

Back to School with the Three Rs

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Long before I'm ready to say goodbye to summer, just when I can't imagine wearing anything but T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops, I open up the August Sunday sales flyers to find they are bursting with back-to-school merchandise.

My kids see those flyers and run screaming from the room. They aren't ready to face life without flip-flops either.

I dread back-to-school shopping. It always seems to end in a feeding frenzy. I'm always in a hurry, and with each daughter insisting in each ear that they "need" the package of hot pink erasers or the cute Post-it notes, I end up just throwing packages of stuff willy-nilly into the cart and making my escape.

One way for me to stop the feeding frenzy is to fall back on that tried and true formula: the three Rs.

The first R stands for *reduce*. In *Green, Greener, Greenest: A Practical Guide to Making Eco-Smart Choices a Part of Your Life* journalist Lori Bongiorno writes, "[Reducing] is a pretty simple concept, but it's often the most overlooked of the 3Rs. If you buy less stuff, then you will have fewer things to dispose of."

One way to reduce is to take inventory at home first. Official supply list in hand, I rummage through my children's supplies to salvage what I can from last year, an easy task because their backpacks are still sitting in the exact spot they dropped them in late May. I may need to change a battery

or two, wipe down the pencil box, and sharpen some pencils, but such early intervention reduces time, cost, and resources.

"Break the shopping habit," advises Bongiorno. "Buy only what you really need."

Related to reducing is the second R, which stands for *reuse*. When I do have to shop, I try to purchase items that have long lives and many uses.

"Reusing is preferable to recycling," writes Bongiorno, "because the product doesn't need to be reprocessed before it can be used again."

It may mean that I spend more up front, but it's worth it for some items. My kids' battered L. L. Bean backpacks still work despite years of school books, travel, and trips to the library.

Trendy, cheap clothes are a particular environmental disaster. Bogiorno points out, "Conventionally grown cotton, for example, is a huge eco-offender—it consumes enormous amounts of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers that deplete soil and pollute water. Fabric...dyes are made from heavy metals and other toxic chemicals; the dyeing process uses vast amounts of water and is highly polluting."

Organic clothing is getting easier to find; it's available at retailers like Wal-mart, and websites such as the Green People Directory (www.green-people.org) list other places to find sustainably produced clothing (and all kinds of other sustainably produced

household items). My approach is to buy some decent, well-made basics like jeans, khakis, and T-shirts, maybe a sweater or two, that are easily interchangeable. Then the girls and I also patronize consignment shops in town to find fun, funky clothes—even name brands—that are inexpensive and still retain the "cool" factor.

Of course, some items can't be reused. Until all the fourth-graders in my daughter's class carry their own handkerchiefs, new Kleenex boxes are non-negotiable. But at least the boxes are recyclable, which is the third R.

"Recycling is a no-brainer," writes Bongiorno. "[It] saves energy, water, and other natural resources, and reduces pollution, including the greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change."

Many school supplies made of paper and plastic contain at least some recycled content. Retailers such as Office Depot and Staples have made great strides in providing more "green" office supplies such as refillable toner and ink cartridges, recycled paper products, and even sustainably harvested bamboo desk accessories.

Going back to school can be a teachable moment for my family. We can learn to reject empty consumerism, emphasize stewardship and resourcefulness, and discern the difference between needs and wants.

I'll still miss my flip-flops, though. ■

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