

1-1-2001

How Can We Avoid The Back-To-School Shopping "Brand-Name Blues"?

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Tom, "How Can We Avoid The Back-To-School Shopping "Brand-Name Blues"?" (2001). *All Archived Publications*. Paper 245.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/245

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can We Avoid The Back-to-school Shopping “Brand-Name Blues”?

Tom Lee answers:*

Clothing items with certain brands or labels seems to promise to make life more exciting and fun. Children can easily feel deprived if they don't have things they see in the media or things they think their friends will have. Consider these tips when back-to-school shopping.

- Approach children in ways appropriate to their age and understanding. For example, brand name awareness is especially prevalent when buying shoes. With preschool age children you can say,
- “Here are two pairs of nice shoes. Which pair do you want?” With elementary school children you can tell them an amount of money and say “Let's go to the store and choose a pair in this range.” For teens you might say “I'm willing to spend 'x' amount for shoes. If you want something more than that, you will need to pay the difference.”
- Help children distinguish between wants and needs. If there is something they want that you don't approve of, be truthful. Instead of saying “I can't afford that,” say “I'm not willing to spend my money that way.” Talk about quality versus price. Have children do comparison shopping for something they don't care about, such as canned vegetables. Show them that a store brand, with equal nutrition and value, costs less than a name brand. Compare this to other things they do care about, where the brand name increases the price without necessarily increasing the quality.
- Give older children a clothing allowance. Talk with them about planning and projecting their needs and then let them make their choices. Resist your urge to rescue them from poor choices. Talk about what happened and what might work better next time. Require them to have the money saved or to have done the required work before getting the desired item. Help children learn patience in working for what they want. Avoid teaching that they can get what they want if they hassle long enough.
- As parents be aware of the messages you may be sending about materialism through your own behavior. Children learn their values by watching what we do more than by what we say. Watch for examples of people in the news who exemplify service over materialism.

* Tom Lee is Utah State University Extension Family and Human Development Specialist