



Balancing THE BOOKS

Money coach **Sarah McMurray** talks us through a particularly busy time of year.

The beginning of the year is a hard time for family finances in New Zealand. We just get over Christmas, find that our 'cheap' summer holiday was surprisingly expensive and then we have to deal with back-to-school costs.

Before we jump into the ways to save money on these, my first suggestion is that you take a moment to reflect. Back-to-school expenses are a direct cost of having children. How would you like your children to remember their start to the school year? What are your values around providing for your children?

The reason I bring this up is twofold. Firstly, school expenses can be shockingly high, understandably raising stress levels for parents. But letting your children know you're stressed about the costs (even if you blame the school) can lead to your child feeling guilty that they're costing you money, and leave them with memories of how you resented spending money on things that they needed.

Secondly, by being specific about your values regarding

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providing for your children, it's possible to re-frame your experience. Instead of feeling anger and resentment for the costs, you can feel quiet pride that you are meeting your child's needs and being the kind of parent you want to be.

Now get really clear about exactly how much it's going to cost. Get as much information as you can: be detailed and utterly realistic. You may need to consider:

- Uniforms and shoes
- Stationery
- Individual subject costs
- Bring-your-own-device (e.g. laptops or tablets)
- Swimming lesson fees
- Togs / goggles / swim caps
- Extra-curricular activities e.g. sports, music, Girl Guides
- School fees or donations

- Lunch boxes, drink bottles, school bags
- Class trip costs
- School camp fees

Setting it all out can be confronting, especially when you add up the entire cost, but facing the painful truth is going to lead to a better outcome than ignoring the inevitable.

Now review the list. Resist the temptation to just wipe off entire categories. Instead ask yourself, "Is there any way I can reduce my costs here and still meet my child's need?"

When you're feeling calm, it would be a great idea to ask your teenagers this question. Getting their ideas and buy-in for how you will meet needs without overspending not only recognises the contribution they can make to the family, but teaches them an invaluable lesson about money management.

Some ideas to reduce costs are:

- First, shop at home and in your social networks. What do you / they already have? Try friends, family, local Facebook pages, Trade Me, or Neighbourly.
- Can you cut down on the number of uniform items, or will this put too much day-to-day stress on your family to get the laundry done? A chore for teenagers, maybe?
- Stationery – is it possible to cherry-pick the extreme specials available at different stores? Figuring out where the best deals are is another job a teenager could do.

- Extra-curricular activities – could you get a discount for volunteering to coach or lead? Are the children doing too many activities? Would grandparents contribute to these costs as the child's birthday present?
- School donations – these are voluntary, but keep in mind that schools really need them. Talk to the school about any difficulties you have in meeting school costs.
- Use a site like PriceSpy to find the best deal on devices.
- Could you cut ongoing costs (like buying lunches) to help pay for needed items?

It's too late for this year, but plan ahead for next year's school expenses. Sometimes needed items can double as Christmas gifts; devices could be bought on sale; uniform items bought throughout the year.

Sarah McMurray is a money coach, trained by the Financial Recovery Institute. A money coach helps people figure out the emotions, thoughts and beliefs that are driving their (often self-destructive) behaviours with money. Sarah has a background in both education and business and is a mother of three.
www.relatingtomoney.co.nz



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For more information contact Lorraine Owen: lorraine.owen@theparentingplace.com

