



Back-to-School Shopping 2026

Spending is up, and so is kids' influence



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01

Key takeaways

The printed supply list is out and the shared family cart is in. Families expect to spend nearly \$1,000 this year, and 61% let their kids add items straight to the digital cart.

- Student shoppers have arrived. Sixty-one percent of parents plan to let their kids (pre-K through high school) add items directly to online carts, turning the back-to-school season into a collaborative purchasing journey.
- Spending is climbing. Families expect to spend an average of \$922 this year and 47% plan to spend more than they did last year.
- AI has arrived in the aisle. Seventy-three percent of parents plan to use AI somewhere in their shopping journey, whether to research, compare, budget, or find deals.
- The path to purchase is fragmented. In-store shopping is expected to be down to 70% this year, compared to 79% last year, as families go between online marketplaces, brand sites, social media, and AI tools to compare and buy items.



Back-to-school shopping used to mean a printed list and a trip to the store to buy notebooks, pencils, and a fresh pair of sneakers. But today, some kids are skipping the list and adding items to the cart themselves.

According to PwC's 2026 US Consumer Poll on Back-to-School Shopping, students are influencing purchasing decisions more often and through more channels than ever before. They're discovering products on social platforms, following trends, and curating wish lists that land in digital carts. In the process, back-to-school shopping has evolved from a routine errand into an increasingly collaborative, digital, and expensive seasonal milestone.

Based on our latest survey data, parents say they expect to spend an average of \$922 on back-to-school shopping this year. Nearly half (47%) expect to spend more than they did a year ago, a jump from 35% who said the same in last year's survey.

02

Back-to-school budgets expand

The back-to-school shopping season has gotten pricey. Three out of four families are spending at least \$100 on clothing and shoes, averaging \$278 per household, more than twice what they spend on actual school supplies (such as backpacks, notebooks, binders, pens and pencils, etc.). And technology (such as laptops, tablets, calculators, headphones, and fitness wearables) isn't far behind, at \$222 per household, as schools bring more devices into the classroom.

Parents point to familiar factors like higher prices and grade-level changes, but kids' preferences are also affecting the size of the receipt. Nearly a third (32%) of parents say their children request name-brand or trend-driven items, while 26% report needing to upgrade their kids' technology.



Where the \$922 back-to-school budget goes

\$278Clothing
and shoes**\$222**

Technology

\$161Equipment for
after-school
activities**\$122**

School supplies

\$95Books and
education materials**\$44**Other one-time
school year
purchases

Q: Thinking only about one-time purchases you typically make at the start of the school year for your child or children going to preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school, how much do you expect to spend on each of the following for the 2026-2027 back-to-school season? (Give your best estimate in dollars).

Base: Parents expecting to spend 491

Source: 2026 US Consumer Poll on Back-to-School Shopping

Most of these decisions get made within a tight window: 71% of families complete their back-to-school purchases between two weeks and two months before the first bell. That concentration creates a critical period for retailers to capture attention as parents weigh budgets, compare options, and field their kids' requests.

And the financial commitment doesn't end in August or September. Parents expect to spend an additional \$635 per month (per household) on recurring expenses once school starts, including \$260 on school fees (such as field trip fees, tutoring, or tuition) and \$235 on meals and snacks. More than half of survey respondents (54%) expect to spend at least \$100 a month on meals and snacks alone.

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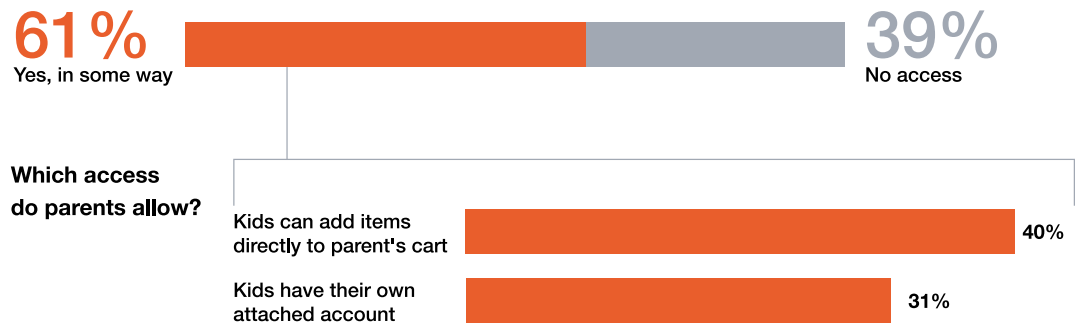
03

Kids aren't just influencing the cart—they're filling it

Back-to-school shopping is rooted in familiar rituals, but the mechanics of the experience are changing fast. Kids have a more direct role than they've ever had before. They're not just pointing at items in a store or texting links to a parent, but also logging in and adding to the cart themselves. In fact, 61% of parents allow their children some level of direct participation in online shopping. Forty percent give kids their own access to add items, while 31% use linked or shared family accounts. As kids gain more direct access, retailers have an opening to design shopping experiences that put privacy and parental controls front and center.



How kids participate in online back-to-school shopping



Q: Thinking about when you are shopping online, do you give your kids access to your online cart or do they have their own attached account (e.g., Amazon, Walmart, Instacart, Whole Foods), so they can add the back-to-school products they want? (Select all that apply.)
Base: Parents expecting to spend 491
Source: 2026 US Consumer Poll on Back-to-School Shopping

Kids' influence over the family wallet shows up across categories. According to the survey, students of all ages (pre-K through high school) are shaping clothing, shoes, and school supply choices. And half of high school parents say their child influences tech purchases, compared to less than a quarter of middle school parents.

04

The shopping journey has splintered

In-store shopping hasn't disappeared, but it's losing share fast: 70% of parents plan to shop in-store this year, down from 79% a year ago, a nine-point drop in a single season. Meanwhile, online channels are picking up the slack, and parents are using several of them in combination rather than picking just one. Major online marketplaces will see activity from 67% of parents, while 49% will shop directly on brand or retailer websites. Emerging channels are carving out space too: 23% of parents plan to shop through social media or influencer recommendations, and the same percentage will find deals using AI, a channel that didn't meaningfully exist in last year's back-to-school season. All told, 73% of families will use AI one way or another during the back-to-school shopping process, whether researching brands, comparing products, budgeting, or something else.

Retailers can no longer count on a linear path to purchase. A child might discover a backpack on social media, a parent might price-check it through an AI assistant, and the final purchase might happen on a marketplace app, all within the same week. Winning the back-to-school season now means showing up consistently as students and parents increasingly make decisions together.



If demand signals now start in one channel while fulfillment expectations land in another, it creates new complexity around inventory management and optimization. For supply chain, operations, and technology leaders, it reinforces the case for a more intelligent, connected enterprise that can sense demand and respond across channels in real time. Winning the back-to-school season now means showing up consistently as students and parents increasingly make decisions together.

73% of parents plan to use AI for back-to-school shopping, for everything from finding deals to helping balance the budget.

05

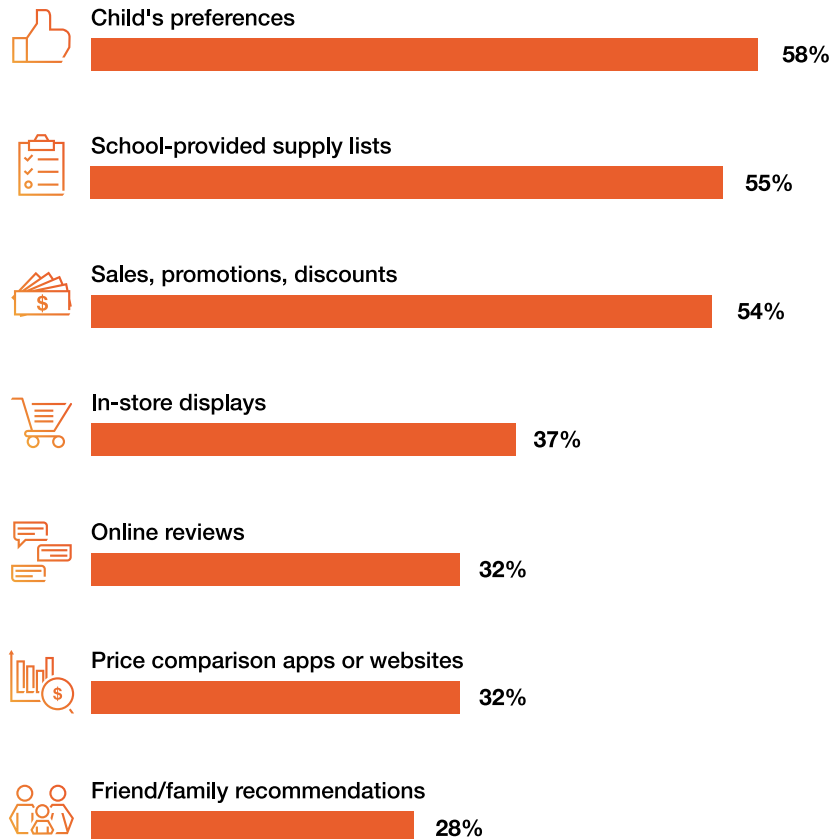
What's shaping the final decision

When it's time to actually buy, parents are weighing a growing list of inputs. Children's preferences have the most influence over back-to-school purchasing decisions, cited by 58% of parents. But that influence doesn't exist in a vacuum. By the time a child requests a particular backpack, pair of shoes, or device, they've often been exposed to it for weeks through friends, social media, online communities, and entertainment.

Practical considerations still anchor the decisions. School-provided supply lists shape 55% of purchases, followed by sales, promotions, and discounts (54%). The pattern reveals a balancing act familiar to any parent: kids help shape the wish list, but parents still manage the budget.



Factors influencing back-to-school purchase decisions



Q: Which of the following influence your back-to-school purchasing decisions? (Select all that apply.)

Note: Showing 7 choices out of 12 options

Base: Parents expecting to spend 491

Source: 2026 US Consumer Poll on Back-to-School Shopping

For retailers, the takeaway is clear. Winning back-to-school shoppers means understanding everything that shapes their choices—from school requirements and household budgets to the social platforms, peer networks, and AI tools that increasingly suggest to students what they want before they ever walk into a store or open an app.



About the survey

PwC surveyed 2,080 adults ages 18 and older in the US between May 20 and 22, 2026.

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