTO TWO STAGES: SCOUT FIRST, THEN BUY.** This is a great technique to avoid impulse buying and encourage careful decision-making. Make it clear to your children that the first time through the mall you are not going to buy anything, but are only going to look at the options. Have your children take a notebook and keep track of the items they like, noting brand, color, size, and price. Then sit down and have a snack while you go over the list together and decide what to go back and purchase.
- **FOR ITEMS THAT DON’T FIT THE BUDGET, CONSIDER HELPING YOUR CHILDREN FIND WAYS THEY CAN EARN MONEY AND SAVE.** Whether they do extra household chores for you or, if they’re old enough, babysitting or lawn work for neighbors, earning money for things they want will build their confidence and increase their appreciation of what they have.

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