

Back-to-school savings

7 ways to cut your spending on kids' clothing



There's nothing like spiffy new clothes to help your child (and you) get psyched for the start of a new school year. But before you visit the mall or click "buy now" on a Web site, here are a few lessons from moms we spoke to about how to save big on outfits and accessories.

1 STALL WITH SUMMER SALE ITEMS

It's the start of a new season and probably too soon for sales on many of your kids' favorite brands of fall clothes. So what can you do? "Buy

your kids one or two outfits so they can feel good because they have something new to wear to school, but make those outfits summer clothes on sale," says Stephanie Nelson, the owner of Couponmom.com and the mother of two, from Marietta, Ga. It's likely to still be warm outside at the beginning of the school year, so kids can often wear summer outfits (that you've snagged at deep discounts) for a month or so. Stalling not only gives your kids a chance to tune into fall clothing trends and get a firm idea of what they really want, it buys you time to take

advantage of Labor Day and Columbus Day sales, and other money-saving opportunities that pop up as the fall leaves turn.

2 DON'T STOCK UP

When you're ready to shop for fall school clothes, take an inventory of your child's closet and drawers so you don't buy more of what he already has that still fits. Then resist the temptation to stockpile for the indefinite future. Kids tend to pick favorite clothes and wear them to death. They also hit growth spurts that throw off your sizing forecasts. So buy several outfits in your child's current size, and plan to go shopping again in a month or two for a wardrobe refresher, maybe around Thanksgiving and during the after-Christmas sales. To capture savings and maintain a manageable wardrobe, it's better to buy less, but shop more often. If you load up in one trip for the year, some items will invariably get lost in the shuffle and not worn at all. Kids can also feel overwhelmed with choices, which can add to morning angst about what to wear. Anything your child doesn't wear, even if it's a sale item, is a waste of money that could have been spent on something else.

3 ARM YOURSELF WITH COUPONS

Before you hit your child's favorite stores, check for coupons or online coupon codes on Web sites such as www.couponcabin.com. (Also Google

the names of retailers and the words "coupon code" to find sites.) You can find coupons and codes for dozens of major retailers such as The Children's Place, Limited Too, Gymboree, Sears, Target, Macy's, Old Navy, and Gap Kids, which could save you 10 to 50 percent off your clothing tab, or at the very least get you free shipping on online orders. You can also join the e-mail list of your child's favorite store by signing up online at the store's site for advance notice of sales and coupons. Just remember to check shipping costs when shopping online with coupons. They can sometimes wipe out any savings—and then some. Another way to save big is to go to a site's sale and clearance sections.

4 TRY THINGS ON

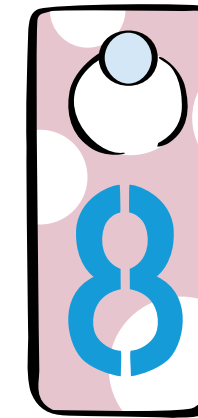
Clothing sizes vary by brand, so to avoid having to return items, shop in stores that have fitting rooms and take your child shopping with you. If you get your child's approval, he'll be more likely to wear an item, and you won't be surprised by pants with tight waistbands or shirts that turn out

to be scratchy around the neck. Of course, when you shop online, it is impossible for your kids to try things on, so be willing to experiment. After a while, you'll get to know which of your child's favorite brands run large, small, or just right, and returns due to size problems won't be as much of an issue. And always check a site's return policy before shopping, cautions Nan Moon, founder of American Joe Apparel, an online clothing store, and the mother of six, from Plano, Texas. That way you won't get stuck with items you can't exchange or take back.

5 STICK WITH COTTON

Cotton is one of the most common and kid-friendly fibers because it's comfortable, breathable, and durable.

Keep in mind that all-cotton knits can shrink as much as 10 percent with repeated washing. If cotton items fit perfectly when your child tries them on, buy a size larger. "To make school clothes last longer, have your kids change into play clothes when they get home," says Diana Ennen, the mother of three, from Margay, Fla.



Never miss a sale

Lots of retailers offer price-protection policies that let you bring back an item that went on sale after you purchased it so you can get the discount. But how can you track every sale? Try www.priceprotectr.com. Find the item you bought (in store or online) on the store's Web page, paste its URL into the box at the Priceprotectr.com site, and enter your e-mail address. If the price of that item drops within the time the store's policy guarantees the price, you'll get an e-mail saying you're entitled to a refund. Nice!

HOODIE HAZARD
This sweatshirt was recalled this year because of its drawstring.



CLOTHING CAUTION

When you're back-to-school shopping for coats and other outerwear, keep an eye out for drawstrings. Neck drawstrings on clothing sizes 2T and up are a strangulation hazard because they can get caught on things like playground equipment and school bus doors. From January 1985 through January 1999, the Consumer Product Safety Commission received reports of 22 deaths and 48 incidents in which hood and waist drawstrings became entangled on equipment, cribs, or other items. So buy kids' jackets and sweatshirts with snaps, buttons, Velcro, or elastic at the neck and waist—not drawstrings. And if you've bought or received anything with a waistband drawstring in sizes 2T and up, make sure it's sewn to the garment at its midpoint so that the string can't be elongated and pulled to one side, and remove toggles or knots at the ends. If you see items with drawstrings, report it at www.cpsc.gov.

6 GO AHEAD AND PAY FULL PRICE—SOMETIMES

You don't have to buy everything at bargain prices to get a good deal. There will be times when your child falls in love with a certain shirt, dress, or pair of pants that isn't on sale and isn't likely to be in the future. (Some stores don't hold sales very often.) What to do? Go ahead, give in. If your child wears a favorite (nonsale) item a gazillion times, it's worth the extra money.

7 BUY SHOES ONLINE, BUT BE SURE TO DO SOME FOOTWORK

Buying new school shoes online is not just convenient, it's sometimes the only way to get brands, colors, styles, and sizes that are so popular that your local shoe store can't keep them in stock. (You know what we're talking about if you tried to buy your child a pair of Uggs last year.) Look for sites that offer free shipping, no sales tax, and free return shipping so you can easily return pairs. Shoebuy.com also offers a 110 percent price guarantee. If you find a particular brand of shoes for a lower price on another site, Shoebuy will refund you 110 percent of the difference between the lower price and Shoebuy's price. **TIP** To lessen the chance of having to return shoes, know exactly what your child wants and be firm on sizing before placing your online shoe order. "Visit a shoe store first to scope out the selection and get your child's foot measured," says Anne Crays, vice president of merchandising and fashion forecasting for Shoebuy.

KEEP YOUR KID'S SHOES ON!

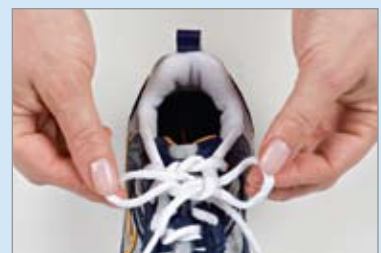
Staffer Maxine Siegel shared this shoelace-tying method, so you'll be able to untie them easily, but your little one won't.



1. Cross laces as usual.



2. Make two loops (shown), or one and wrap the other lace around it.



3. Pull one loop through.



4. Instead of pulling the knot tight now, push that loop back through the center hole.



5. Pull tight. This knot can be undone in a flash—just tug on the end of one lace and voilà!

TIP If you can, hold off on shoe purchases until school is up and running. Kids can be passionate about their footwear but change their mind once they see their friends and classmates wearing something else. There's nothing worse than having a perfectly good pair go to waste. Shop about a month after school starts; your kids are more likely to know what shoes they want at that point, says Shoebuy's Anne Crays.