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Going back-to-school shopping? Be kind to your wallet and the planet

By Tom Watson

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The never-ending parental juggling act gets even trickier at back-to-school time, especially if you want to go green and spend lean.

Finding greener, cheaper alternatives for your school-bound children isn't necessarily the hardest part — you also need to make sure they will actually use what you buy.

These tips will help you get the greenest bang for your buck.

Reclaim the season

The National Retail Federation, which keeps track of holiday spending, lists the back-to-school season right alongside Christmas and Halloween. Americans are expected to spend \$51 billion on back-to-school-related shopping (including college) this year — more than we spend for Mother's Day, Valentine's Day and Easter combined.

It may be a holiday for retailers, but the timing is unfortunate for parents and kids. Late summer usually brings us the best weather of the year, plus a whirlwind of activities including Bumbershoot, the Puyallup Fair and countless sports and recreational diversions.

This year, aim for more fun, less shopping and more savings.

For basic school supplies, try to **buy only what's required** by the school or specific teachers. Since those grade-by-grade supply lists sent out by the schools often run from 10 to 20 items, you and the planet just can't afford to buy additional stuff.

And don't be intimidated by those lists. If a school list for your second-grader mentions a brand name of scissors, for example, it will probably be fine to send a generic pair of school scissors you already have. Also feel free to ask a teacher if substitutions are OK.

If you are sure you will use up an item, such as notebook paper, **buy it in bulk**. Keep all your extra school supplies on one shelf where everyone in your family can easily find them. Buy recycled-content paper when possible. It may cost slightly more in some cases, but prices have gradually been dropping for recycled-paper products.

Tough stuff

From school supplies to clothes, you can save money in the long run if you **spend a little extra for more durable items**. Sometimes it's a difficult call. For example, many notebooks, weekly planners and folders now have hard plastic covers, which are not recyclable. But in some situations, those plastic covers may keep your kids from having to throw away a whole notebook because it got wet or trashed.

Creative and thrifty

For back-to-school clothes, the key to going green and saving money is to know what your child will wear. **Thrift and consignment stores** are perfect for shopping for younger children who don't have strong opinions about their clothes, or individualistic older kids.

If you give your teenagers a clothing allowance, remind them they can save money (read: Get more) by buying some clothes or accessories used. The Capitol Hill and University District neighborhoods in Seattle boast many thrift and consignment stores with merchandise that especially appeals to kids and teens. You can also reduce your purchases of new clothes by using fabric paint or iron-ons to rejuvenate thrift-store items or siblings' old clothes.

The lunch crunch

Healthful foods packed in a lunchbox frequently end up in the school garbage can. To avoid this, bring your kids to the **farmers market** with you to pick out stuff they will eat. Local, organic fruit and veggies at farmers markets often cost less than in groceries, and some farmers at the markets sell lunchbox-friendly items such as dried apple chips.

Buying **large sizes of grocery and snack items** instead of individual-serving sizes can save a family of four \$2,000 a year, according to Earth 911, an Arizona-based environmental partnership. But before you buy a 5-pound bag of raisins for school lunches, for example, try to make sure your kids will consistently eat them.

Another way to save big is by sending kids to school with a **reusable water bottle** instead of single-use bottles. If the reusable bottle is hard, colored plastic, it should say "BPA-free." The chemical bisphenol A, or BPA, may leach from some older plastic bottles under certain conditions.

Also stay away from **reusable lunch boxes or bags** made from polyvinyl chloride (PVC, or vinyl). Production of PVC has been linked to health problems, and some older vinyl lunch boxes may contain high levels of lead. Reusablebags.com has a large selection of safe, durable lunch bags and water bottles, though some are on the pricey side.

Higher education the green way

A checklist on a major retailer's Web site lists 115 items a student needs when going off to college. But 40 is more like it. Most dorm rooms aren't even big enough to hold all the stuff stores push. To prevent unnecessary purchases, students should always **check with their roommates** to see who's bringing what.

College students spend an average of \$900 a year on textbooks, according to the Washington Student Public Interest Research Group (WashPIRG). To cut those costs, try **Campus Book Swap**, an online-textbook exchange supported by WashPIRG and similar groups around the country. Numerous Web sites — including the biggie, Seattle-based Amazon.com — also offer used textbooks (and not just for college students).

With all the advantages of going green when back-to-school shopping, one unexpected benefit may be the most welcome: You and your kids will actually agree on something.

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