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Back-to-School Shopping in Canada: Back-to-School Shopper Journey 2026



Make better decisions, faster, with access to rapid insights at every stage of the consumer journey

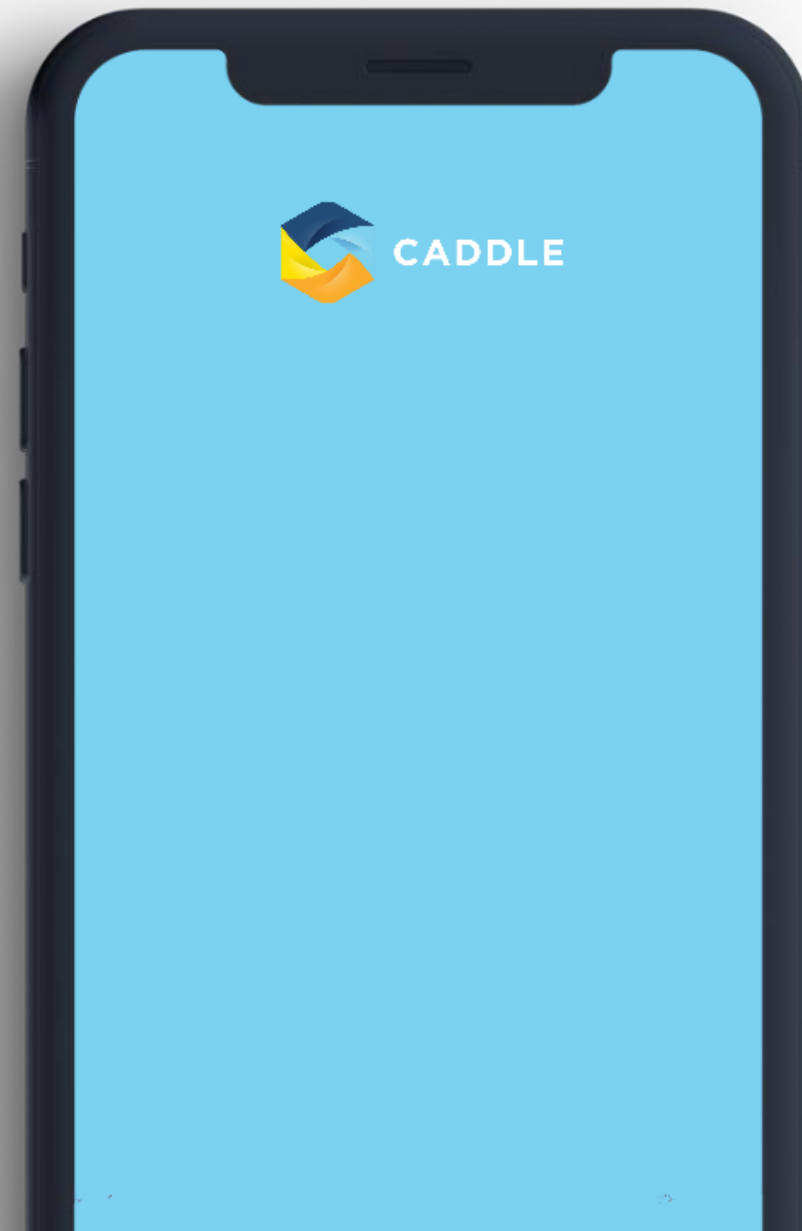
May 2026

Methodology

Caddle, in partnership with the Retail Council of Canada (RCC), surveyed Canadians from coast to coast to better understand consumers' shopping around the next Back to School season.

Surveys were conducted in late April 2026 using Caddle's mobile platform and online panel amongst a representative randomized sample of n= 1,398 Canadian shoppers with children that will be attending kindergarten to Grade 12 during the next school year (2026-2027). Where applicable, comparisons to 2025 have been added.

All data presented is owned by Caddle. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by Caddle, Inc.



Key Findings (1 of 2)

01 **Planning Begins Early but Is Not Always Thorough**

Most parents begin preparing for Back-to-School in late spring or early summer. Sixty-one percent have already started or plan to begin soon (down from 67 percent in 2025). Younger families tend to plan earlier, while high school parents are far more likely to shop on the fly.

02 **Promotions and Price Define the First Stop**

Price remains the number one driver of retailer choice. Eighty-five percent of parents actively seek deals (slightly down from 89 percent last year). This makes mass merchandisers such as Walmart the clear starting point for most families due to competitive pricing and convenience.

03 **Emotional States Influence Decision-Making**

Parents who feel excited, stressed, or overwhelmed are significantly more likely to rely on product reviews and to change their purchase decisions based on them. These emotional states are more prevalent among parents of younger and middle-grade children.

Key Findings (2 of 2)

04 Shopping Happens in Multiple Rounds

Although most parents feel confident that they can finish shopping efficiently, only 19 percent expect to complete everything in a single trip. The majority plan for two to three separate visits driven by stock availability, price comparisons, and evolving school lists.

05 In-Store Dominates the Path to Purchase

Despite increased online research, 99 percent of parents still plan to shop in-store for Back-to-School essentials. Core categories such as supplies, snacks, clothing, and hygiene items remain overwhelmingly brick-and-mortar purchases.

06 Product Choices Shift with Age

Private label products are most popular with parents of younger children. National brands gain influence as kids age and develop stronger preferences. Many parents remain open to switching between brands and store labels when price and quality align. New this year, 44 percent of parents are already using or very interested in an AI-powered tool to help build shopping lists, compare prices, or suggest where to shop.

Business Implications

- **Start early, support late:** While 61 percent of parents are already in planning mode, many others wait until closer to the school year. Early promotions paired with last-minute bundles and reminders can capture both early planners and late shoppers.
- **Price is the priority:** Price, not brand, continues to drive decisions. Deals are expected, not optional. Make promotions highly visible and easy to act on both in-store and online.
- **Plan for multiple trips:** Most families make two or three visits rather than finishing in one trip. Reliable stock levels, clear signage, and re-engagement tactics such as targeted reminders will help capture incremental sales across those trips.
- **In-store still rules:** Online research is growing, but 99 percent of parents complete purchases in physical stores. Ensure the in-store experience, including availability, signage, and service, matches or exceeds what parents see digitally.
- **Emotion impacts purchase:** Stressed or excited shoppers are more review-sensitive and more likely to switch brands. Positive, reassuring messaging both in-store and online can help close sales.
- **Private label has an age window:** Younger families strongly favour store brands, but brand loyalty builds with age. Tailor value messaging by life stage.
- **Technology creates new opportunity:** Forty-four percent of parents are already using or very interested in AI tools for planning. Retailers that offer simple AI-powered list builders, price finders, or store recommenders can differentiate themselves and win earlier in the journey.

Conclusions

The Back-to-School shopping journey in 2026 remains emotional, multi-trip, and highly value-driven. Parents begin planning early yet face ongoing challenges around price sensitivity, shifting priorities by grade level, and high expectations for both digital tools and in-store support.

Retailers that support this journey end-to-end, with strong visible promotions, reliable product availability, helpful planning resources, clear reviews, and emerging technologies such as AI assistants, will stand out in a competitive and emotionally charged retail moment.

Back-to-School Market Landscape

Sizing the opportunity and pressures shaping parent behavior

Retailers should emphasize strong value messaging this season. Parents continue to feel significant price pressure, which is influencing their choices around what to buy, where to shop, and how they approach the entire process.

Back to School shopping represents a more than \$4.5B market

Back-to-School shopping represents a substantial \$4.5 billion opportunity in Canada. This market is powered by roughly 6 million K-12 students and average spending of \$600 to \$750 per child when electronics are included.



6 Million

K-12 Students
(2023/2024)*



1.8

Children/ Family**



\$600-750

Spend/ Child***

\$ 4.5 Billion

Estimated approx. Back-to-school shopping market size

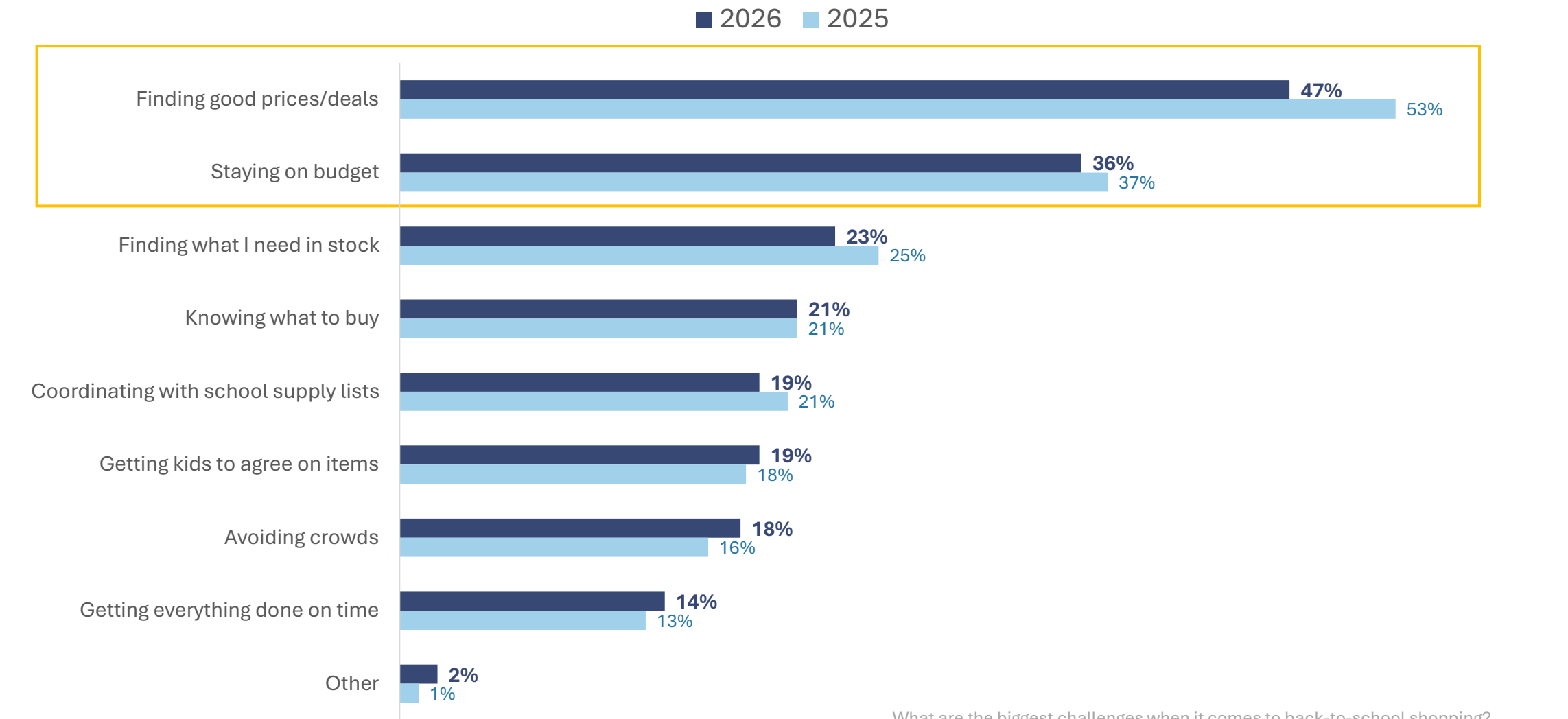
*Statistics Canada [2023/2024](#): Public and Private schools

**2021 [Census](#)

***2024 Multiple Surveys – includes electronics

Price Pressure Tops the List of Parent Challenges

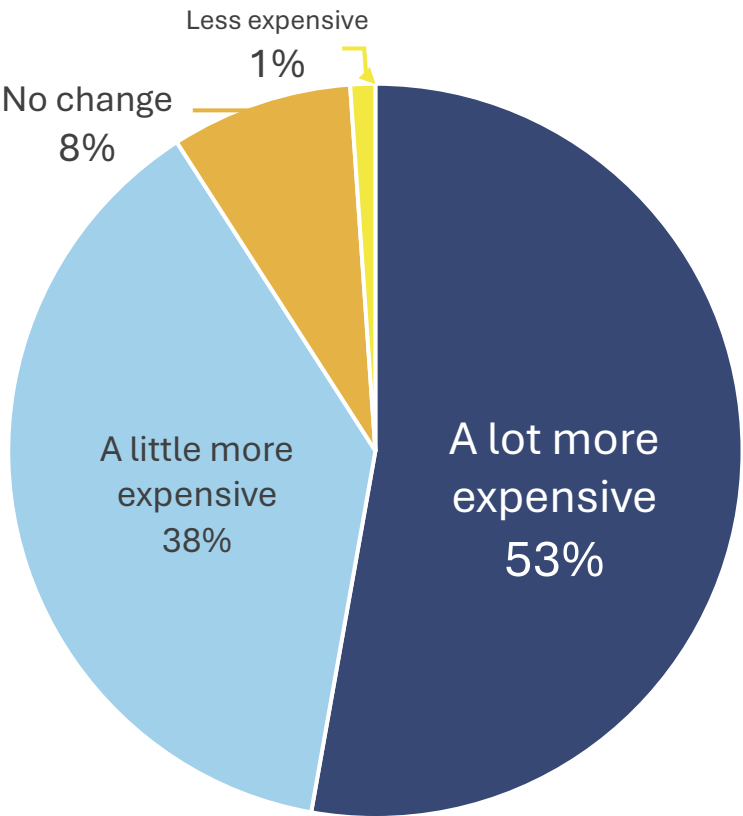
Price remains the biggest challenge for parents during Back-to-School shopping. 53 percent of parents cite finding good prices and deals as their primary difficulty, ahead of staying within budget and ensuring items are in stock.



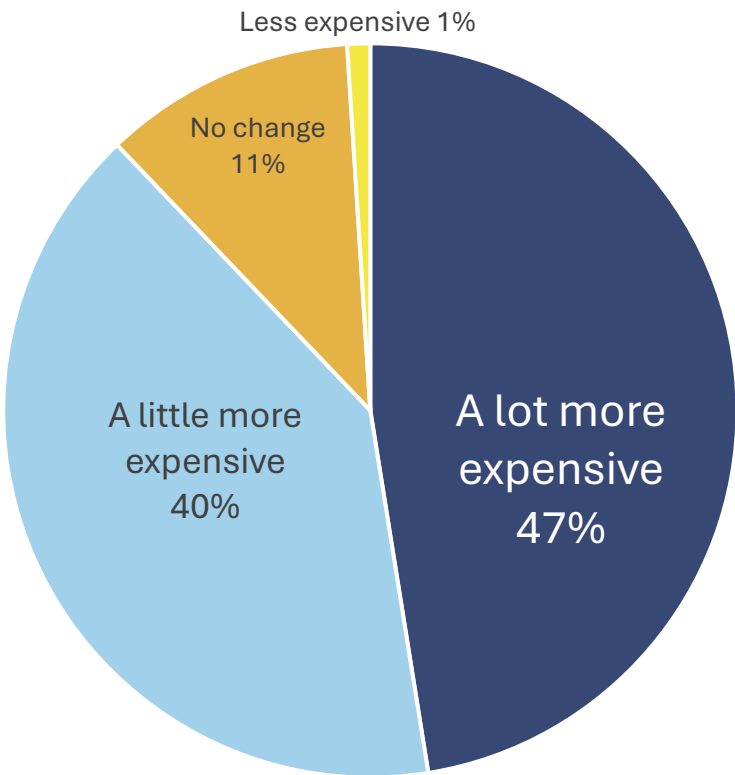
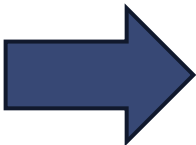
What are the biggest challenges when it comes to back-to-school shopping?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

91% Say BTS Shopping Is More Expensive Over Half Say ‘A Lot More’

Sticker shock continues this year. 91 percent of parents feel Back-to-School items have become more expensive, with 53 percent describing the rise as a lot more expensive (up from 47 percent in 2025).



2025

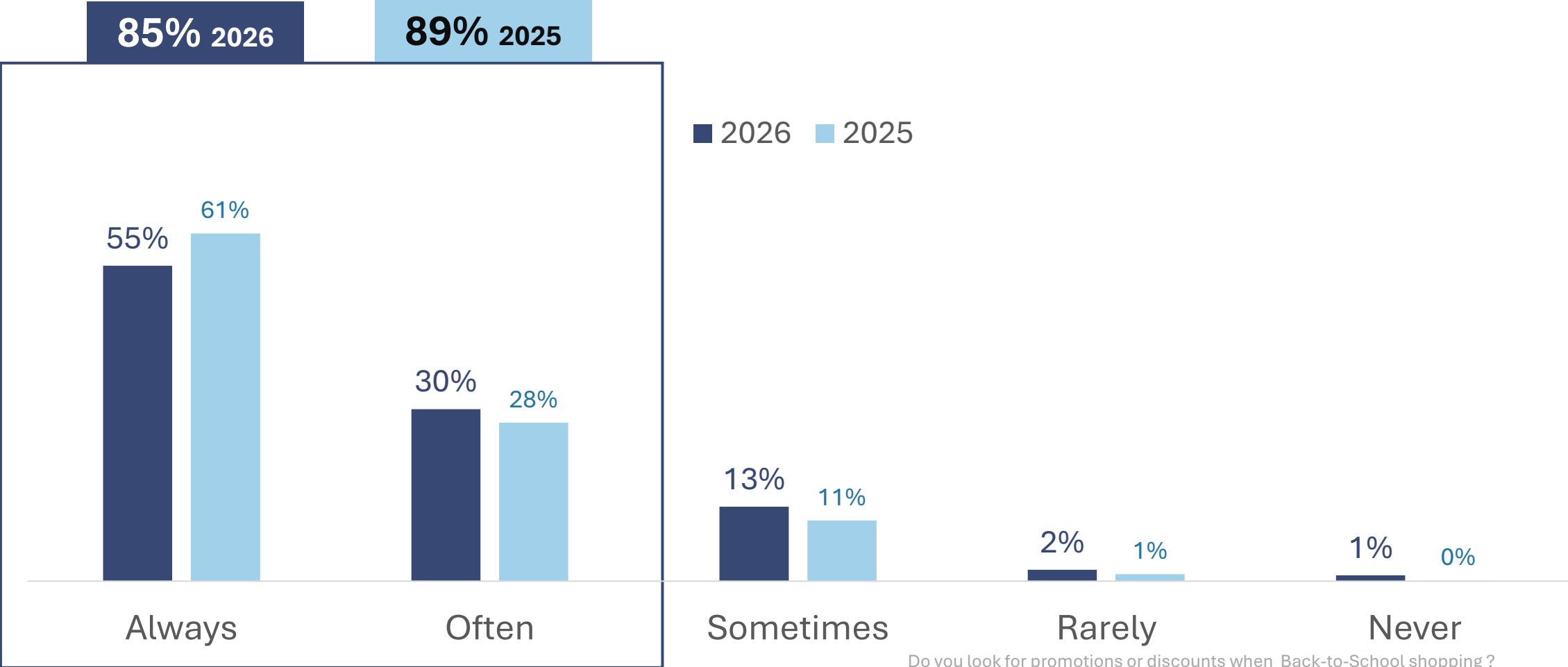


2026

Do you feel that Back-to-School shopping has become more expensive in recent years?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

Deals are expected: 85% Always or Often Hunt for Promotions

Parents actively seek out promotions when shopping for Back-to-School. 85 percent always or often look for discounts (slightly down from 89 percent last year), while only 1 percent shop without considering offers.



Do you look for promotions or discounts when Back-to-School shopping ?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

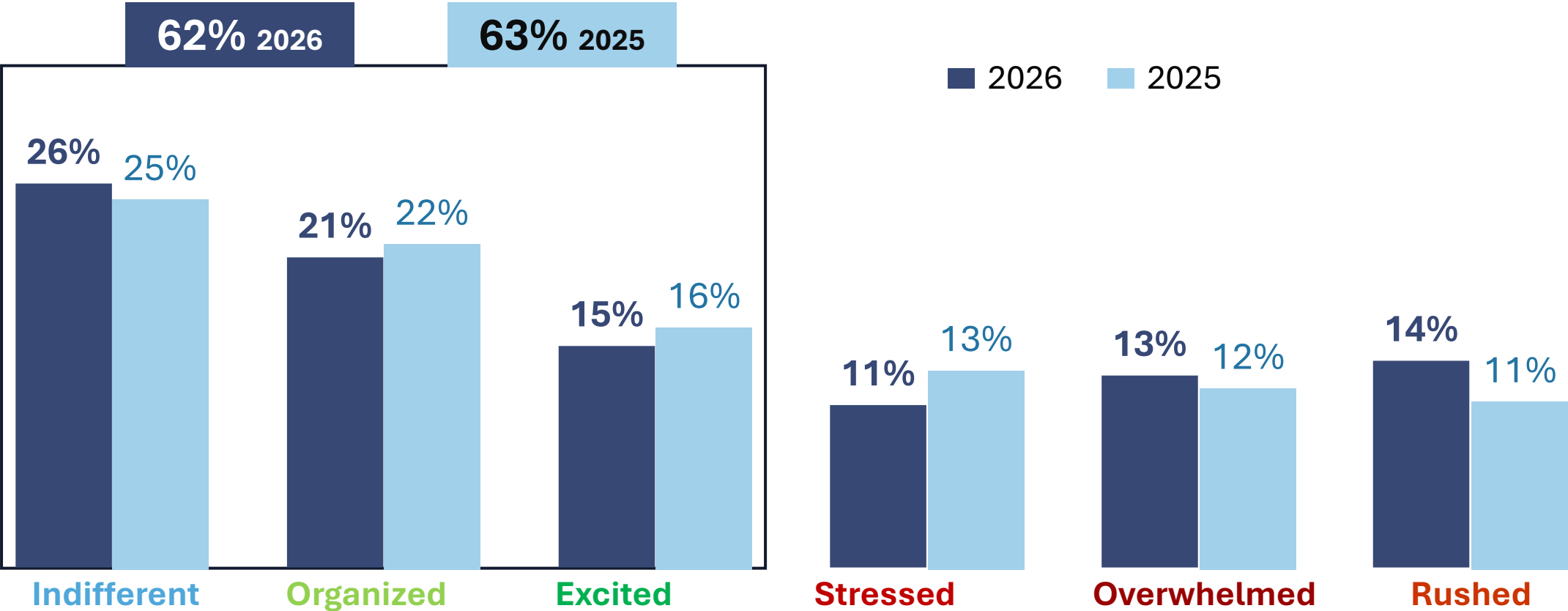
Shopper Sentiment & Emotional Drivers

How parents *feel* about Back-to-School shopping and how emotion affects decisions

Many parents approach Back-to-School season with optimism rather than dread. Understanding these emotional states can help shape more effective messaging and in-store support strategies.

6 in 10 Parents Feel Indifferent or Positive About BTS Shopping

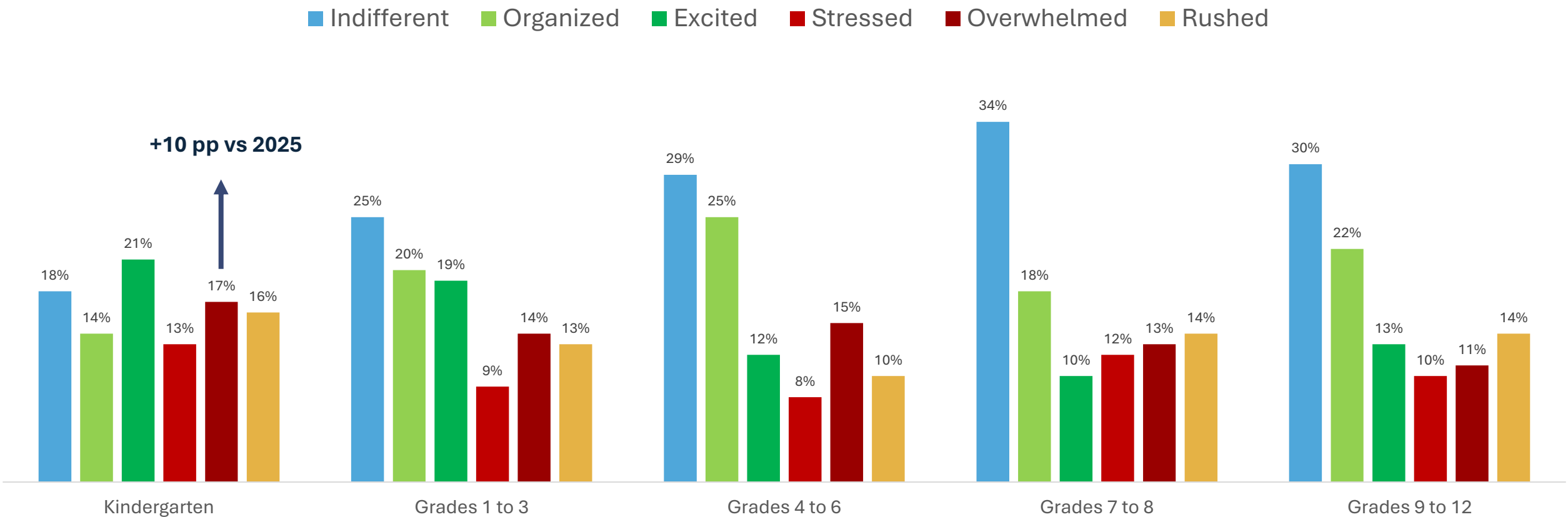
Despite cost pressures, the majority of parents feel neutral or positive about the Back-to-School shopping experience. 62 percent fall into the indifferent, organized, or excited categories, with only 13 percent feeling overwhelmed.



Which of the following best describes how you usually feel during the Back-to-School shopping season?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

Excitement Peaks Early – Then Fades into Stress and Indifference

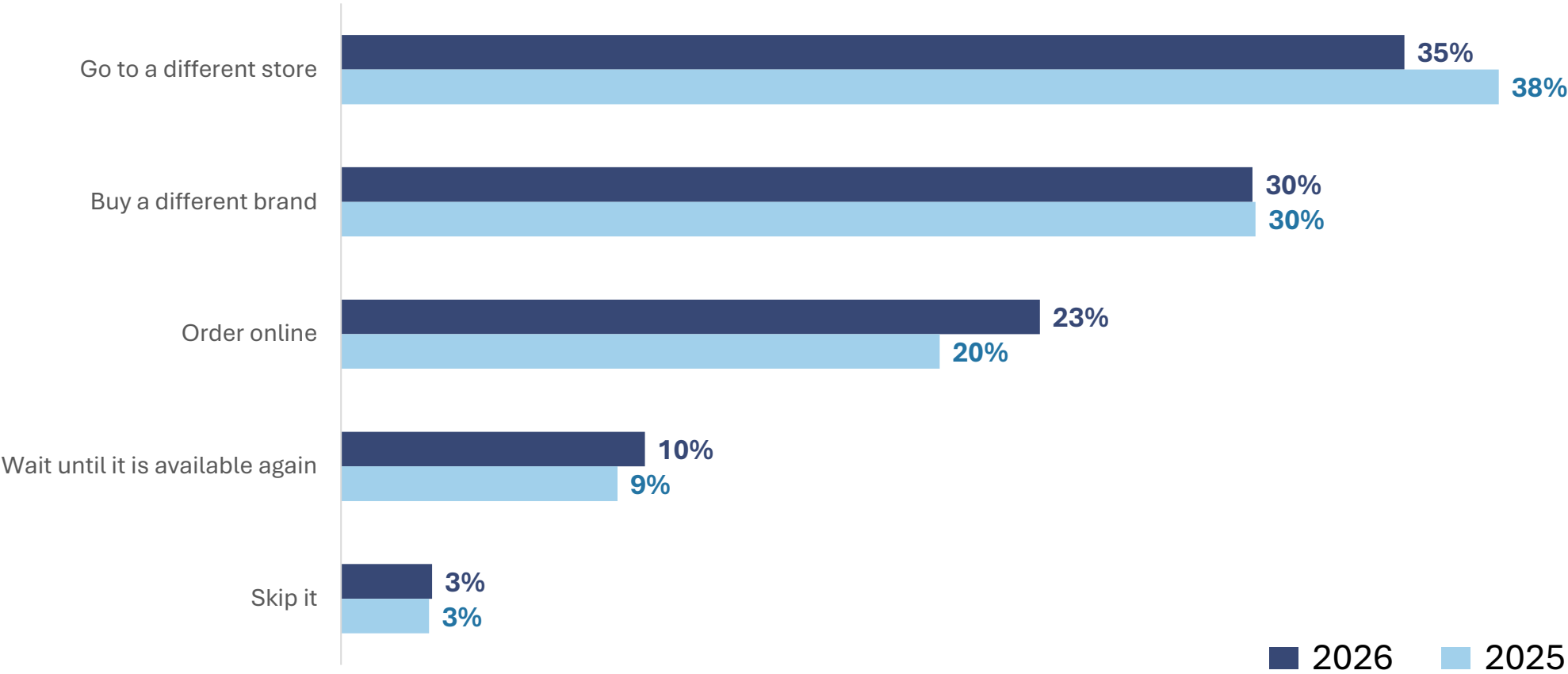
Parents of younger children tend to feel more excitement and organization when shopping. As students reach high school, feelings of indifference and stress become more common.



Which of the following best describes how you usually feel during the Back-to-School shopping season?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

Loyalty Is Thin – 35% Will Switch Stores if Items Are Missing

Parents show limited store loyalty when faced with stockouts. 35 percent will go to a different retailer (down from 38 percent in 2025), while 30 percent opt for a different brand. Only 3 percent skip the item entirely, and online ordering has increased to 23 percent.



What do you usually do when a key item is out of stock at your usual retailer?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

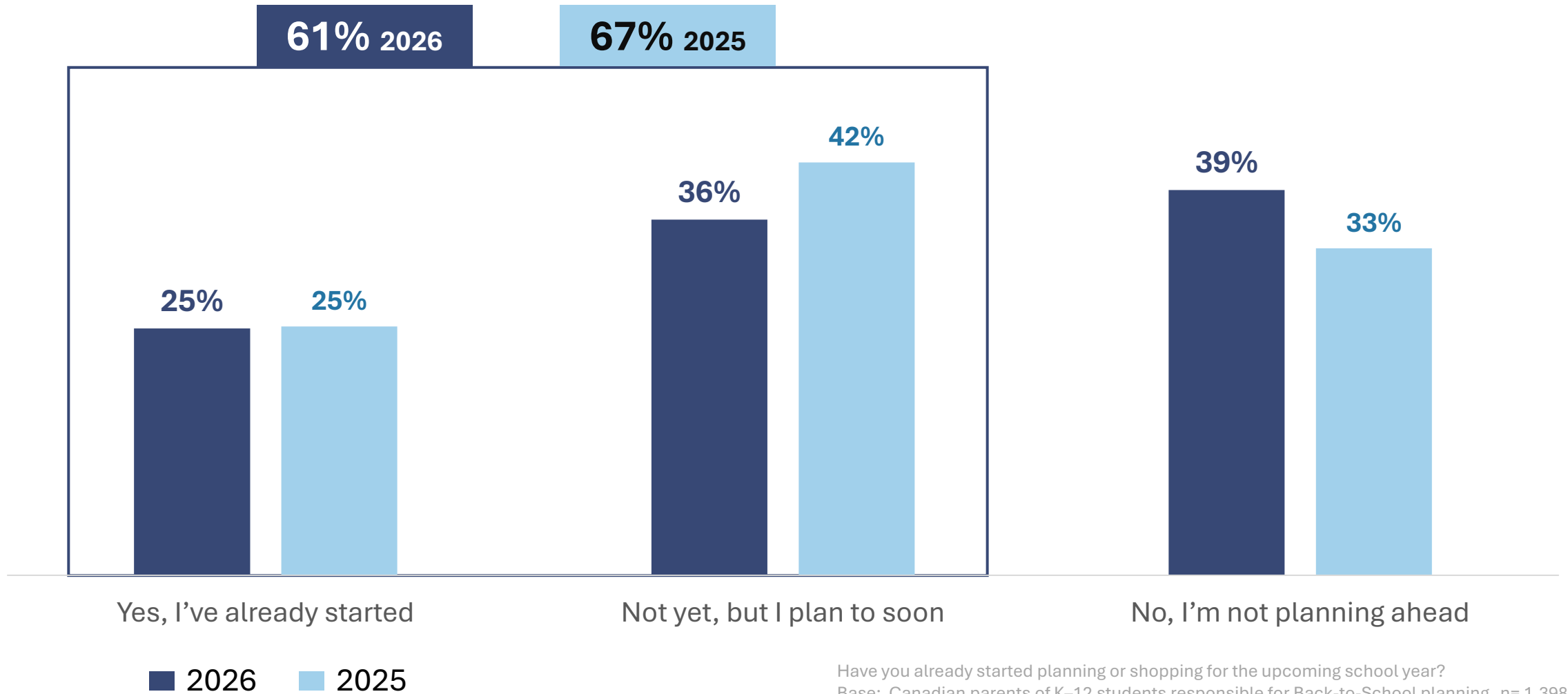
Planning & Purchase Behavior

When, how, and with whom parents shop for school

Planning for Back-to-School remains somewhat fragmented. Retailers can help close the gap between early intentions and actual purchases by offering timely promotions and easy-to-use planning resources.

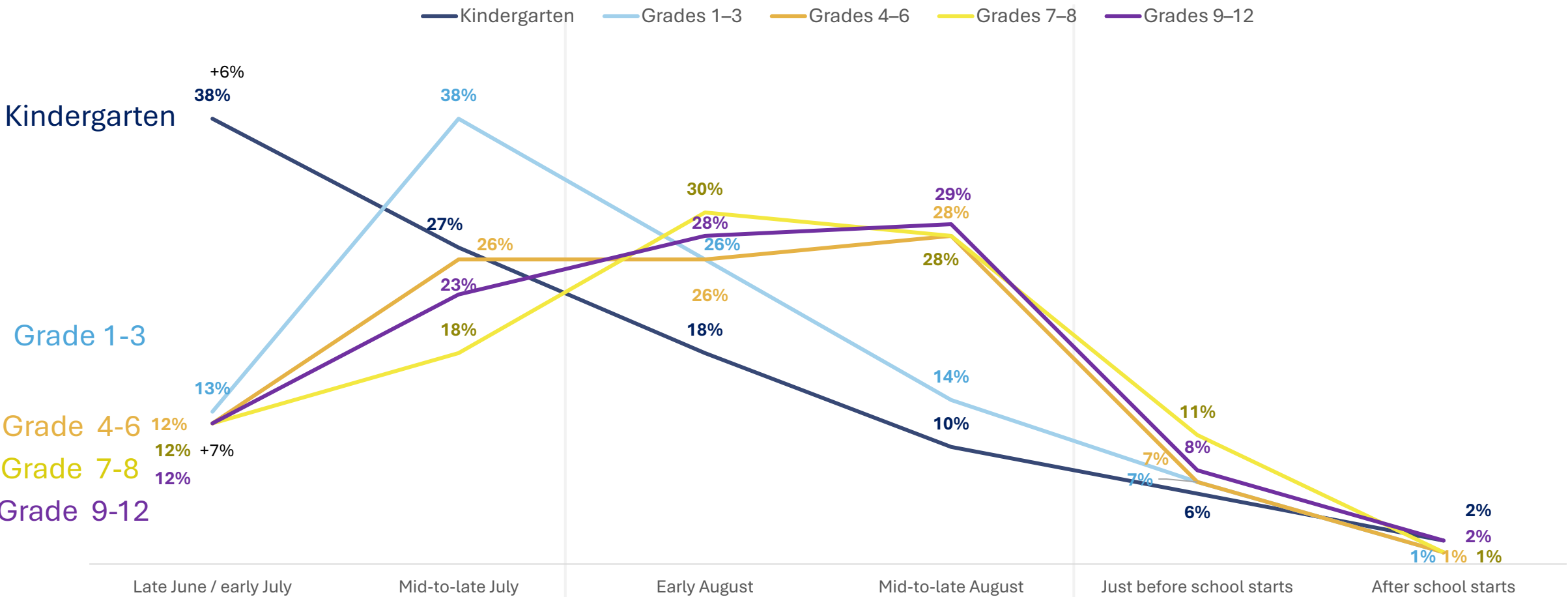
61% of Parents Are Already in Planning Mode

A majority of parents are actively preparing for the upcoming school year. 61 percent have already started shopping or plan to begin soon (compared to 67 percent in 2025).



Early Years Drive Early Carts – Older Kids Mean August Rush

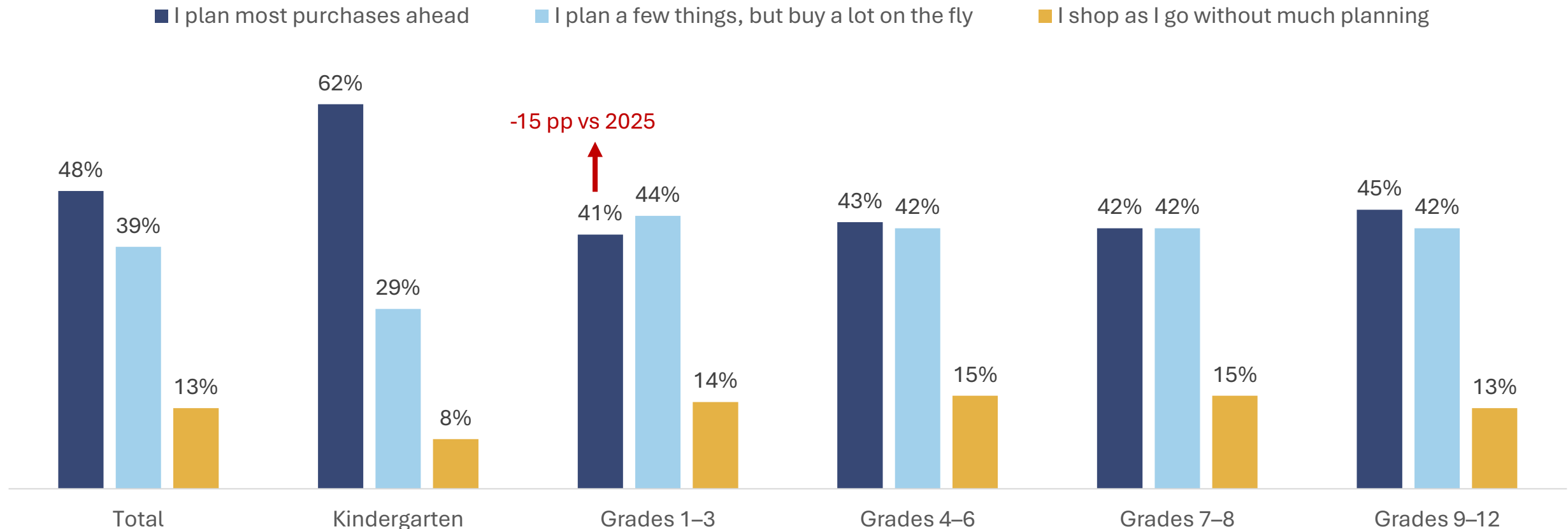
Families with younger children tend to start their Back-to-School shopping earlier in the summer. Parents of middle and high school students are more likely to concentrate their purchases in mid-to-late August.



When do you expect to do MOST of your Back-to-School shopping?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n = 1,398

Planning Declines as Children Age – Impulsivity Rises in High School

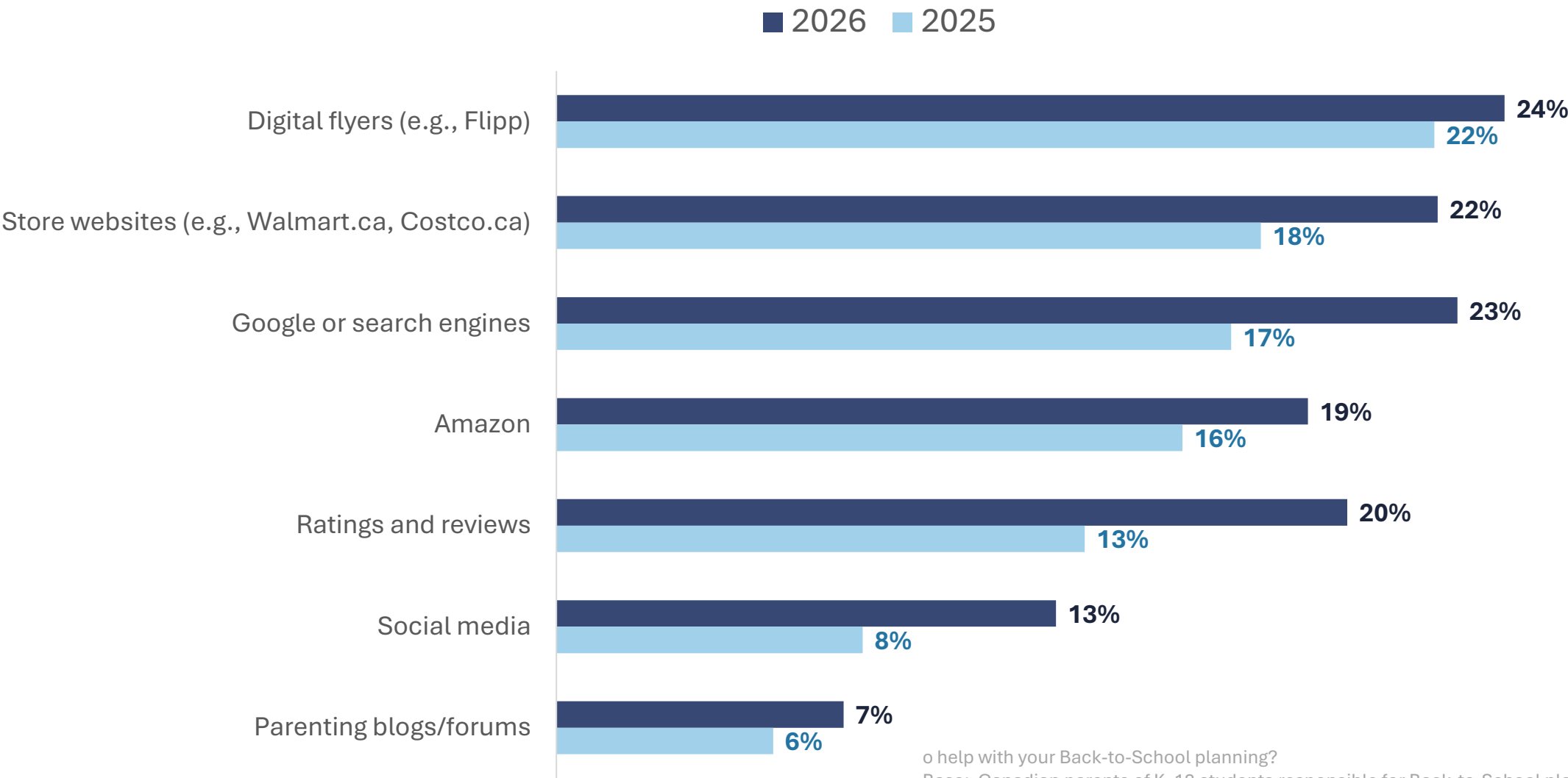
Advance planning decreases as children get older. Only about one-third of high school parents plan most purchases ahead of time, while many prefer to shop more spontaneously.



Do you USUALLY plan your Back-to-School shopping in advance, or shop as you go?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

Digital Flyers Lead Back-to-School Planning Tools

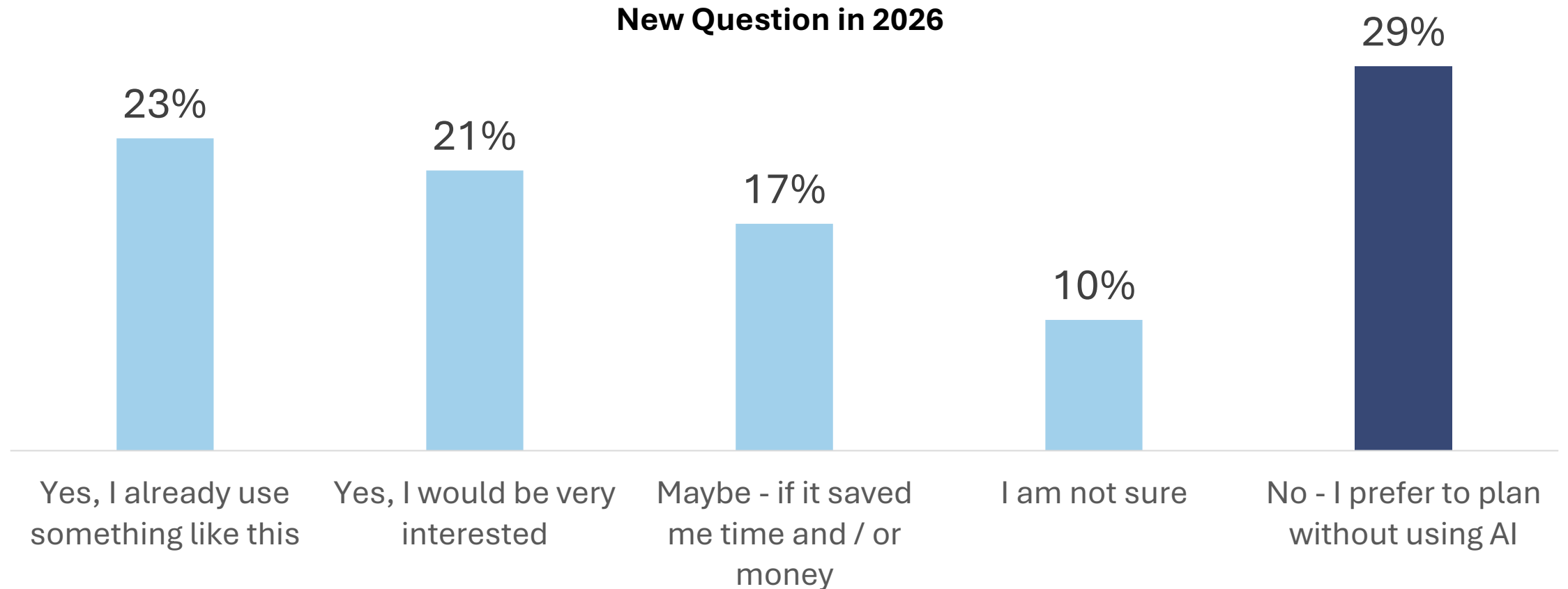
Digital flyers top the list of planning resources parents use. 24 percent rely on apps such as Flipp (up from 22 percent in 2025), ahead of store websites and search engines.



o help with your Back-to-School planning?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Parents Are Open to AI Assistance for Back-to-School Planning

44% of parents already use or would be very interested in an AI-powered tool to build shopping lists, find the best prices, compare products, or recommend local stores. Another 17% say they would consider it if it clearly saved time or money. Only 29% prefer to plan entirely without AI—creating a clear opportunity for retailers to stand out with smart digital solutions.

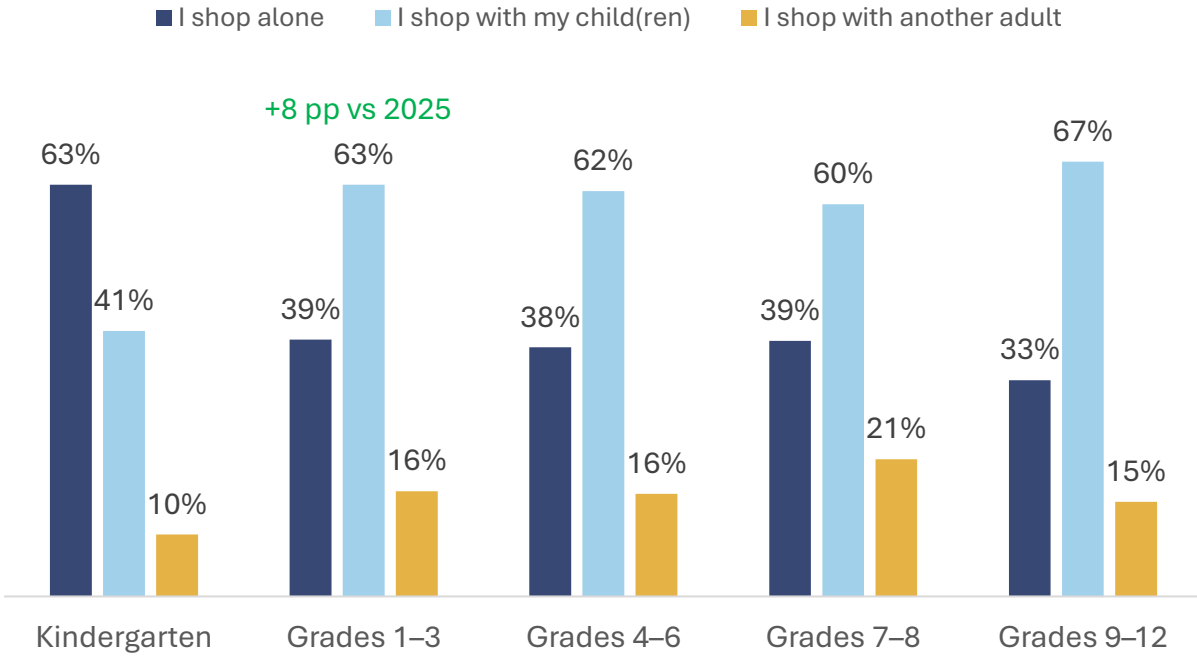
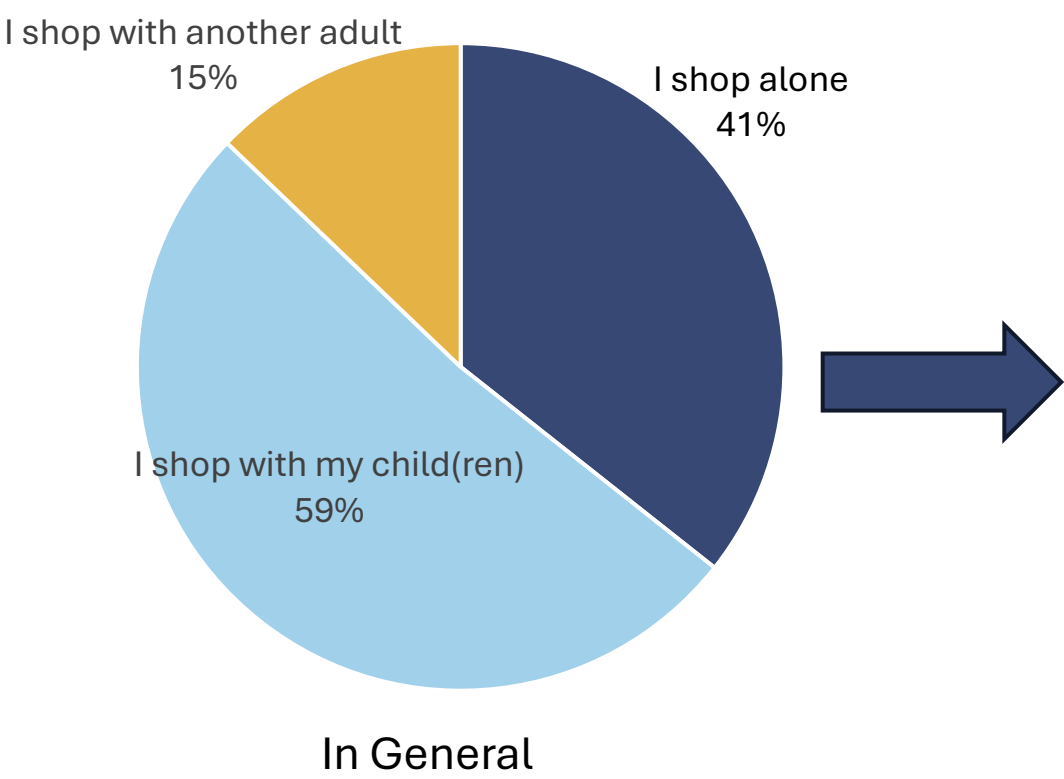


Would you use an Artificial Intelligence(AI) powered tool that could help you plan back-to-school shopping (i.e. building a specific shopping list, finding best prices, comparing products or suggesting where to shop in your area)?

Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Who Parents Shop With Depends on Their Child's Age

Shopping companions change with grade level. Parents of younger children are more likely to shop alone, while older students increasingly join the trip, particularly in high school.



Who do you whop with for Back-to-School items?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Retail Channels & Trip Behaviors

In-store is dominant—but online plays a growing role

Although online shopping continues to gain ground, in-store remains the preferred channel for most Back-to-School purchases. Retailers should focus on delivering a strong in-store experience, especially around convenience and product availability.

Bricks still beat clicks: 99% Plan to Shop In-Store

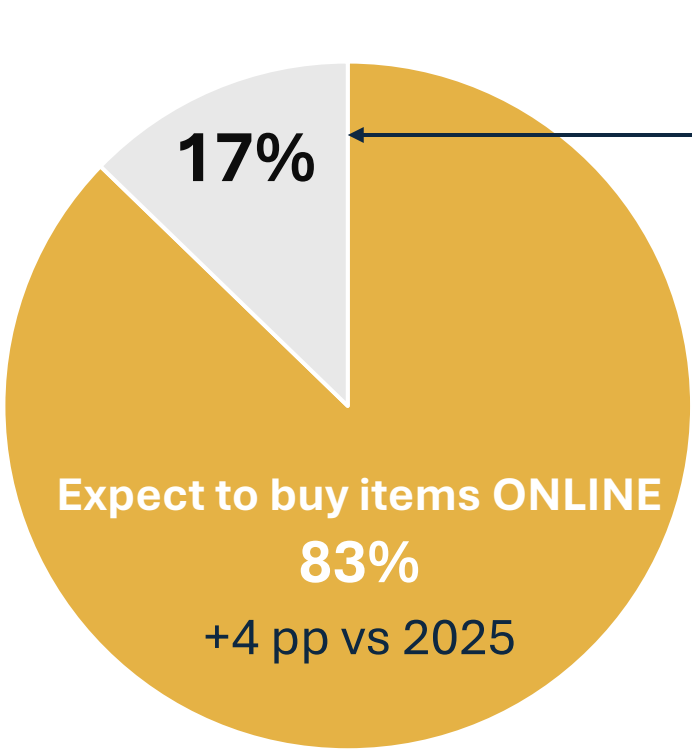
In-store shopping continues to dominate the Back-to-School journey. 99 percent of parents plan to make purchases in physical stores, even as online buying has grown to 83 percent (up 4 percentage points versus 2025).



I do not expect to buy anything **in-store**



I do not expect to buy anything **ONLINE**

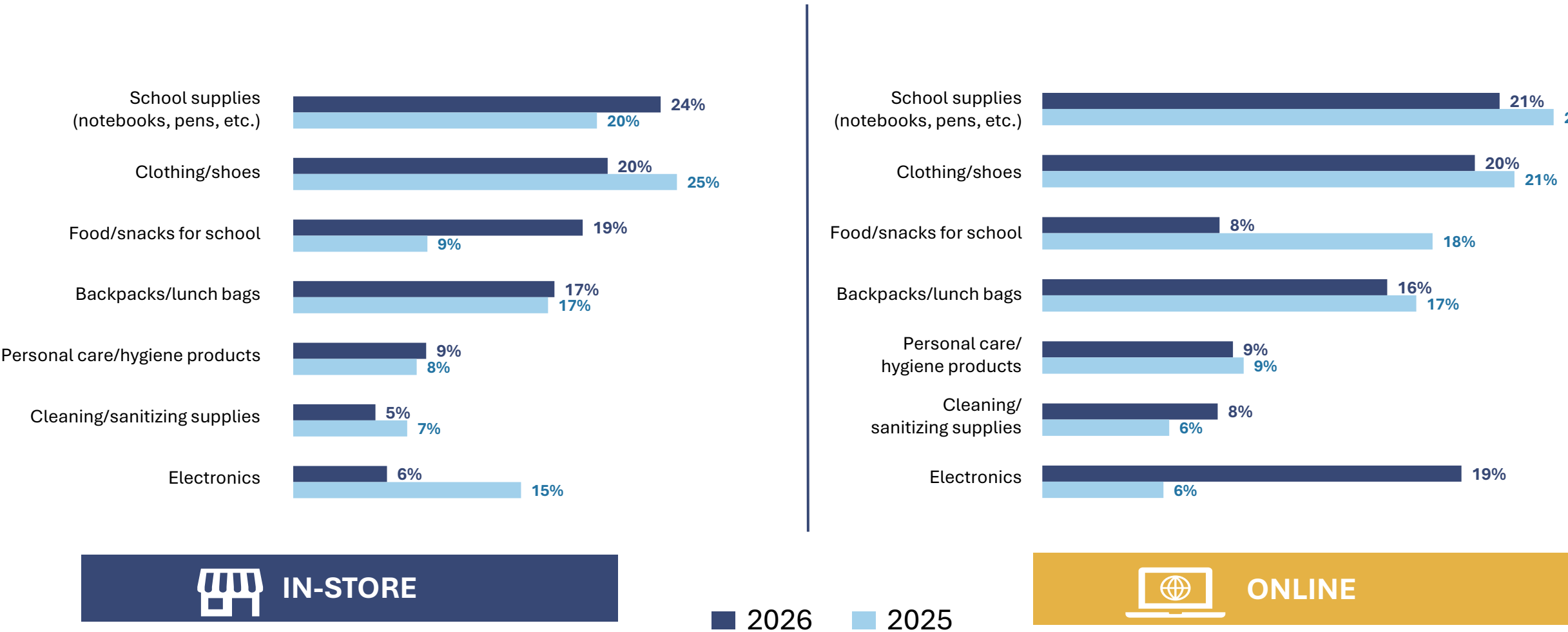


Which of the following items do you expect to buy IN-STORE for Back-to-School?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Which of the following items do you expect to buy ONLINE for Back-to-School?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

Everyday Essentials are Still an In-Store Game

Core Back-to-School categories such as school supplies, clothing, snacks, and personal care items are purchased overwhelmingly in-store.

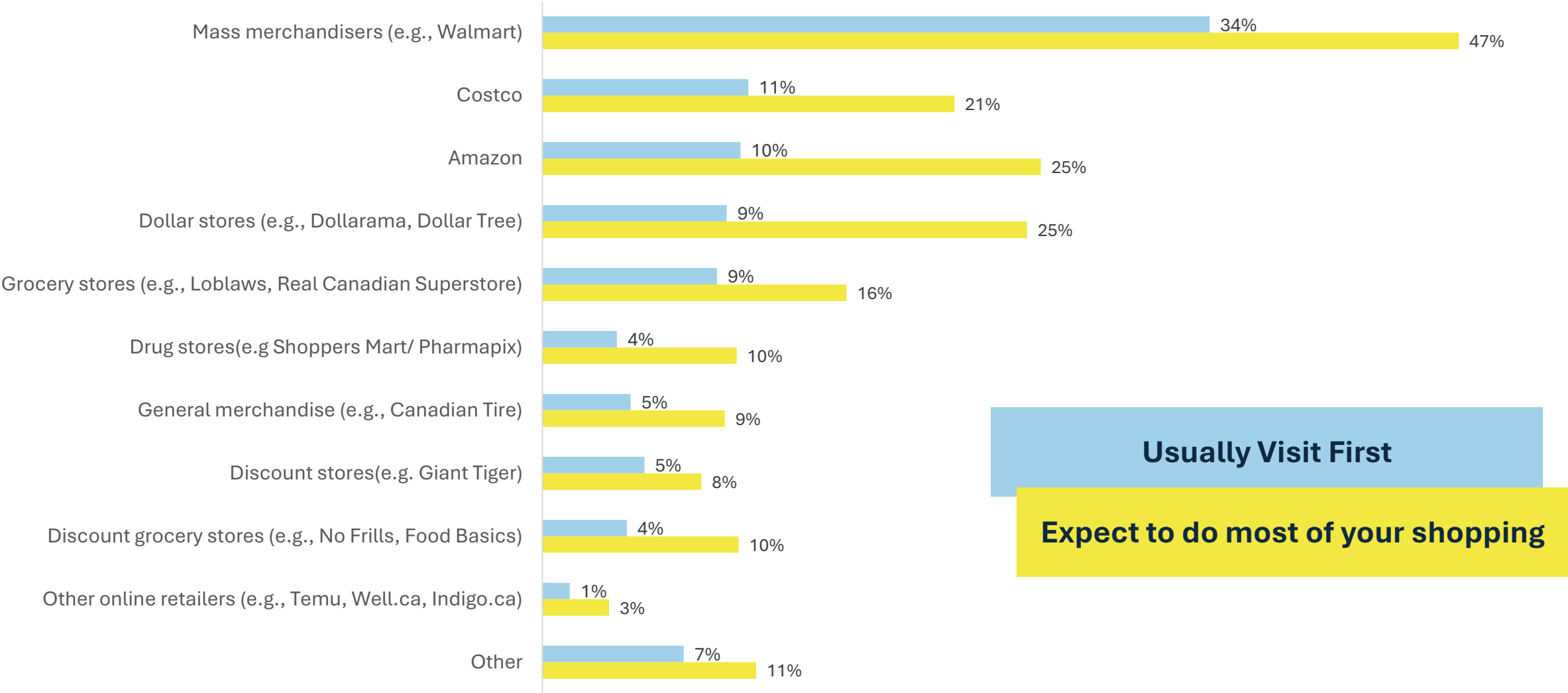


Which of the following items do you expect to buy IN-STORE for Back-to-School?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,188

Which of the following items do you expect to buy ONLINE for Back-to-School?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=815

Mass Merchandisers Are the First – and Main – Stop

Mass merchandisers (such as Walmart) serve as both the starting point and primary destination for most families. They lead in first visit (34 percent) and account for the largest share of total spending (47 percent).

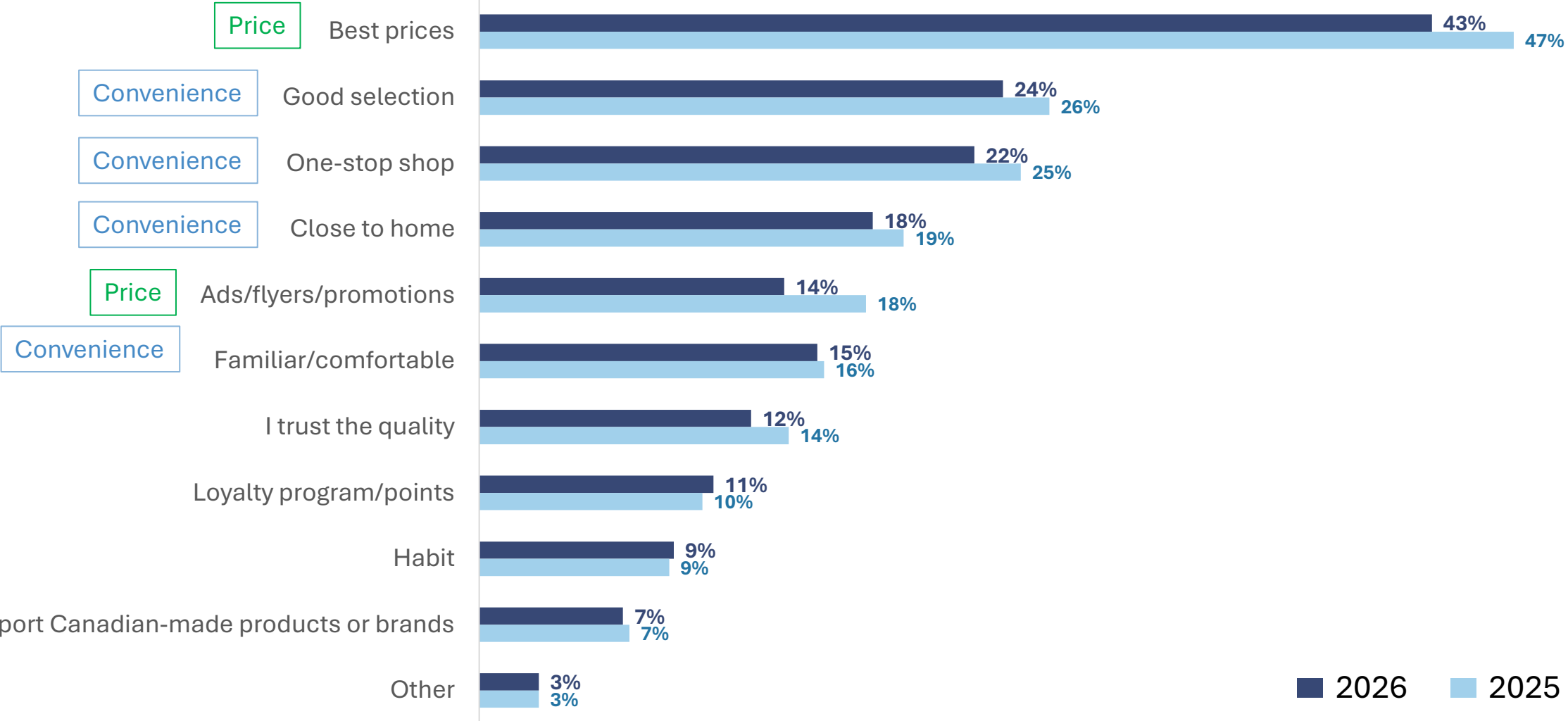


Which of type of retailer do you usually visit first for Back-to-School shopping?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Where do you expect to do MOST of your Back-to-School shopping this year?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Low Prices and One-Stop Shops Drive Retailer Choice

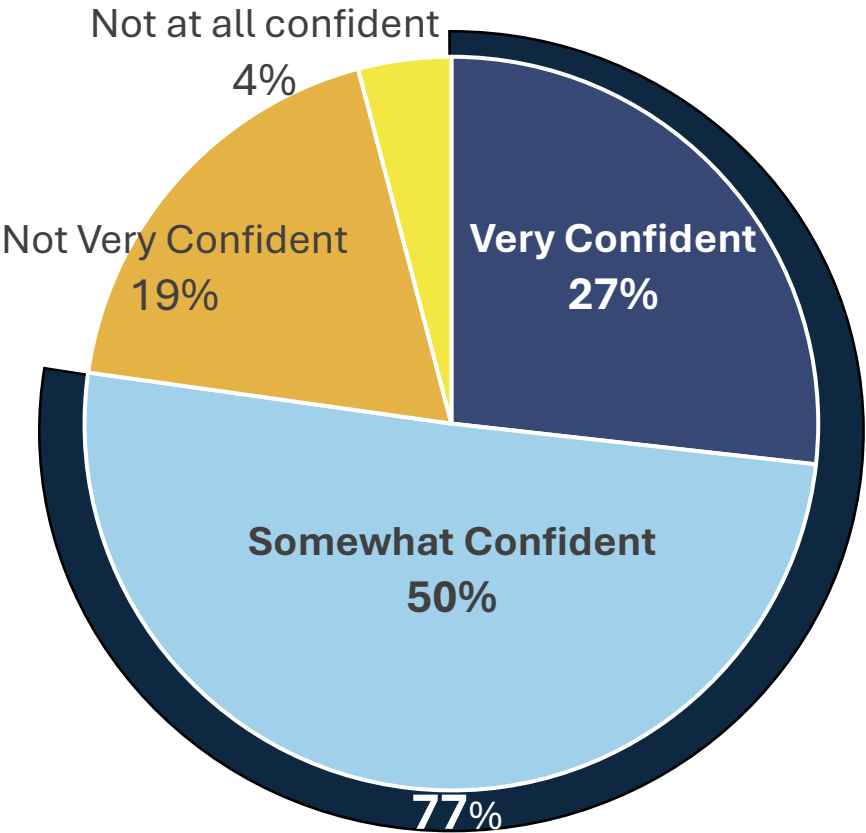
Best prices remain the leading factor when parents select a retailer (43 percent). Strong selection and one-stop shopping convenience follow closely behind.



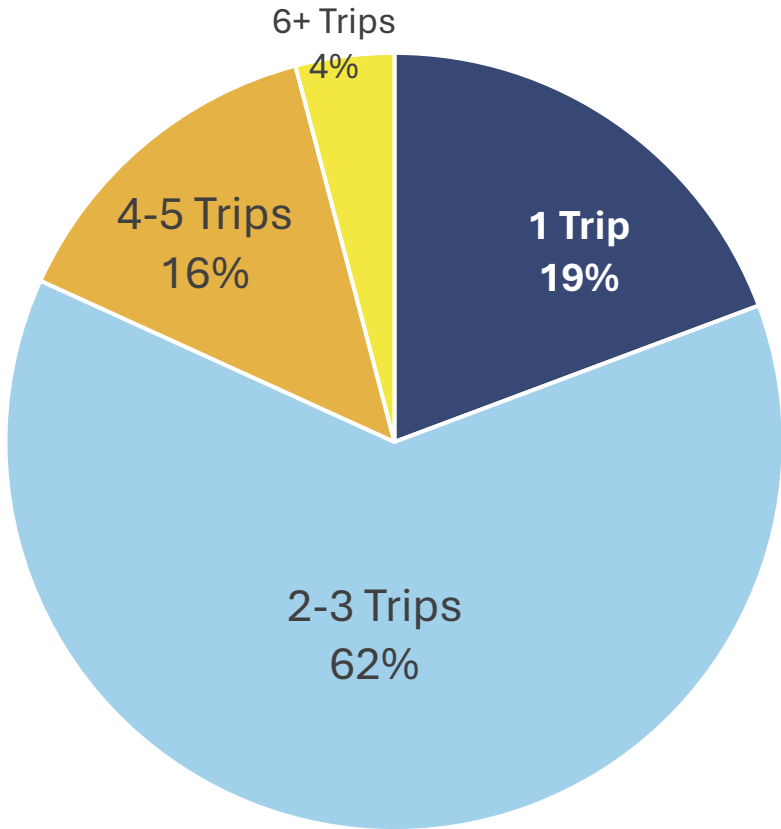
They support Canadian-made products or brands

78% Feel Confident— But Most Expect Multiple Trips

Most parents feel prepared to complete their Back-to-School shopping efficiently, yet the process typically involves several visits. 77 percent feel confident overall, while 62 percent expect to make two to three separate trips.



How confident are you in getting everything you need in one trip?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398



How many separate trips (online or in-store) do you usually make for Back-to-School shopping?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

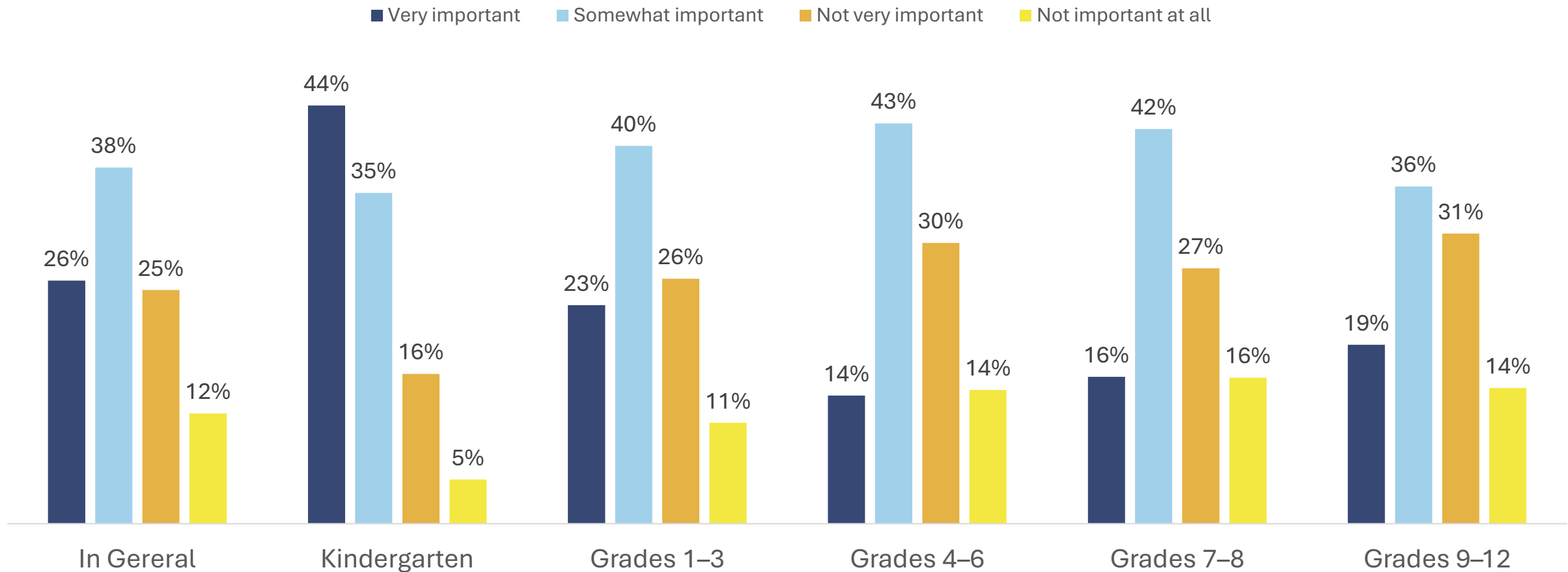
The Influence of Ratings & Reviews

Reviews have powerful sway—especially for emotional shoppers

Shoppers are one click or scroll away from changing their mind. Influencing reviews and ensuring visibility can make or break conversion.

Reviews Matter Most for Parents of Younger Kids

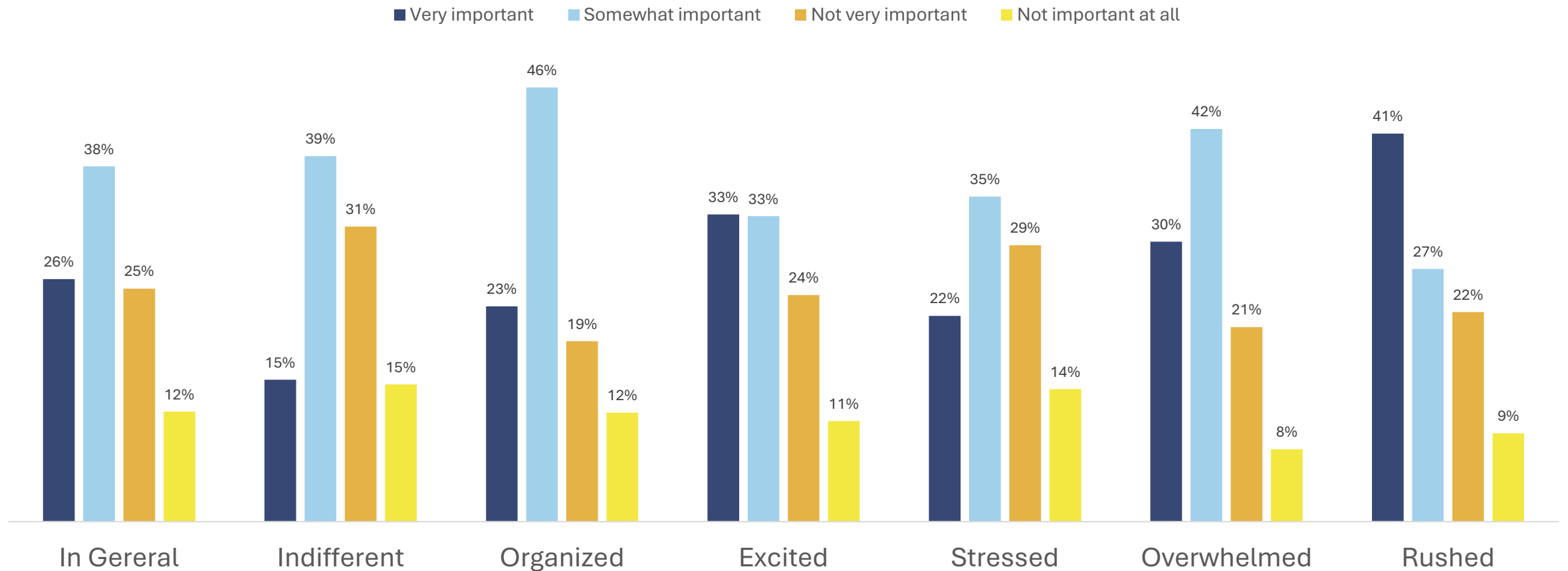
Reviews carry the greatest weight with parents of younger children. 51 percent of Kindergarten parents say ratings and reviews are very important, compared to just 17 percent of high school parents.



How important are ratings & reviews when deciding what to buy for your Back-to-School?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Emotional Shoppers Trust Reviews More

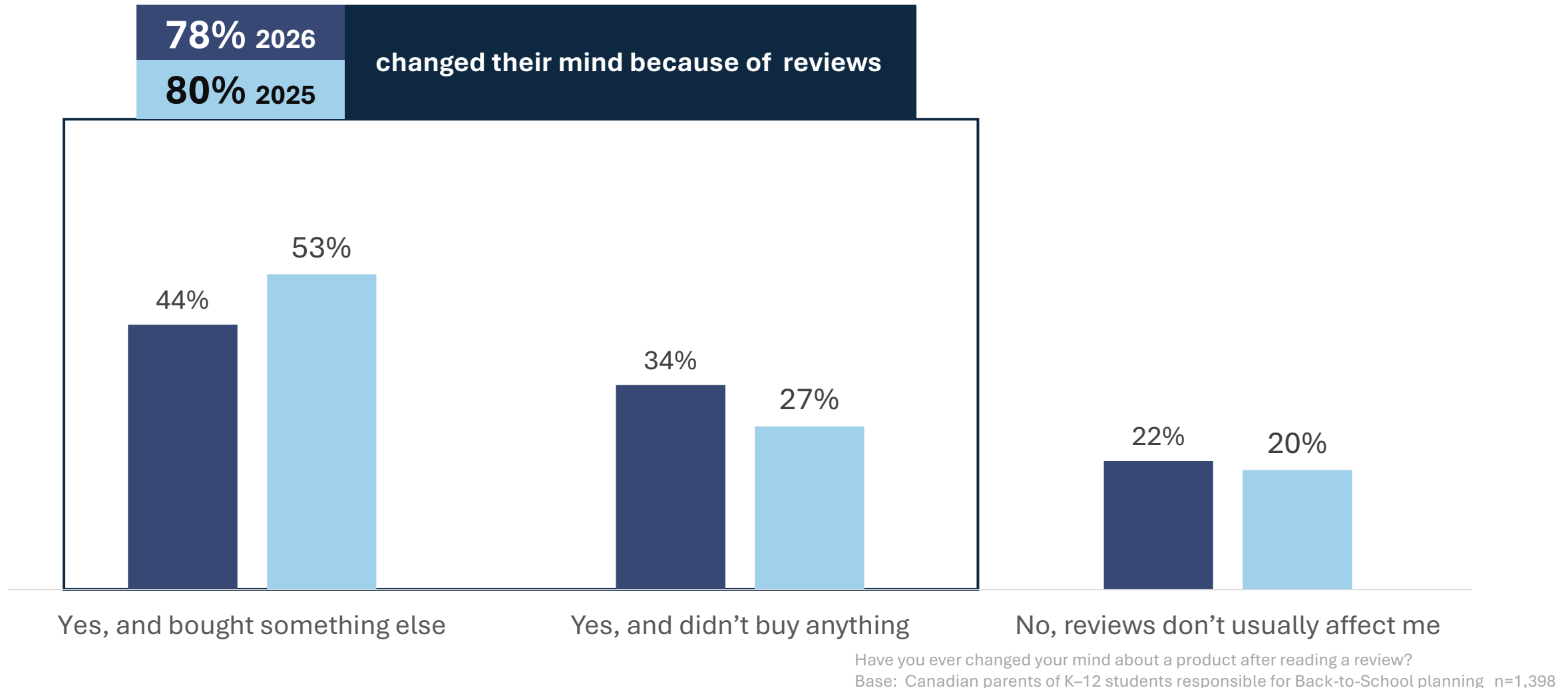
Parents experiencing excitement, stress, or feeling overwhelmed place higher importance on reviews when making purchase decisions.



How important are ratings & reviews when deciding what to buy for your Back-to-School?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

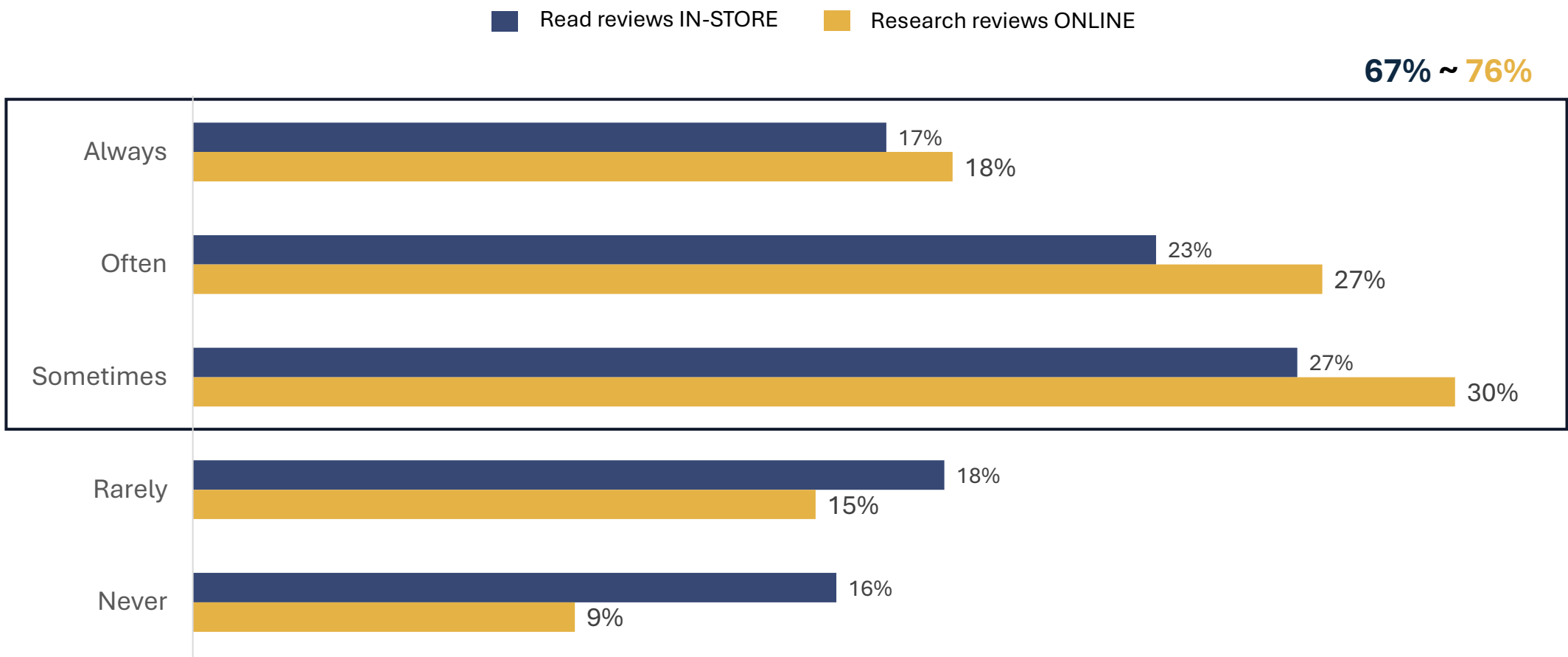
80% Changed Their Mind Because of a Review

Four in five parents report that a review has influenced their final Back-to-School purchase decision. 78 percent changed their mind because of reviews this year (slightly down from 80 percent in 2025), often leading them to select a different item or skip the purchase altogether.



Parents Use Reviews Both In-Store and Online

Ratings and reviews guide decisions across channels. 71 percent check reviews while shopping in-store, and 78 percent research items online before buying.



When shopping in-store, how often do you look at online reviews before choosing what to buy?/
How often do you research Back-to-School items online before buying them?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

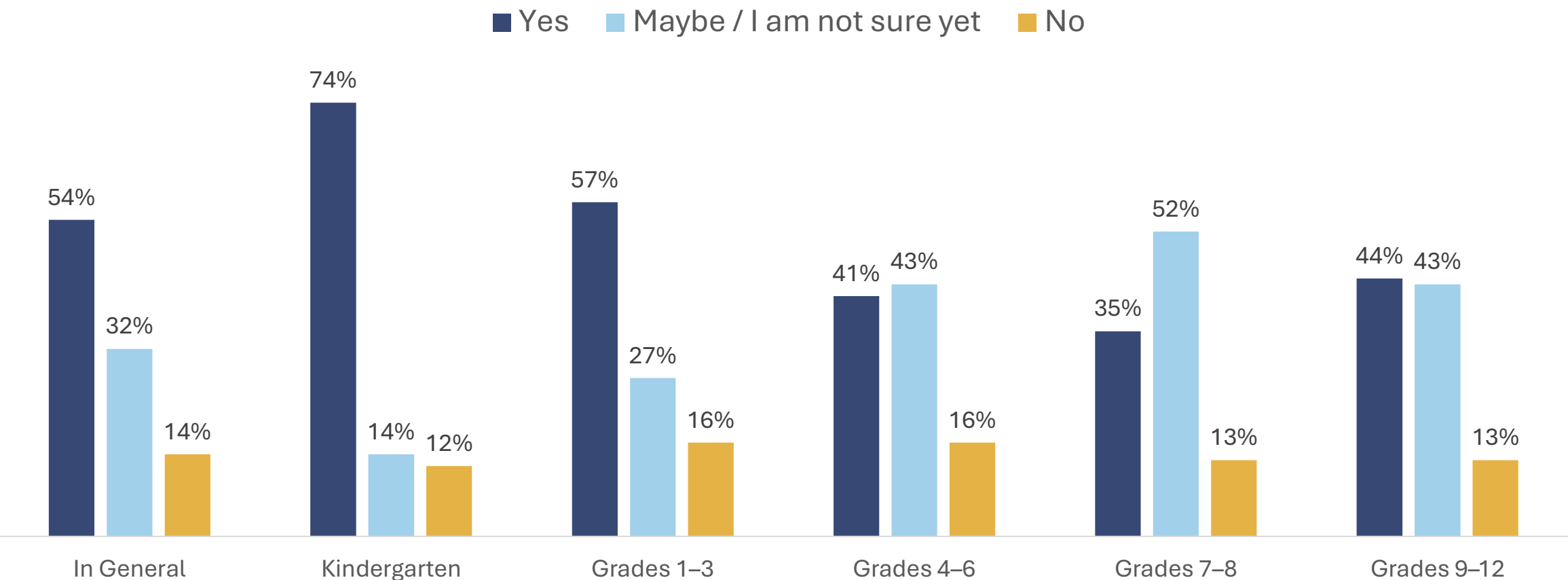
Product Preferences: Store Brand vs. Name Brand

Store brands win early—but brand preferences shift with age

Brand loyalty is flexible, especially when promotions are involved. Retailers and manufacturers alike should frame Back-to-School season as a key window to acquire new customers.

Store Brands Rule Early – Parent Preferences Shift with Age

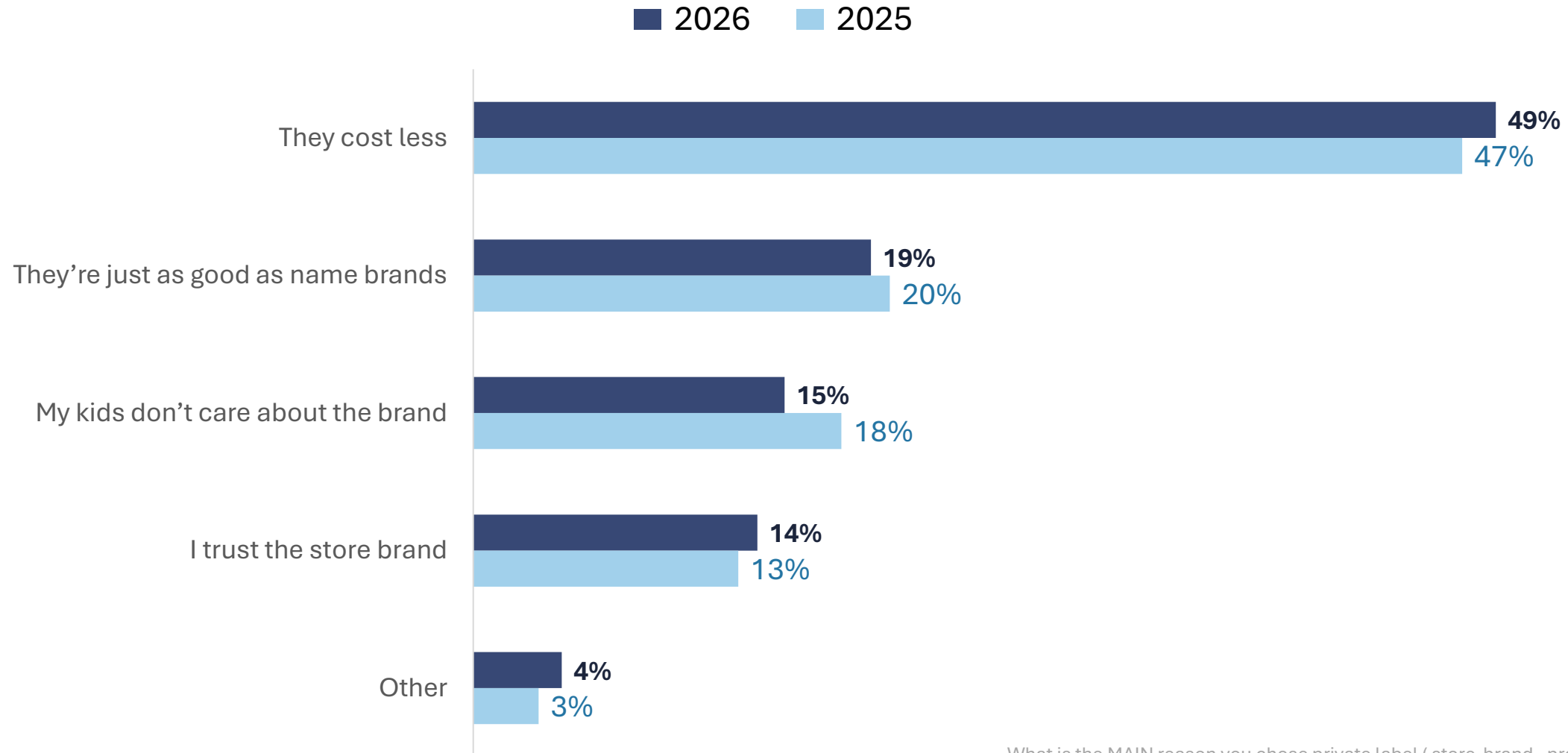
Private label products appeal strongly to parents of younger children. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of Kindergarten parents plan to buy store brands, yet interest declines steadily as students get older and brand preferences strengthen.



Are you planning to buy any private label products (also known as store brands, like No Name or Great Value) for Back-to-School this year?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Affordability Drives Private Label Adoption

Lower cost remains the top reason parents choose private label items. Nearly half (49 percent) cite price as their main motivation (up slightly from 47 percent in 2025).

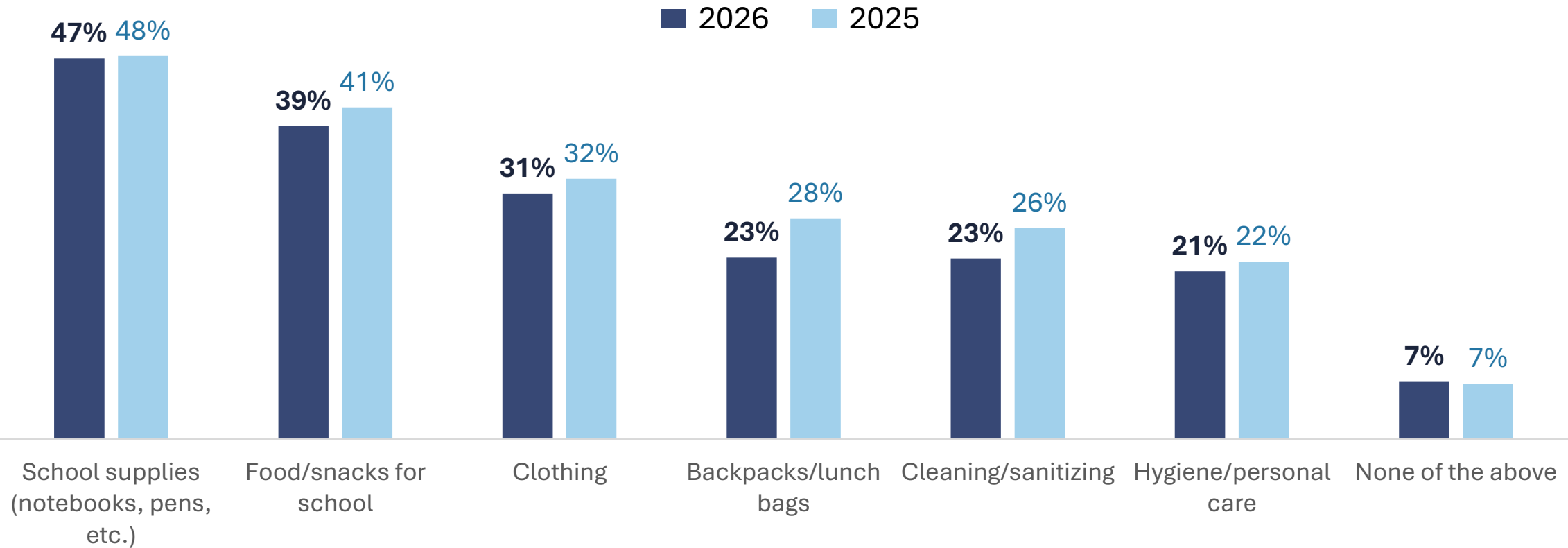


What is the MAIN reason you chose private label (store-brand_ products?

Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

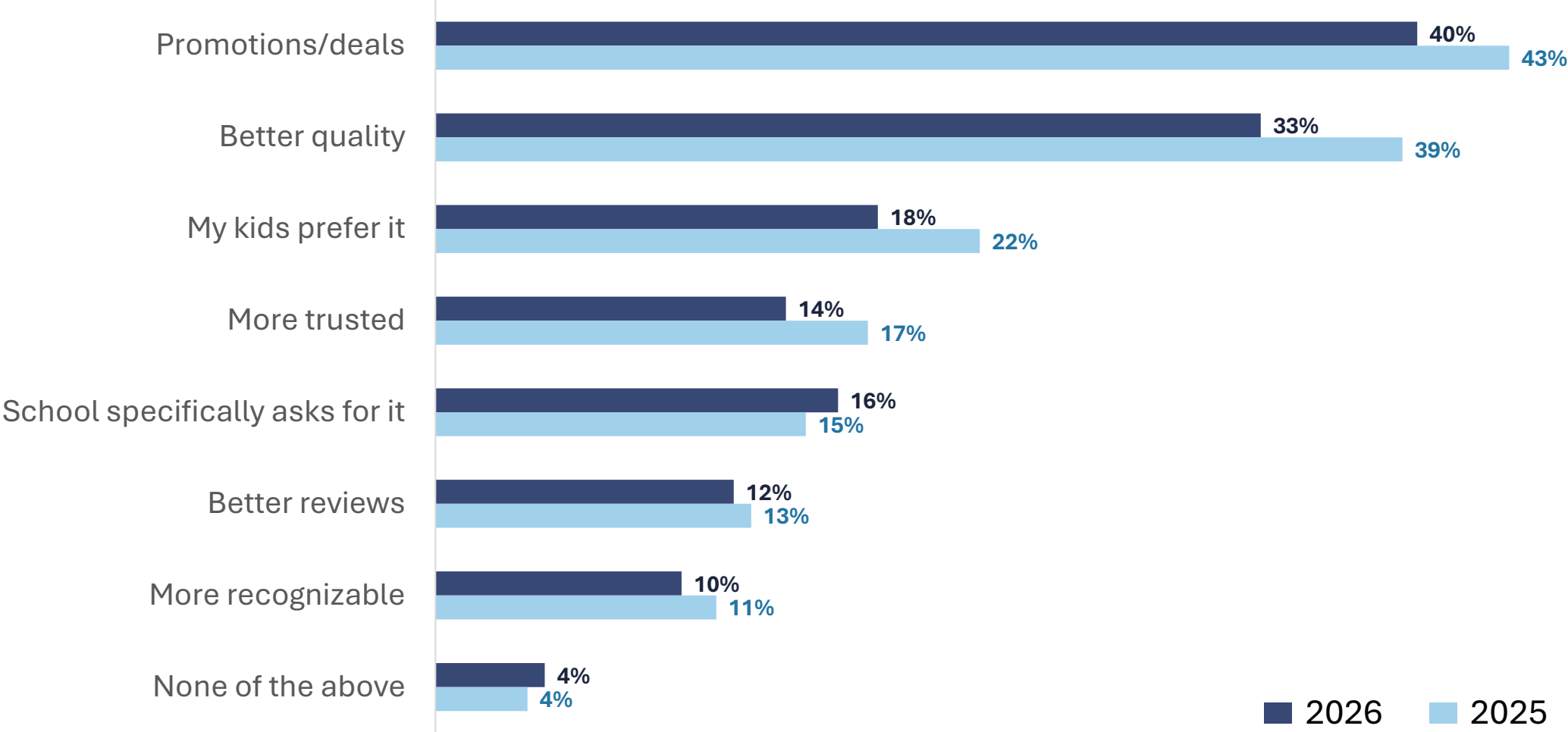
Parents are More Comfortable Buying Store-Brand Stationery

School supplies represent the category where parents feel most comfortable purchasing private label. 48 percent are open to store-brand notebooks, pens, and similar items.



Deals First, Trust Second: Why Parents Choose Name Brands

Promotions and deals remain the strongest driver for choosing national brands over private label (40 percent). Perceived better quality follows at 33 percent.



What would make you choose a national brand (name-brand) instead of private label (store-brand) product?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398