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Published
September 2025

Back-to-School 2025: What Parents & Teens Really Want

Fresh insights into how families are shopping this back-to-school season

A Season of Essentials and Emotions

This year's back-to-school shopping season is about more than just crossing off supply lists—it's about navigating rising prices, balancing convenience with fit and feel, and bridging the gap between parent priorities and teen tastes.

For retailers, brands, and marketers, this moment is an opportunity to connect with both practical and emotional drivers. Parents are watching budgets more closely than ever, while teens are bringing their own expectations for style, quality, and self-expression.

Knit's Back-to-School 2025 study captures these dynamics in real time—showing how families are deciding what to buy, where to shop, and how much to spend.

About the Study

Knit surveyed **521 U.S. parents and teens** planning to shop for the back-to-school season, gathering both quantitative data and qualitative video feedback.

Audience

Parents
261
Teens
260

Shopping Method

In-store
146
Online
34
Hybrid
340

Age Range

13-65

Requirement

Must be **planning back-to-school** purchases in 2025

Key Findings at a Glance

Families are making strategic decisions, balancing needs with wants, and adjusting their habits in response to both emotional and economic realities.

Essentials dominate the list.

Clothing and apparel top the season's priorities (91%), closely followed by school supplies (90.6%) and footwear (79.8%). Accessories like backpacks and water bottles (78.3%) are also widely shopped, while electronics (37%) and sports equipment (25.5%) remain lower on most back-to-school lists.

Shoppers mix channels with purpose.

In-store shopping wins when it comes to getting the right fit (64.4%) and checking a product's look and feel (56.8%). Online is favored for its convenience (64.7%) and easy price comparisons (58.8%). The sweet spot? Hybrid shopping, which 65% of parents and teens say is their preferred approach.

Price and quality priorities split by generation.

Parents bring a sharper focus on price—mentioning it twice as often as teens (22 vs. 11 mentions)—while teens lean a bit more toward quality (19 mentions vs. 12).

Different emotions are in play.

Teens enter the season with more excitement (61.5%) than parents (52.5%), while parents are more likely to feel the pinch of inflation (48.7% vs. 19.2%).

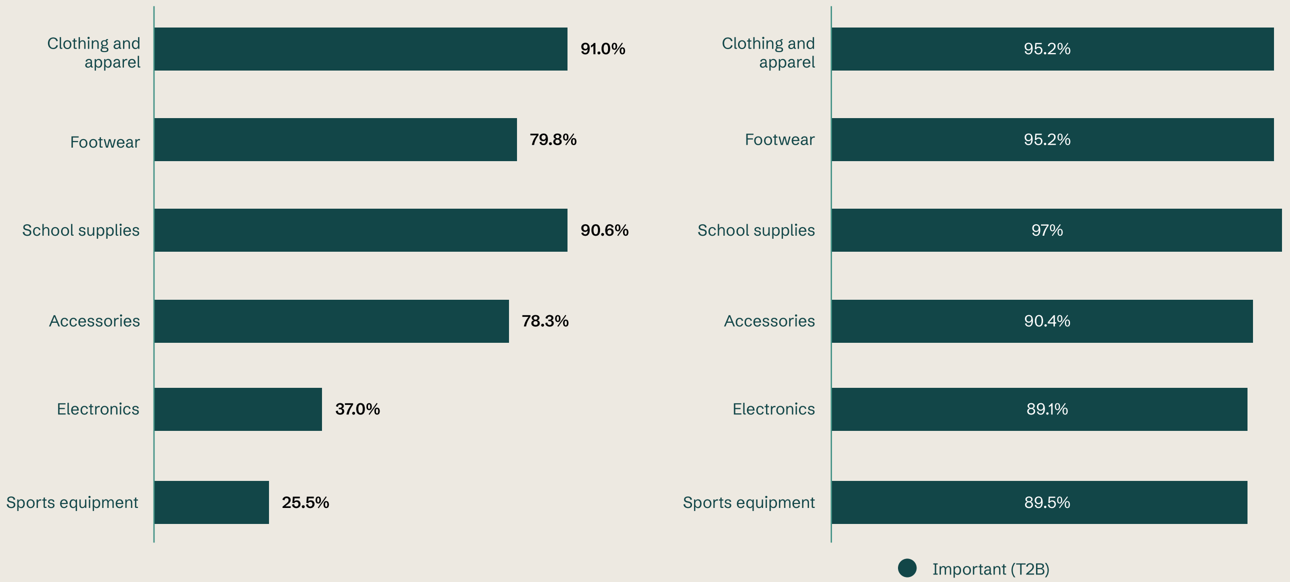
The Season of Essentials

This year's back-to-school shopping is rooted firmly in the essentials. Clothing and apparel lead the list, with 91% of shoppers planning to buy items in this category. School supplies follow close behind at 90.6%, underscoring the enduring importance of basics like notebooks, binders, and writing tools.

Footwear also ranks high, with nearly 4 in 5 shoppers (79.8%) including it on their lists—suggesting that fresh sneakers and school shoes remain key purchases for the start of the year. Accessories, such as backpacks and water bottles, are next at 78.3%, rounding out the top four must-shop categories.

By contrast, tech and sports fall further down the list. Only 37% of shoppers plan to purchase electronics this season, while sports equipment is even lower at 25.5%, signaling that these are more specialized buys rather than universal back-to-school staples.

With an emphasis on essentials, school supplies emerge as the top priority for back-to-school shopping, followed closely by footwear and clothing/apparel.



Q1.ShoppingCategorie. Which of the following categories are you shopping for as part of your back-to-school purchases this year? Please select all that apply. N = 521
Q2.PriorityLevel. How important are the following categories in your back-to-school shopping this year? N = 521

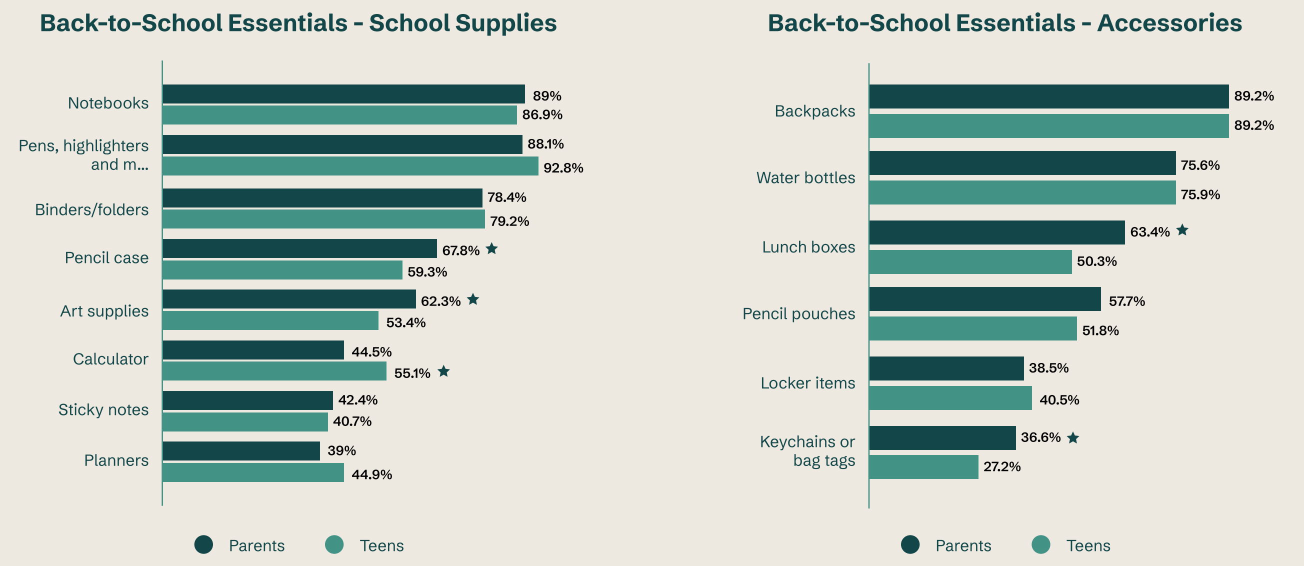
When it comes to school supplies, the classics still dominate. Notebooks are at the top of the list for **89% of parents** and **86.9% of teens**, closely followed by pens, highlighters, and markers—slightly more favored by teens **(92.8%)** than parents **(88.1%)**.

Binders and folders hold strong at around 79% for both groups, while pencil cases and art supplies appeal to a smaller, but still significant, share.

In the accessories category, backpacks are the undisputed must-have, with **89.2%** of both parents and teens planning to buy one this year. Water bottles come next at roughly 76% each, followed by lunch boxes **(63.4% of parents, 50.3% of teens)** and pencil pouches (around 52–58%).

This balance between practical classroom essentials and personal carry items reinforces the focus on functional, everyday use purchases.

Pens/highlighters/markers (slightly more favored by teens) and notebooks are top school supply essentials. Backpacks top accessories category with parents and teens equally (89.2%) favoring it.



Q3_3.ProdtoPurchSS. Which of the following types of School supplies products are part of your back-to-school shopping? Please select all that apply. N = 472
Q3_4.ProdtoPurchAcc. Which of the following types of Accessories products are part of your back-to-school shopping? Please select all that apply. N = 408

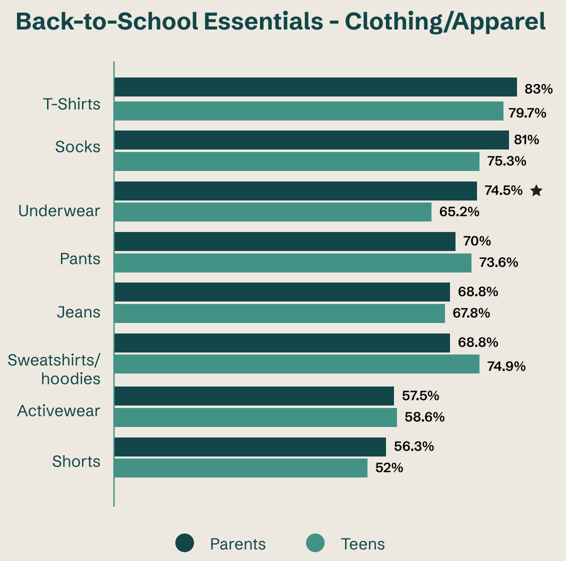
Back-to-school clothing lists are a mix of the everyday and the essential. T-shirts lead for parents **(83%)** and teens **(79.7%)**, followed closely by socks, underwear, and pants. Jeans and sweatshirts/hoodies are nearly tied in importance at around 68-75%.

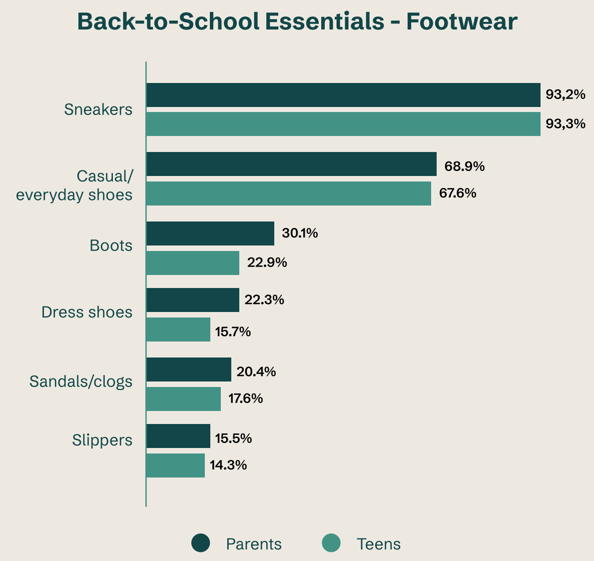
On the footwear side, sneakers are nearly universal—chosen by **93.2% of parents** and **93.3% of teens**—cementing their role as the anchor purchase in this category.

Casual or everyday shoes rank next at about 68%, while boots, dress shoes, and sandals are less frequently prioritized.

This data shows that both parents and teens are preparing for comfort, versatility, and durability—shopping for items that can handle the daily wear and tear of the school year.

Among clothing and apparel, mix of items (t-shirts, socks, underwear, pants, jeans, and sweatshirts) part of the shopping list, while sneakers a must-have in footwear.





Q3_1.ProdtoPurchCA. Which of the following types of Clothing and apparel products are part of your back-to-school shopping? Please select all that apply. N = 474
Q3_2.ProdtoPurchFW. Which of the following types of Footwear products are part of your back-to-school shopping? Please select all that apply. N = 416

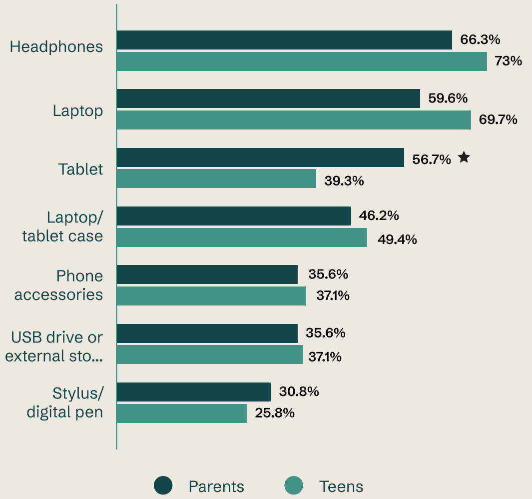
Electronics play a secondary role in back-to-school shopping this year. Headphones top the tech list, with **66.3% of parents** and **73% of teens** planning to purchase them, followed by laptops **(59.6% parents, 69.7% teens)** and tablets. Other items like laptop cases, phone accessories, and USB drives trail well behind.

Sports equipment tells a different story. Sports shoes or cleats dominate the category, purchased by **82.8% of parents** and **78.3% of teens**, with sports uniforms and gym bags following. Protective gear and sport-specific equipment like balls or rackets are important to about half of respondents.

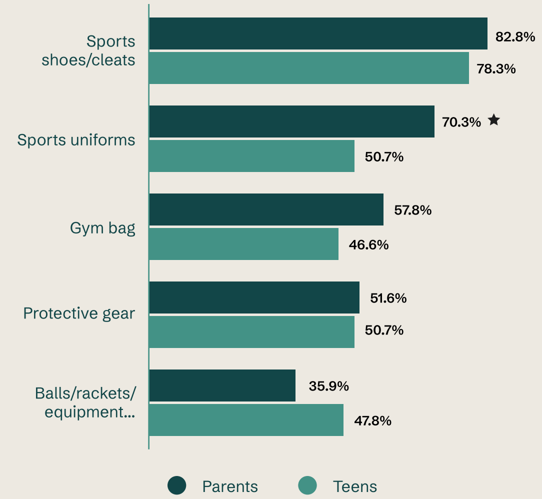
Together, these findings point to a season where tech upgrades are limited and purpose-driven, while athletic gear remains a high priority for families with active students.

Electronics appear less central to back-to-school shopping, with headphones cited most at 70% (on average). Sports shoes/cleats lead the sports equipment category in importance.

Back-to-School Essentials - Electronics



Back-to-School Essentials - Sports Equipment



Q3_5.ProdtoPurchElec. Which of the following types of Electronics products are part of your back-to-school shopping? Please select all that apply. N = 193
Q3_6.ProdtoPurchSE. Which of the following types of Sports Equipment products are part of your back-to-school shopping? Please select all that apply. N = 133

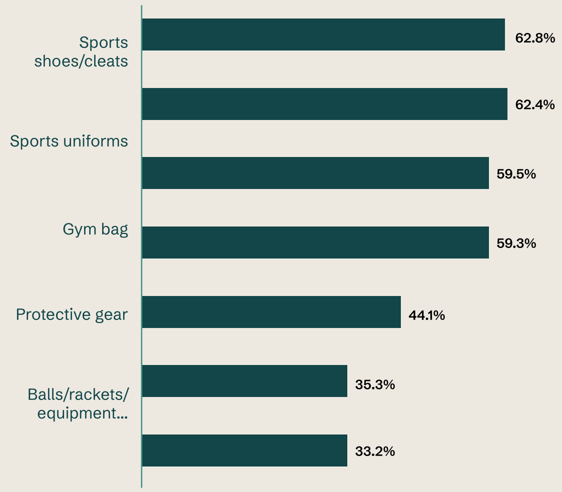
This year's back-to-school shopping is being driven by necessity more than novelty, with practical needs topping the list of motivations. The most common reasons parents and students are heading to the stores are simple but pressing—62.8% say it's because kids have outgrown clothing or shoes, while 62.4% cite the need for specific items. Confidence also plays a role, with nearly 6 in 10 (59.5%) saying they shop to help students feel their best, and a similar share (59.3%) highlighting the tradition or ritual of back-to-school prep.

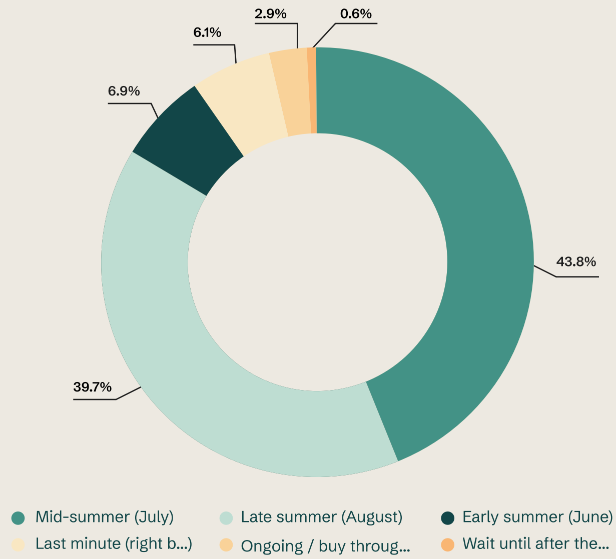
Other factors—like wanting better quality or more durable items (44.1%), being inspired by new arrivals (35.3%), or feeling the need to fit in at school (33.2%)—still matter, but they rank behind those more practical drivers.

When it comes to timing, most shoppers take a measured approach. The largest share, 43.8%, begin in mid-summer (July), while another 39.7% start in late summer (August), making this a season where the bulk of activity happens over just a few weeks. Early birds—those starting in June—account for only 6.9%, while last-minute shoppers (right before school starts) make up 6.1%. A small 4% buy continuously throughout the year, and just 1% wait until after school begins.

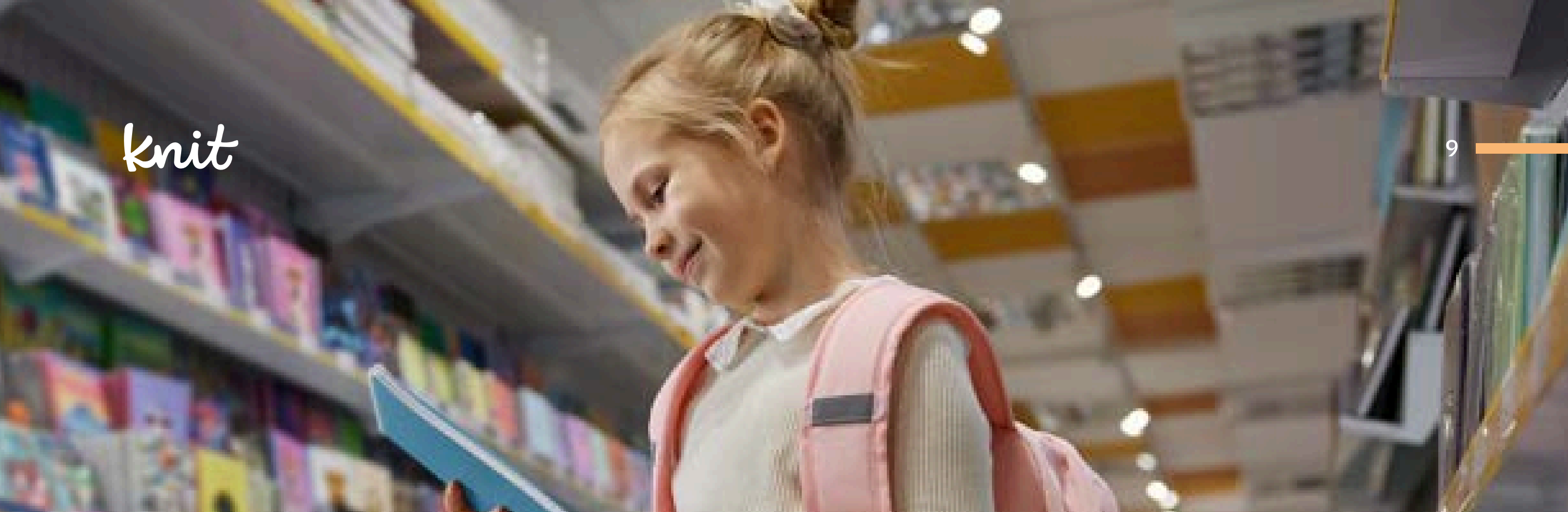
In other words, back-to-school shopping is still anchored in tradition and timing, but it's the practical realities—kids growing, specific needs arising—that truly set the calendar in motion.

Practical needs - like outgrowing clothes or requiring specific items - are the main drivers of back-to-school shopping, with most respondents starting their purchases in mid to late summer.





Q4.ShoppingMotivatio. What are your motivations for back-to-school shopping this year? Please select all that apply. N = 521
Q5.ShoppingPeriod. When do you typically start back-to-school shopping? N = 521

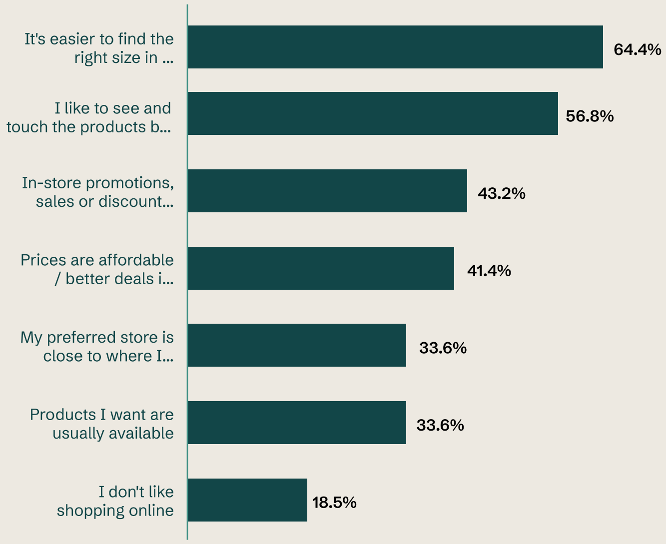


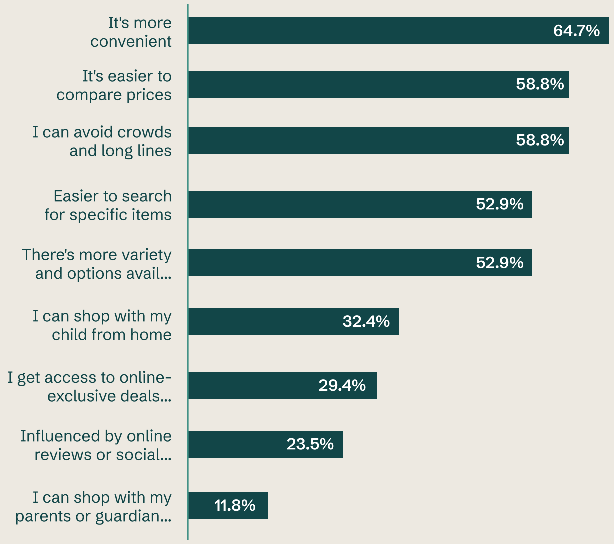
Channel Choices: Fit vs. Fast

Shoppers are clear about why they choose each channel. In-store delivers confidence—making sure items fit (64.4%) and look right (56.8%). Online wins for convenience (64.7%), easy price checks (58.8%), and crowd avoidance (58.8%).

Hybrid shopping, blending both benefits, has emerged as the clear winner—preferred by **65% of respondents.** This balance of in-store assurance with online efficiency reflects the evolving nature of seasonal retail.

In-store shopping is favored primarily for fit satisfaction (64.4%) and the ability to assess look and feel (56.8%), whereas, online is preferred for convenience, easy price comparison and to avoid crowd.





Q7.ShoppingReasons. What factors influence your preference for shopping in-store rather than online? Please select all that apply. N = 146
Q8.OnlineShoppingRea. Why do you prefer shopping online rather than in-store for back-to-school? Please select all that apply. N = 34

Price, Quality, and the Parent–Teen Divide

When it comes to brand choice, **price** tops the list for parents—mentioned twice as often as by teens. For teens, **material quality** edges out price as a deciding factor.

Both groups agree on the top triggers for switching brands: price (66–90% depending on channel) and quality (65–76%). For marketers, this reinforces the need to present both value and substance, regardless of the channel.

Affordable pricing and quality of materials are the leading factors influencing back-to-school shopping decisions.

Reasonable pricing has a significantly greater influence on parents than teens, with **22 mentions** compared to **11.**

- *"One of the main influences on my choice of brands to purchase for back to school items is simply* ***price.****"*
- *"Now, to limit the choice from the hundreds of brands there, there are, I usually focus on the durability and* ***the price.****"*

Material quality is valued by both groups, though it's slightly more important to teens, with **19 mentions** compared to **12** from parents.

- "When I am back to school shopping, my choice of brands is influenced by what I know I prefer, as well as what I know has **good qualities** and things that I can't afford."

VQ9. What influences your choice of brands when shopping for back-to-school items? $[e://Field/VQ9_Pipe]   N = 107

Spending Trends: Rising Prices, Rising Pressures

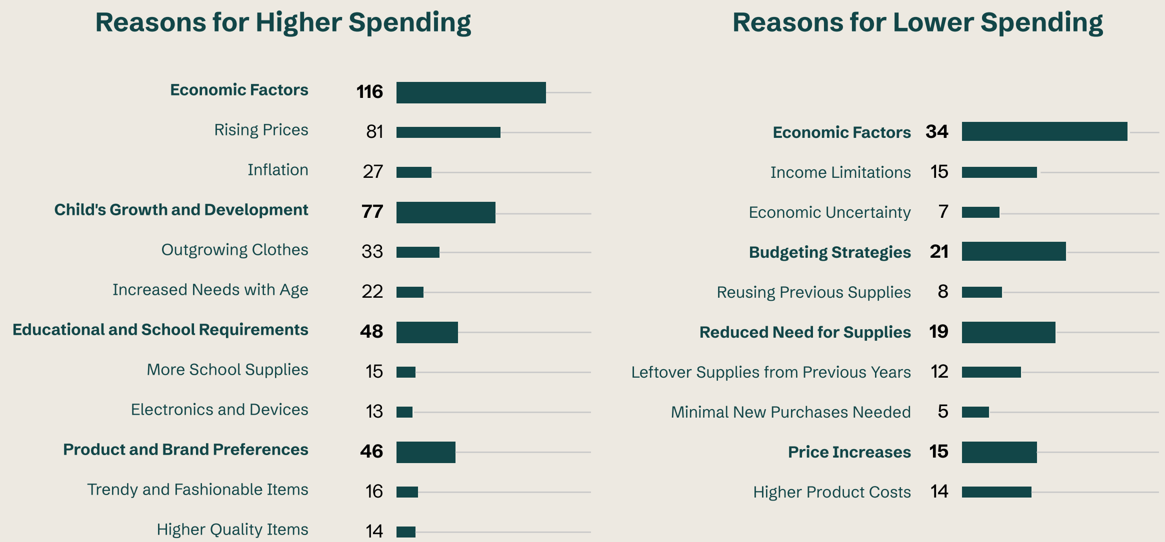
Back-to-school spending in 2025 reflects both a willingness to invest and the financial pressures shaping how families shop. Hybrid shoppers in particular are driving higher budgets—**30% expect to spend $300-$499**, while another **29.4% say they'll spend $500 or more**, making them the segment most open to premium purchases and upsell opportunities.

The reasons behind these spending levels paint a nuanced picture. On the higher end, **rising prices were cited by 81 respondents** as the main driver of increased spend,with inflation (27 mentions) and outgrowing clothes (33 mentions) also contributing to bigger baskets. Families also pointed to new school requirements and the need for more supplies as additional factors.

On the flip side, those planning to cut back often pointed to **income limitations (15 mentions)** and the **high cost of products (14 mentions)** as the biggest barriers. Others said they were managing budgets by reusing supplies from previous years or simply needing fewer new items.

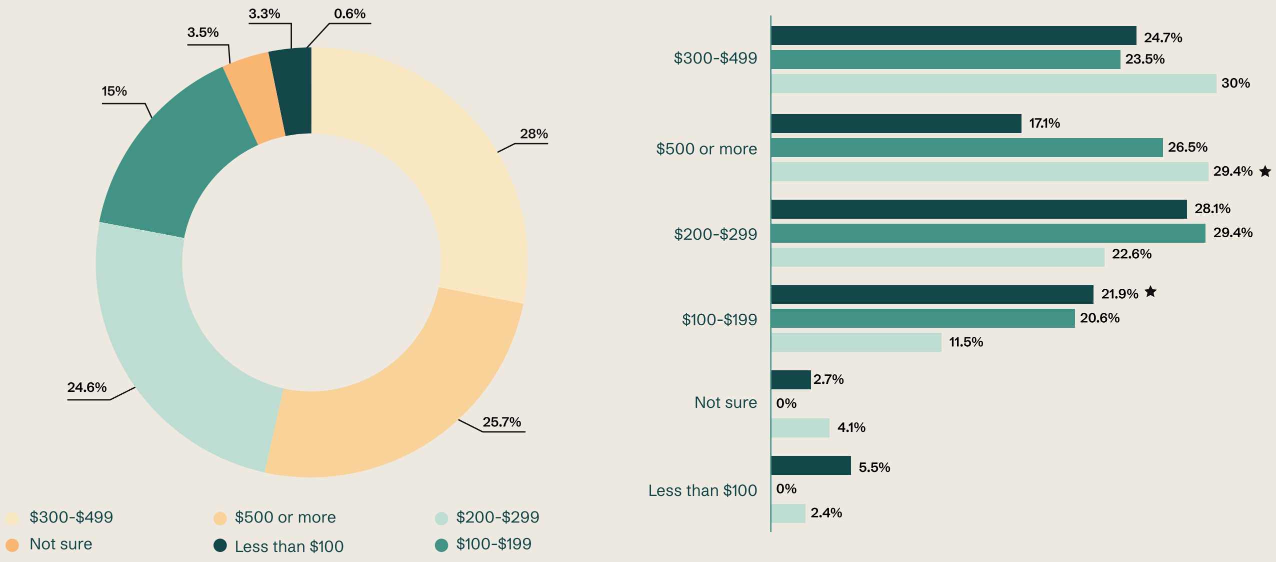
Together, these findings highlight the tension defining this season: while many families are resigned to spending more, they're also carefully watching where those dollars go. For brands, that means transparent pricing, value messaging, and clear differentiation between "must-have" and "nice-to-have" products will be critical.

81 respondents state that rising prices is the primary reason for higher spending this year. Lower spend is driven by income limitations (15 mentions) and higher product costs (14 mentions).



Q23.ReasonsForSpendi. What are the reasons you're spending more on back-to-school shopping this year? N = 232
Q24.ReasonsForSpendi. What are the reasons you're spending less on back-to-school shopping this year? N = 70

Practical needs - like outgrowing clothes or requiring specific items - are the main drivers of back-to-school shopping, with most respondents starting their purchases in mid to late summer.



Q22.EstimatedSpend. Approximately how much are you spending in total for back-to-school shopping this year? N = 521
Q22.EstimatedSpend. Approximately how much are you spending in total for back-to-school shopping this year? N = 520

Emotional Drivers: Teens Are Excited, Parents Are Pragmatic

The emotional tenor of back-to-school season varies sharply between parents and teens. For teens, it's a time of anticipation and optimism, while for parents it's often weighed down by financial realities.

Excitement and optimism lead among teens. Over **61.5%** of teens say they feel excited about going back to school, compared to **52.5% of parents**. Optimism also runs high across both groups—**54% of parents** and **50.8% of teens** describe themselves this way—though teens are more likely to feel motivated **(36.5% vs. 29.9%)** and energized by the new year.

Parents balance positivity with concern. While many parents feel optimistic, they are also far more likely to cite stressors like **inflation and rising prices (48.7% vs. 19.2% of teens)** as shaping their outlook. Parents also report stronger feelings of calm **(27.6% vs. 18.1% of teens)** and relief **(22.2% vs. 6.5%),** suggesting their emotional response is grounded in logistics and planning rather than excitement.

Nervousness and pressure skew toward teens. Interestingly, teens report higher levels of nervousness **(29.6% vs. 18.4% of parents)**, reflecting the social and academic pressures of returning to school.

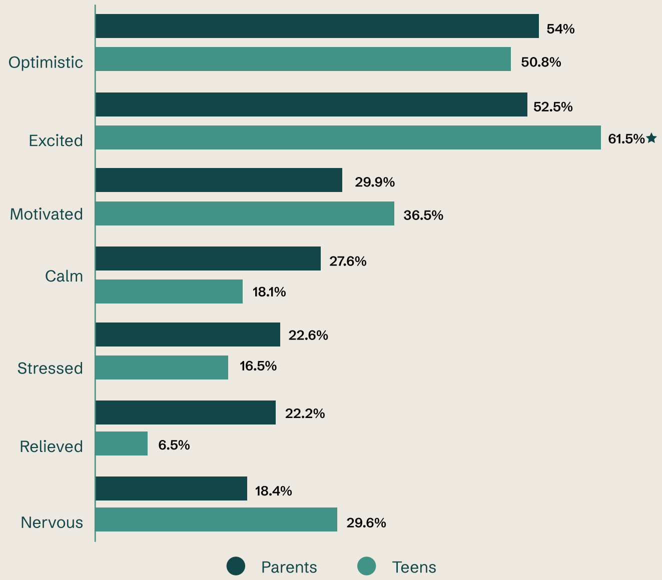
They're also more likely to say they're influenced by positive memories and traditions **(51.2% vs. 41%)** and by the fresh start of a new school year **(56.2% vs. 46%).**

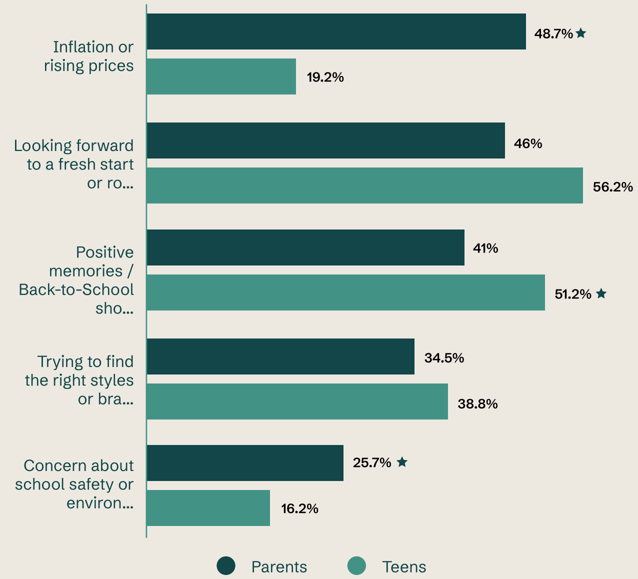
The Opportunity for Brands

The data points to a clear opportunity: teens want to be inspired, while parents want to be reassured. Campaigns that tap into **self-expression, optimism, and fresh starts** will resonate strongly with students. At the same time, addressing parents' concerns with **transparent pricing, value framing, and stress-free shopping solutions** will help ease their anxieties.

The winning strategy? Deliver messaging that speaks to both audiences simultaneously—offering teens the excitement they crave while giving parents the confidence that their choices are smart, practical, and financially sound.

Teens express more excitement about back-to-school (61.5%) than parents (52.5%), with optimism common across both groups. Inflation is a greater concern for parents (48.7%) than teens (19.2%).





Q17.FeelingsAboutBac. How are you feeling about the upcoming back-to-school season? Please select all that apply. N = 521
Q18.ContributingFact. Which of the following are contributing to how you feel about back-to-school this year? Please select all that apply. N = 521

Brand & Retailer Preferences

When it comes to brands, **Nike stands head and shoulders above the rest.** Nearly three-quarters of both parents **(74.7%)** and teens **(75%)** say it's part of their back-to-school shopping plans, putting it far ahead of its closest competitor, Adidas **(50.2% of parents, 52.3% of teens)**. This gap underscores Nike's entrenched position as both a style leader and a trusted go-to for performance and everyday wear.

Beyond sportswear, practical categories also make the list. **Paper Mate** earns a near-identical share of preference among parents **(48.3%)** and teens **(48.5%),** highlighting the continued importance of reliable school supplies. Other strong mentions include **Under Armour (46% of parents, 42.7% of teens)** and **Old Navy (49% of parents, 41.9% of teens)**, signaling a mix of athletic and affordable basics shaping household carts.

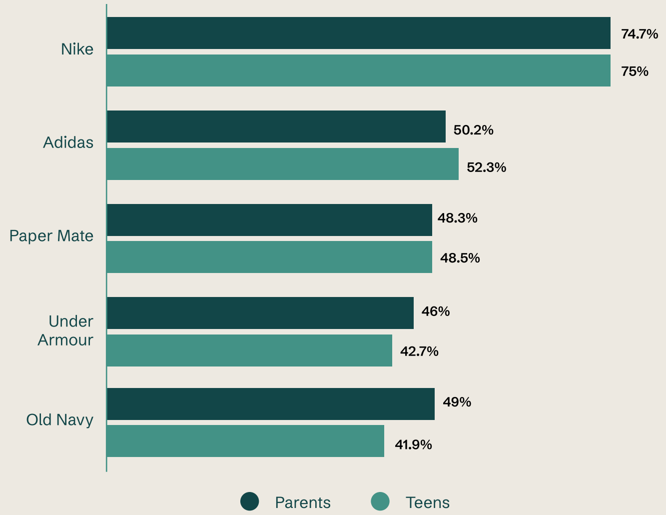
On the retailer side, **Walmart is the clear winner**, with **81.6% of parents** and **76.9% of teens** shopping there this season. **Amazon** follows closely (**75.5% of parents, 68.8% of teens)**, showing its enduring pull for convenience and fast fulfillment. **Target** comes in third, capturing just over 60% from both groups. For clothing staples, **Old Navy** (47.1% parents / 39.6% teens) and **Kohl's** (42.1% / 39.2%) round out the top five.

Together, these numbers reveal a dual shopping mindset: families lean on global athletic giants for apparel and footwear while relying on mass retailers for accessibility, price, and breadth of product assortment.

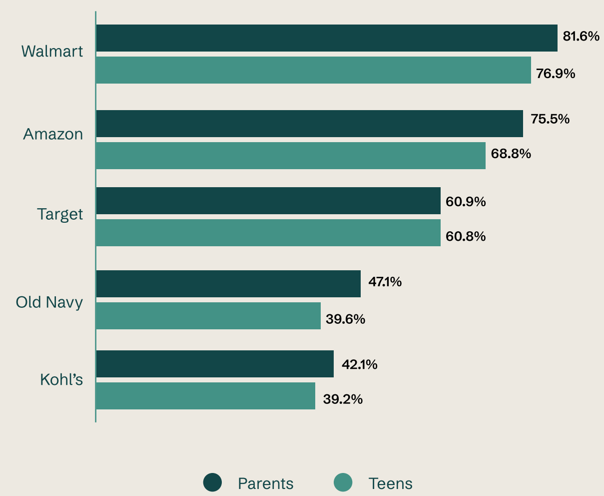
For marketers, the message is clear: **Nike and Walmart are anchoring back-to-school shopping lists, but there's room for challenger brands and retailers to carve out space by combining affordability with distinct value.**

Nike is the top brand choice for both parents and teens, leading Adidas by a wide margin. Among retailers, Walmart ranks highest, follwed by Amazon.

Brand Preference



Retailer Preference

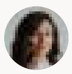


Q11.BrandPreferences. Which brands are part of your back-to-school shopping this year? Please select all that apply. N = 521
Q12.RetailerPreferen. And, which retailers are you considering for your back-to-school shopping? Please select all that apply. N = 521

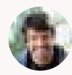
What People Are Saying

On Price and Value

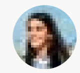
"One of the main influences on my choice of brands to purchase for back-to-school items is simply price."

- Parent 

"I focus on durability and the price—if it lasts and I can afford it, I'll buy it."

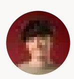
— Parent 

"If it's something I know will last, I'm willing to pay a little more for it."

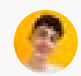
— Teen 

On Quality and Comfort

"When I'm back-to-school shopping, my choice is influenced by what I know has good quality—and things I can afford."

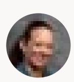
— Teen 

"I want something that fits right and feels good, because I'll be wearing it all year."

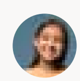
— Teen 

On Shopping Channels

"In-store lets me see if things fit right and check the quality—plus, I don't have to wait for shipping."

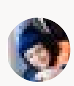
— Parent 

"I shop online to avoid the crowds and compare prices faster."

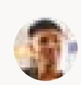
— Teen 

On Must-Haves

"Sneakers are always the first thing on my list. I wear them every day, so they have to be right."

— Teen 

"Backpacks and notebooks—those are the real essentials. Everything else can wait."

— Parent 

On Brand Loyalty

> *"I usually stick to what I know, but if another brand has a better price or quality, I'll switch."*
>
> — Parent

> *"Nike is my go-to—it's reliable and stylish."*
>
> — Teen

Recommendations for Brands & Retailers

Lead with transparent value. Use price-lock messaging and tiered "good-better-best" bundles to satisfy both budget-conscious parents and quality-focused teens.

Mix channels intentionally. Offer ship-to-store and reserve-online options to merge convenience with fit assurance.

Lean into emotional engagement. Teens respond to interactive campaigns (social contests, style showcases), while parents appreciate budget tools and savings guarantees.

Time your push. Launch early-summer teasers, then close with a late-summer urgency drive tied to local school calendars.

Closing:
A Back-to-School Season of Balance

Back-to-School 2025 is a balancing act: essentials over extras, price over novelty, and emotional connection over generic messaging.

The brands that succeed will be those that bridge parent priorities with teen aspirations—meeting shoppers in the right channel, with the right message, at the right time.

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Want access to the full study?

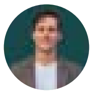
Reach out to the Knit team to get access to the full study to see how Knit's AI Platform brought this data to life and to dig deeper into the findings yourself.

Included in the full study, you'll get access to Knit's full report including:

- Additional Key Takeaways & Recommendations
- VOC Video Showreels
- Theme Trees and Verbatims
- And more

Contributors

Dillon Jacob
Research

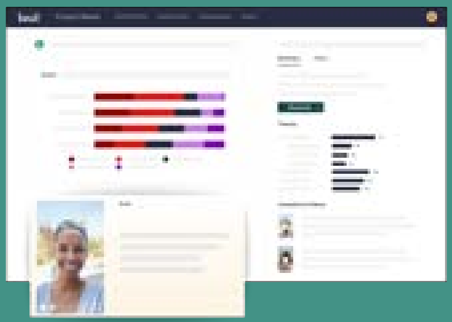


Logan Lebouef
Content

HKO Agency
Design

About Knit

Knit is the end-to-end consumer research platform top brands use to get deep quant and qual insights at scale in a single survey. The Knit AI-native platform automates key phases of the research process from scoping to storytelling, so you can do more research in less time and at a fraction of the cost.



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