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.

CADDLE
Voice of the Consumer ™

In Partnership with

RCC RETAIL COUNCIL OF CANADA

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

01 Planning Begins Early but is not Always Thorough

Most parents begin preparing for Back-to-School in late spring or early summer. 61% have already started or plan to begin soon (down from 67% 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. 85% of parents actively seek deals (slightly down from 89% 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.

04 Shopping Happens in Multiple Rounds

Although most parents feel confident that they can finish shopping efficiently, only 19% 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% 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% 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% 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% 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

44% 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.

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 Market Landscape

Sizing the opportunity and pressures shaping parent behaviour

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***

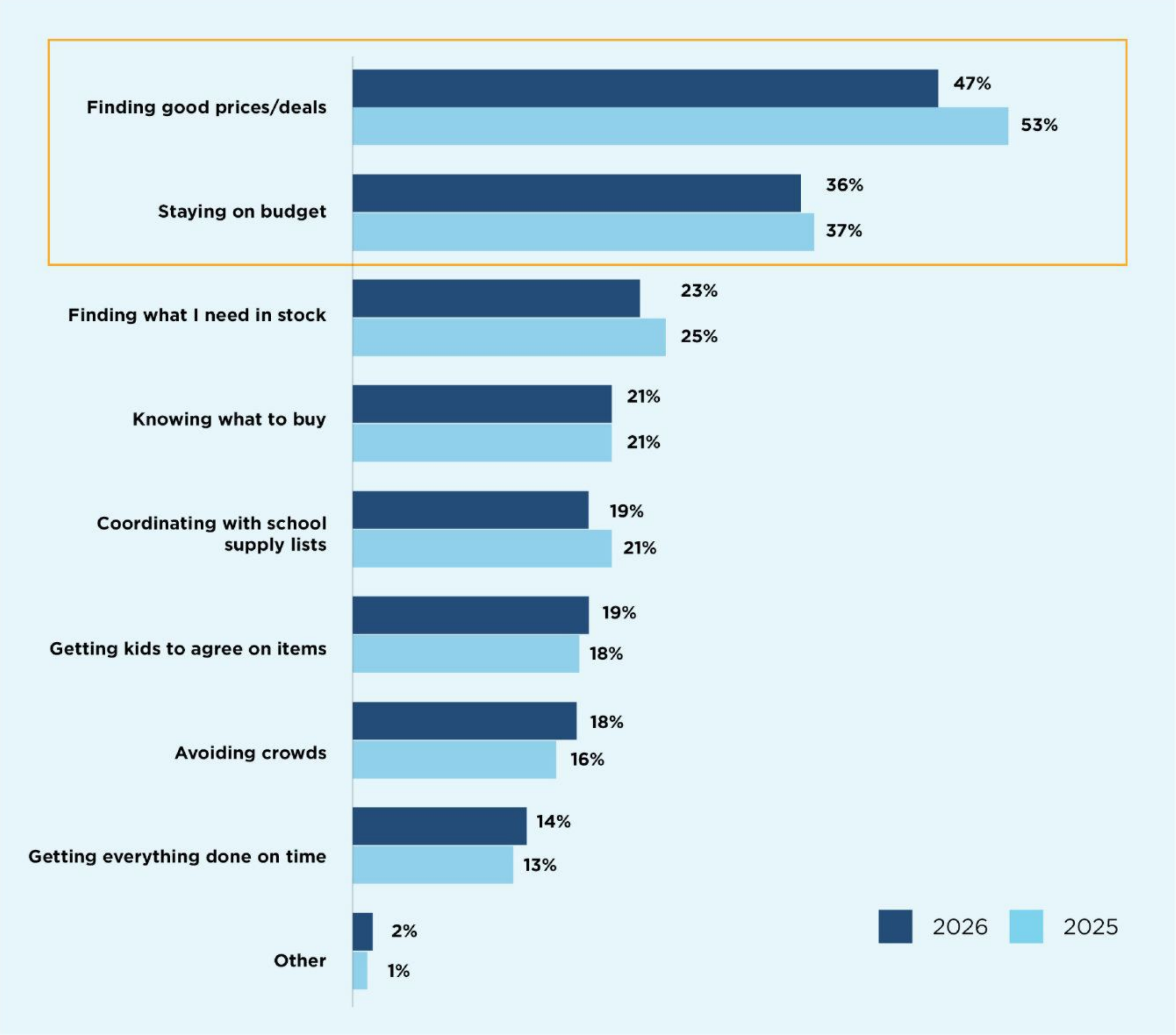
$4.5 Billion

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

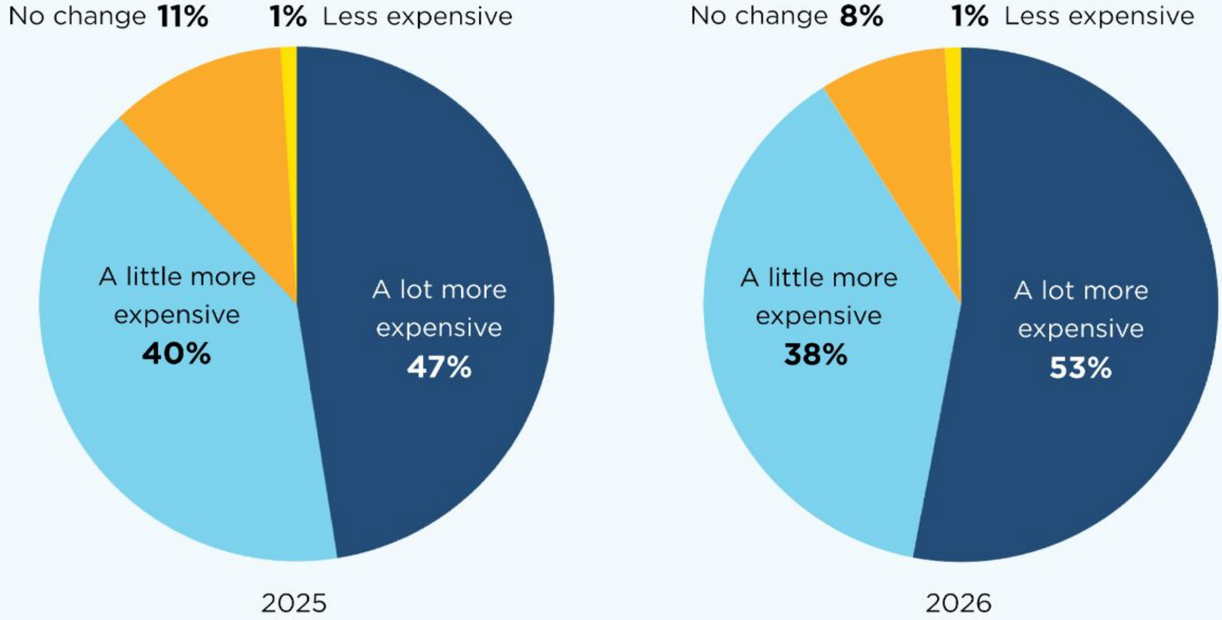
Price remains the biggest challenge for parents during Back-to-School shopping. 53% of parents cite finding good prices and deals as their primary difficulty, ahead of staying within budget and ensuring items are in stock.



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

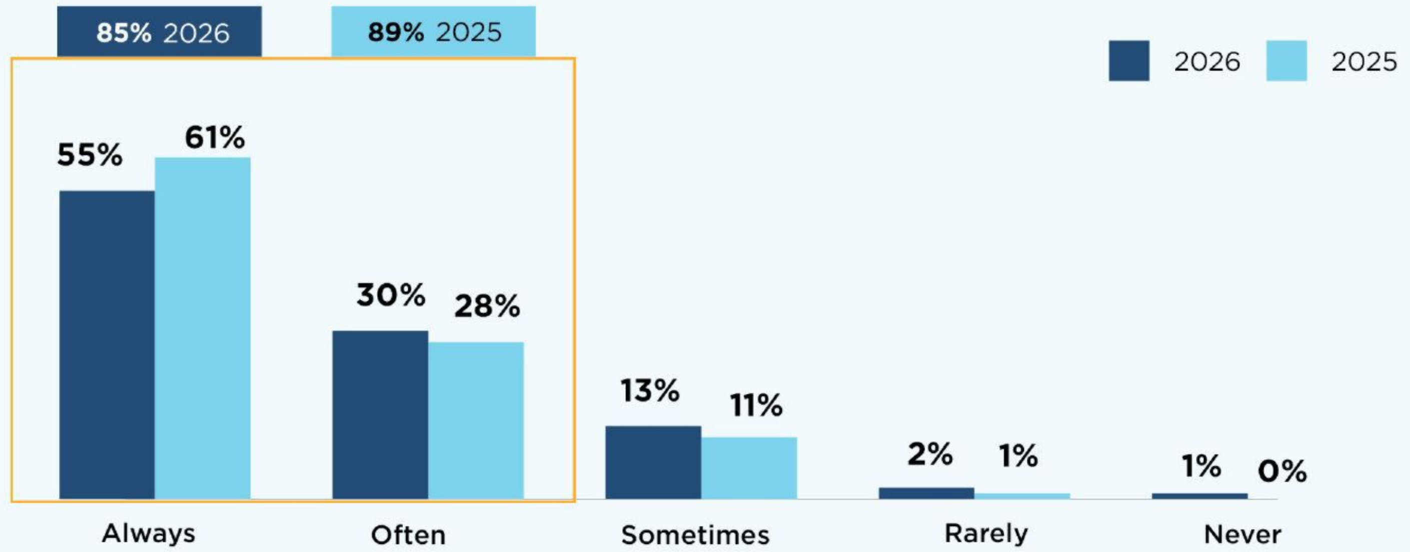
91% Say BTS Shopping Is More Expensive. Over Half Say 'A Lot More'

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



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

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

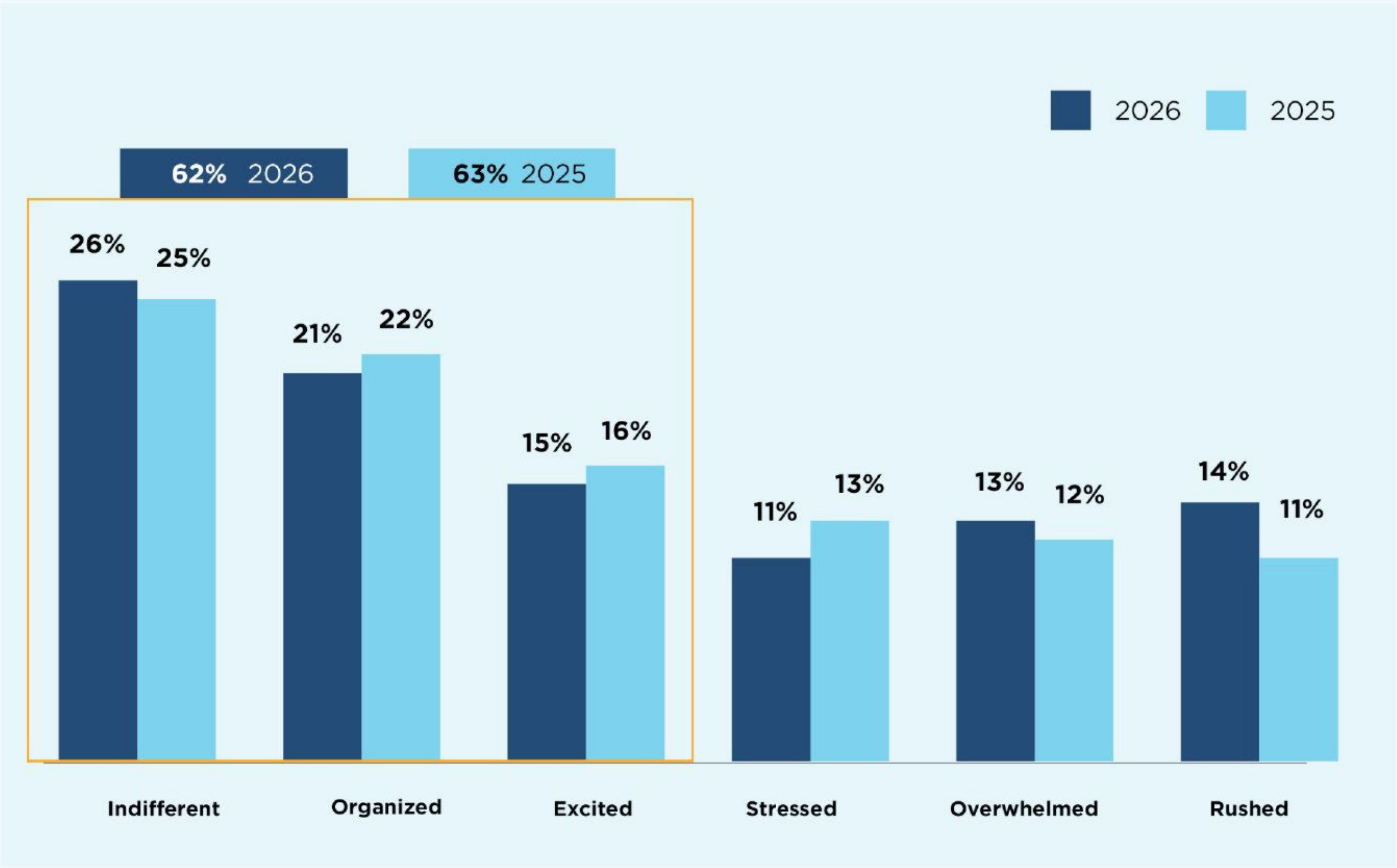


Do you look for promotions or discounts when Back-to-School shopping ?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

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

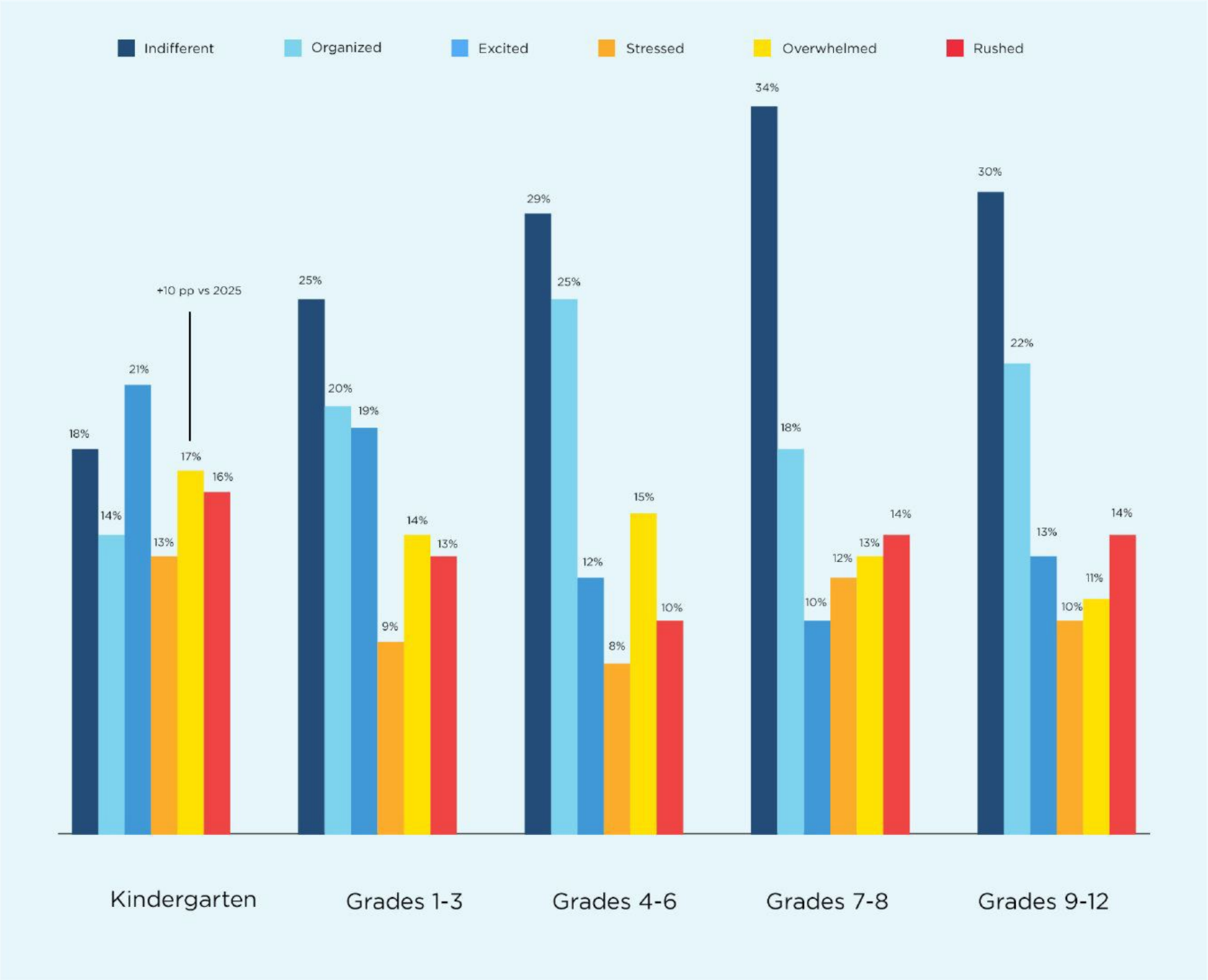
Despite cost pressures, the majority of parents feel neutral or positive about the Back-to-School shopping experience. 62% fall into the indifferent, organized, or excited categories, with only 13% feeling overwhelmed.



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

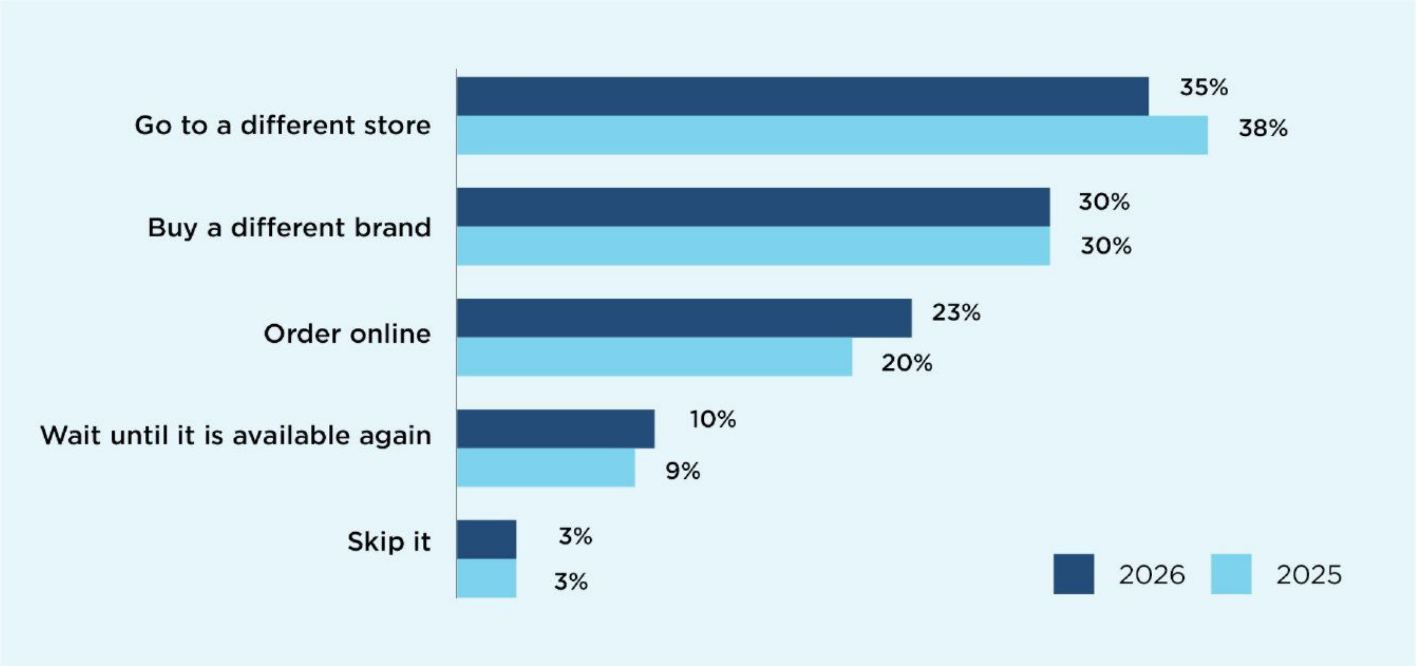
Parents of younger children tend to feel more excitement and organization when shopping. As students reach high school, feelings of indifference and stress become more common.



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% will go to a different retailer (down from 38% in 2025), while 30% opt for a different brand. Only 3% skip the item entirely, and online ordering has increased to 23%.

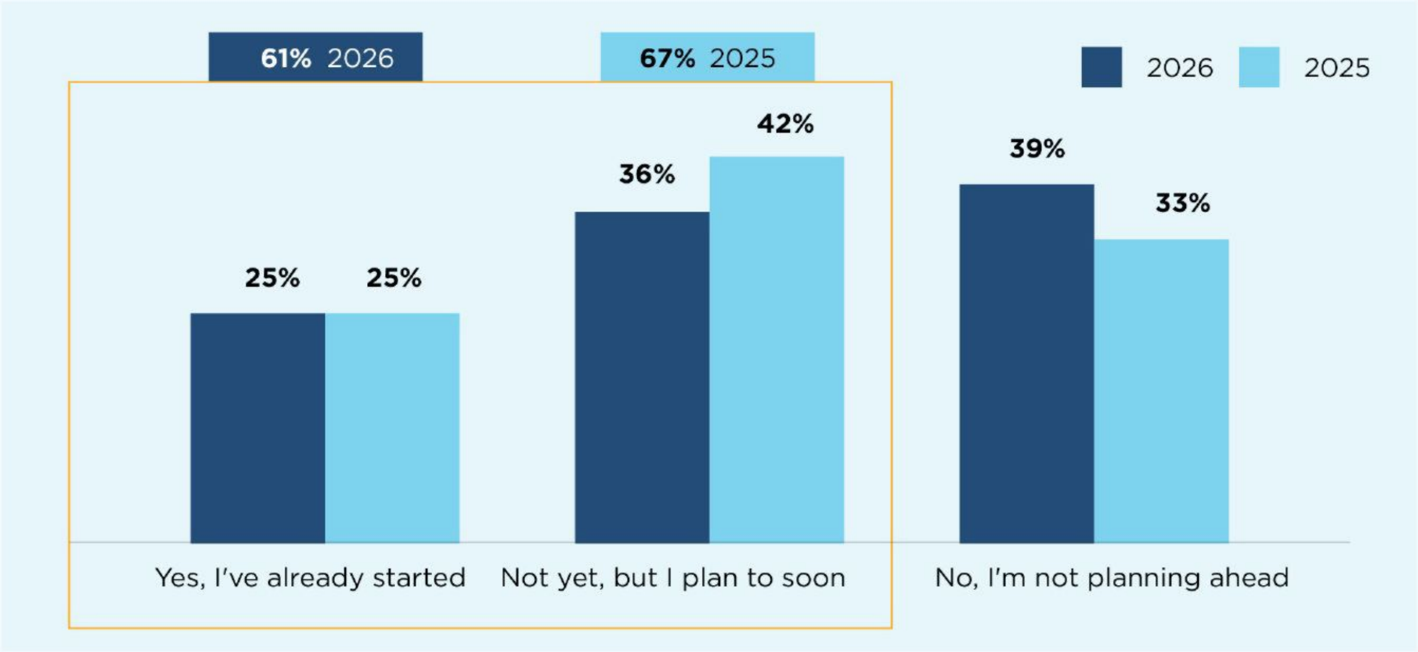


What do you usually do when a key item is out of stock at your usual retailer?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Planning 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

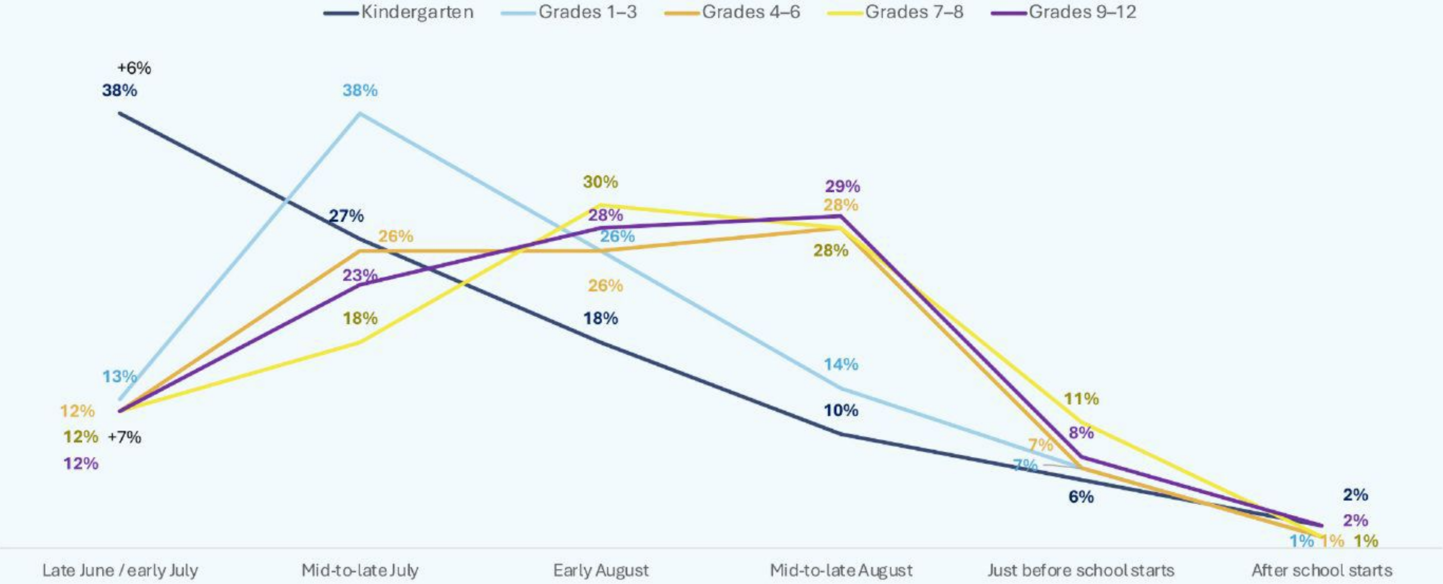
A majority of parents are actively preparing for the upcoming school year. 61% have already started shopping or plan to begin soon (compared to 67% in 2025).



Have you already started planning or shopping for the upcoming school year?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

Early Years Drive Early Carts: Older Kids Mean August Rush

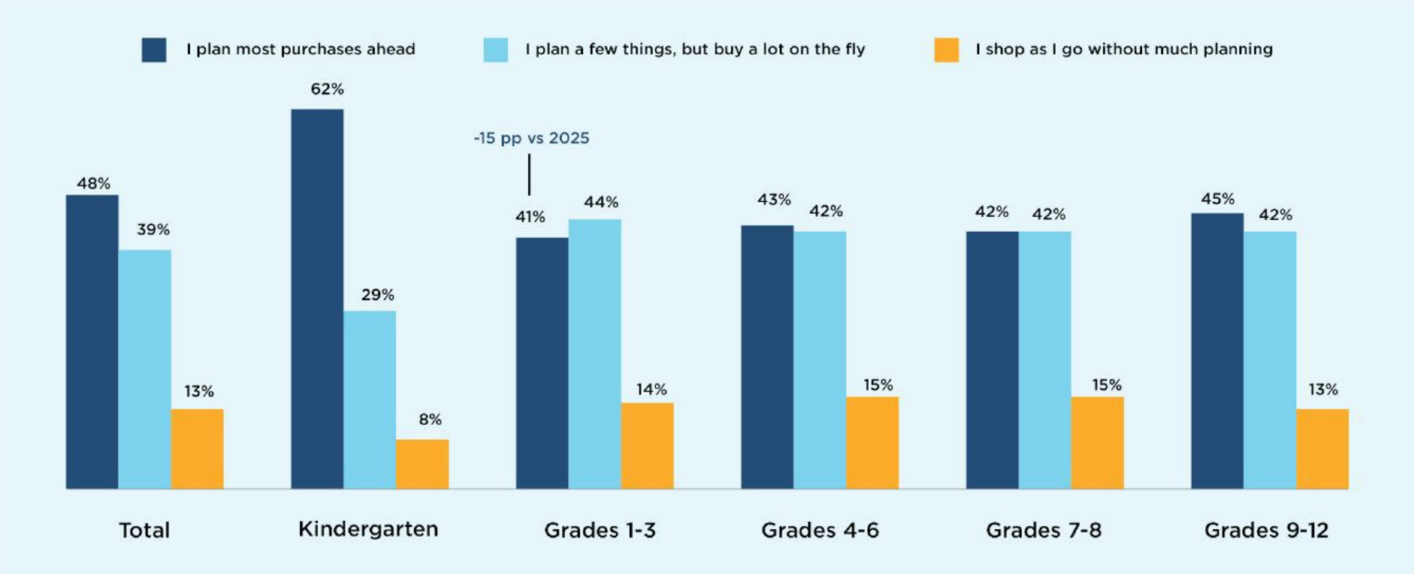
Families with younger children tend to start their Back-to-School shopping earlier in the summer. Parents of middle and high school students are more likely to concentrate their purchases in mid-to-late August.



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

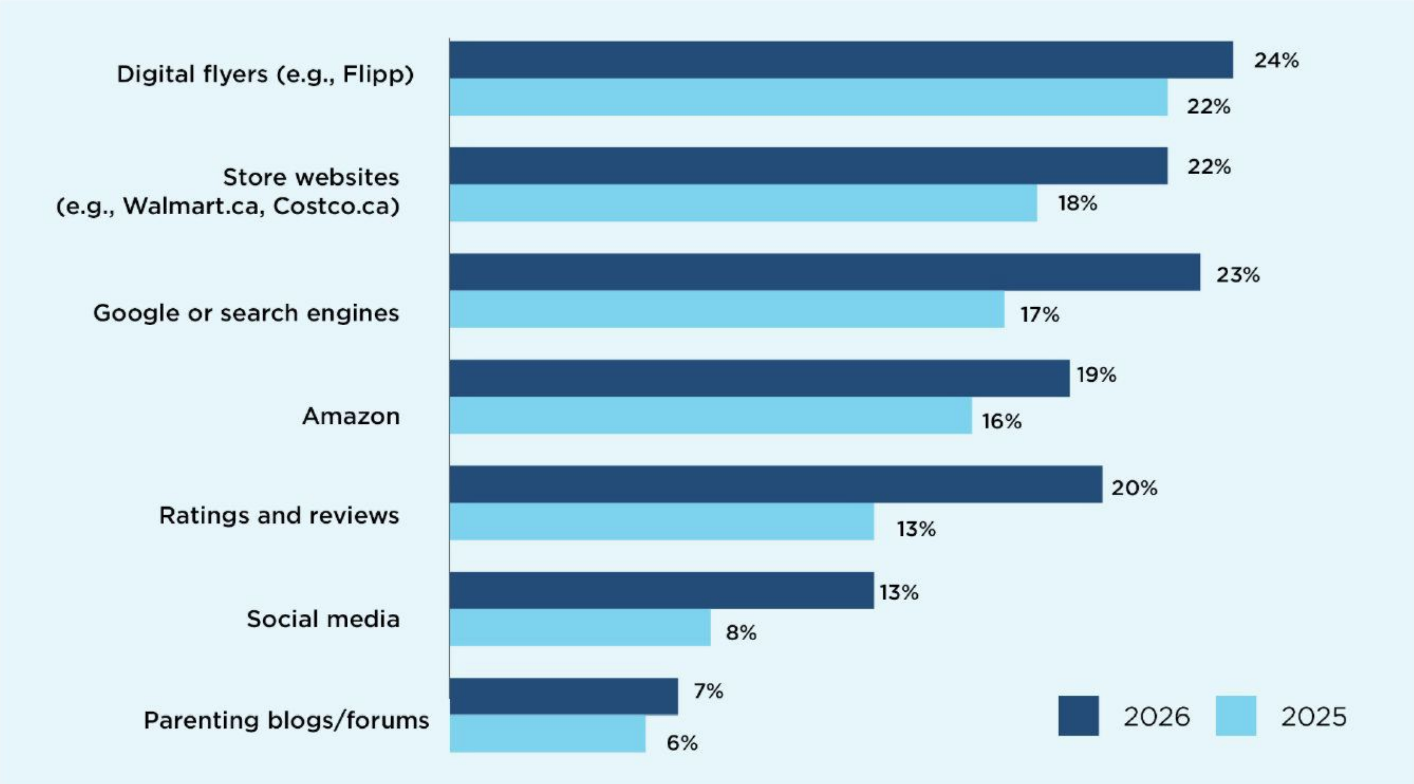
Advance planning decreases as children get older. Only about one-third of high school parents plan most purchases ahead of time, while many prefer to shop more spontaneously.



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

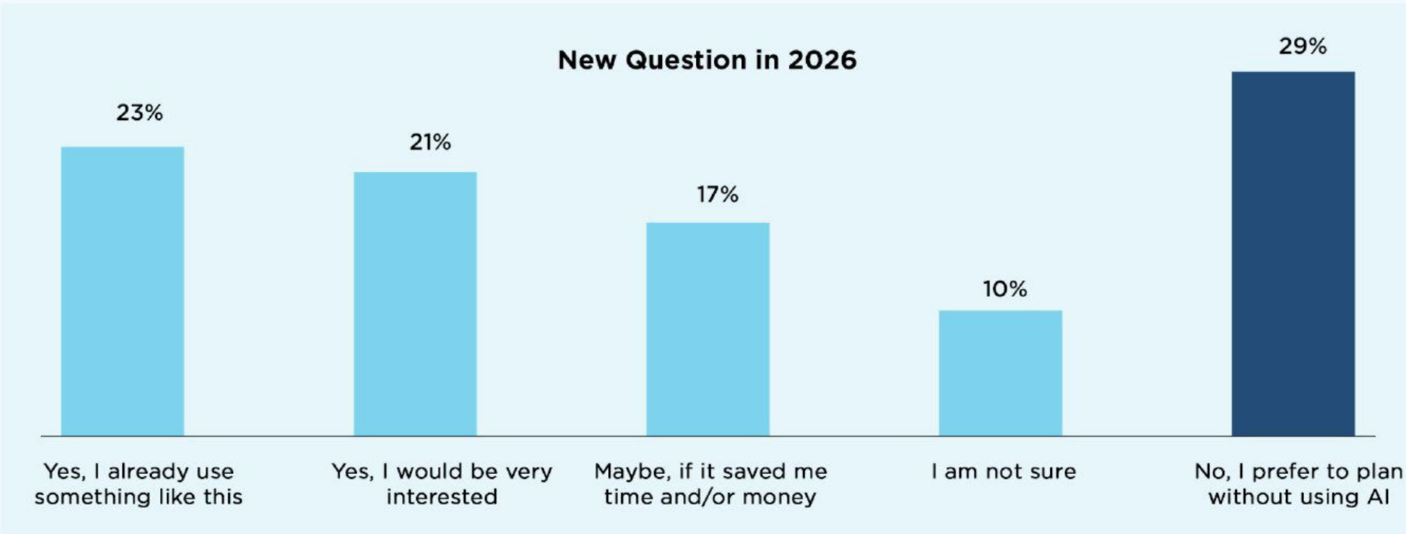
Digital Flyers Lead Back-to-School Planning Tools

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



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

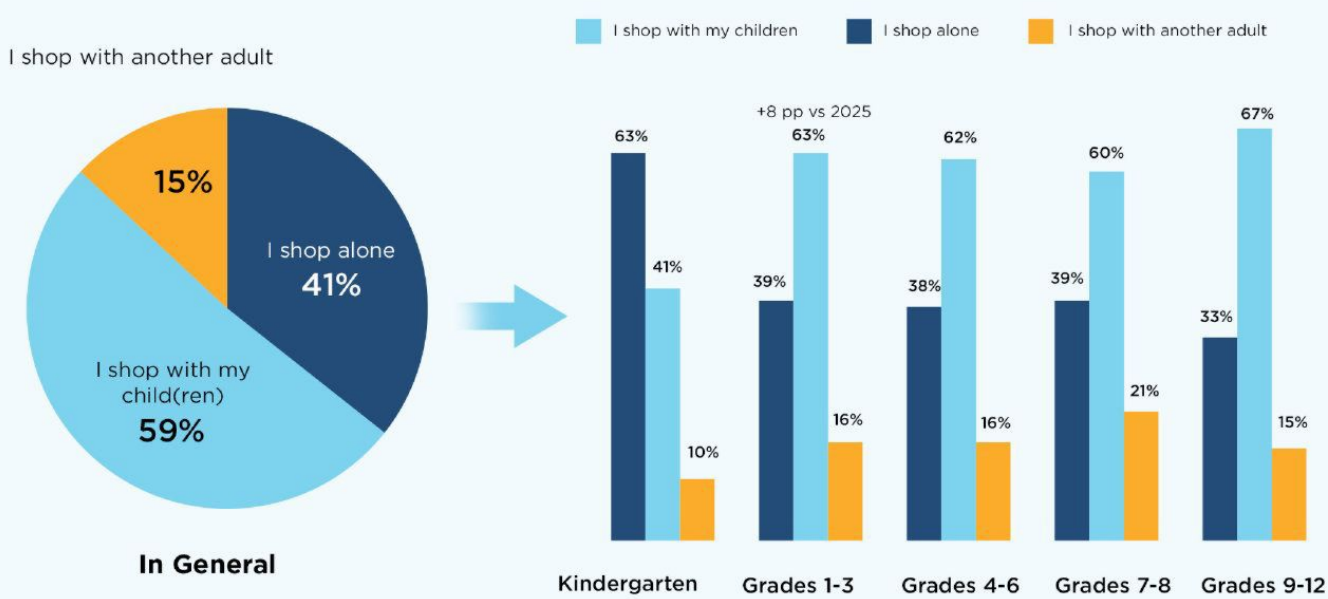
44% of parents already use or would be very interested in an AI-powered tool to build shopping lists, find the best prices, compare products, or recommend local stores. Another 17% say they would consider it if it clearly saved time or money. Only 29% prefer to plan entirely without AI, creating a clear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

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% of parents plan to make purchases in physical stores, even as online buying has grown to 83% (up 4% points versus 2025).

IN-STORE

I do not expect to buy anything
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=1,398

ONLINE

I do not expect to buy anything
ONLINE

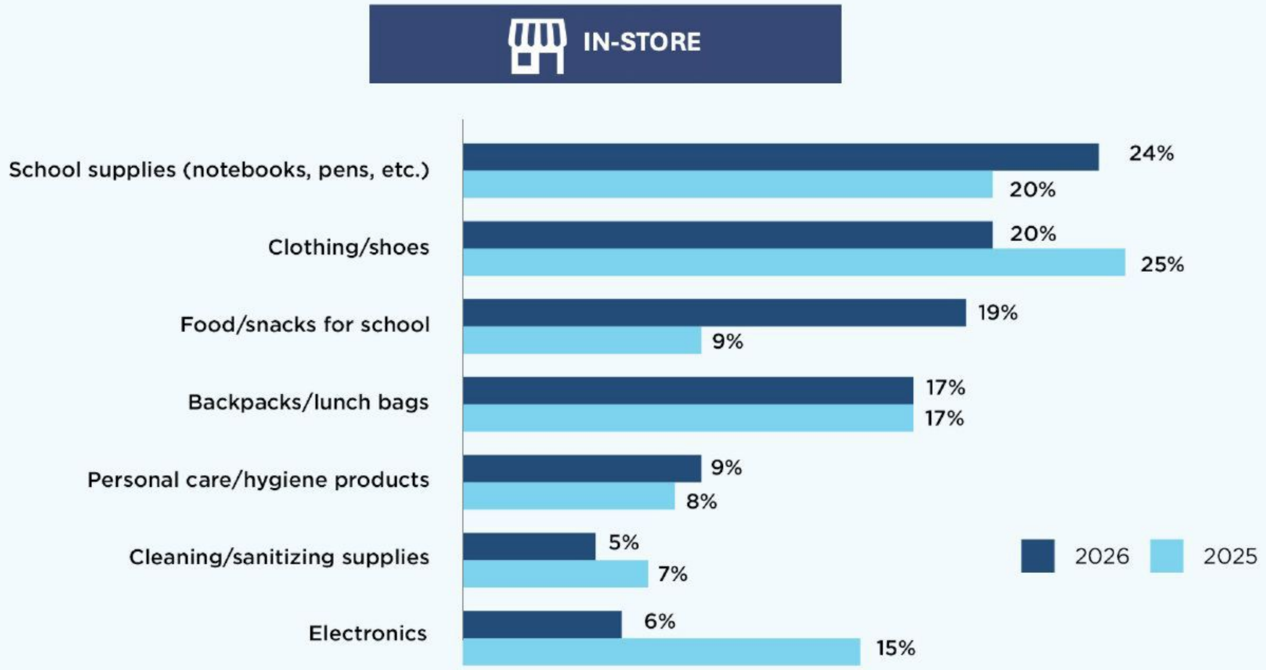
+4 pp vs 2025

Which of the following items do you expect to buy ONLINE for Back-to-School?

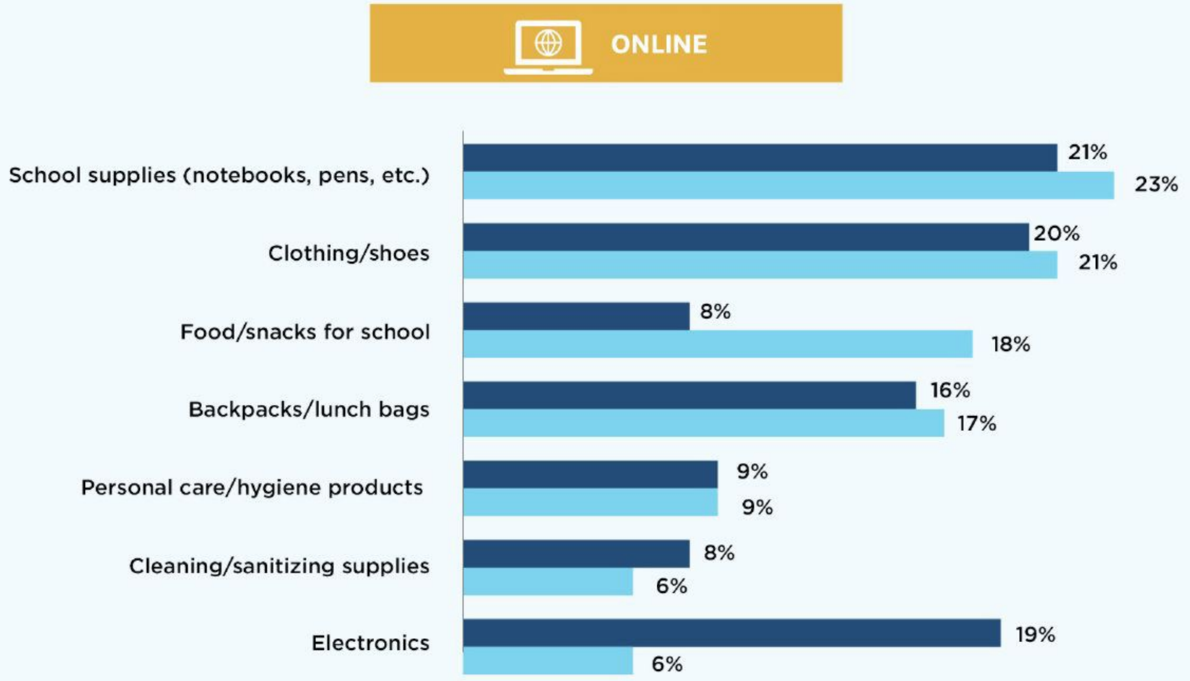
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n= 1,398

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.



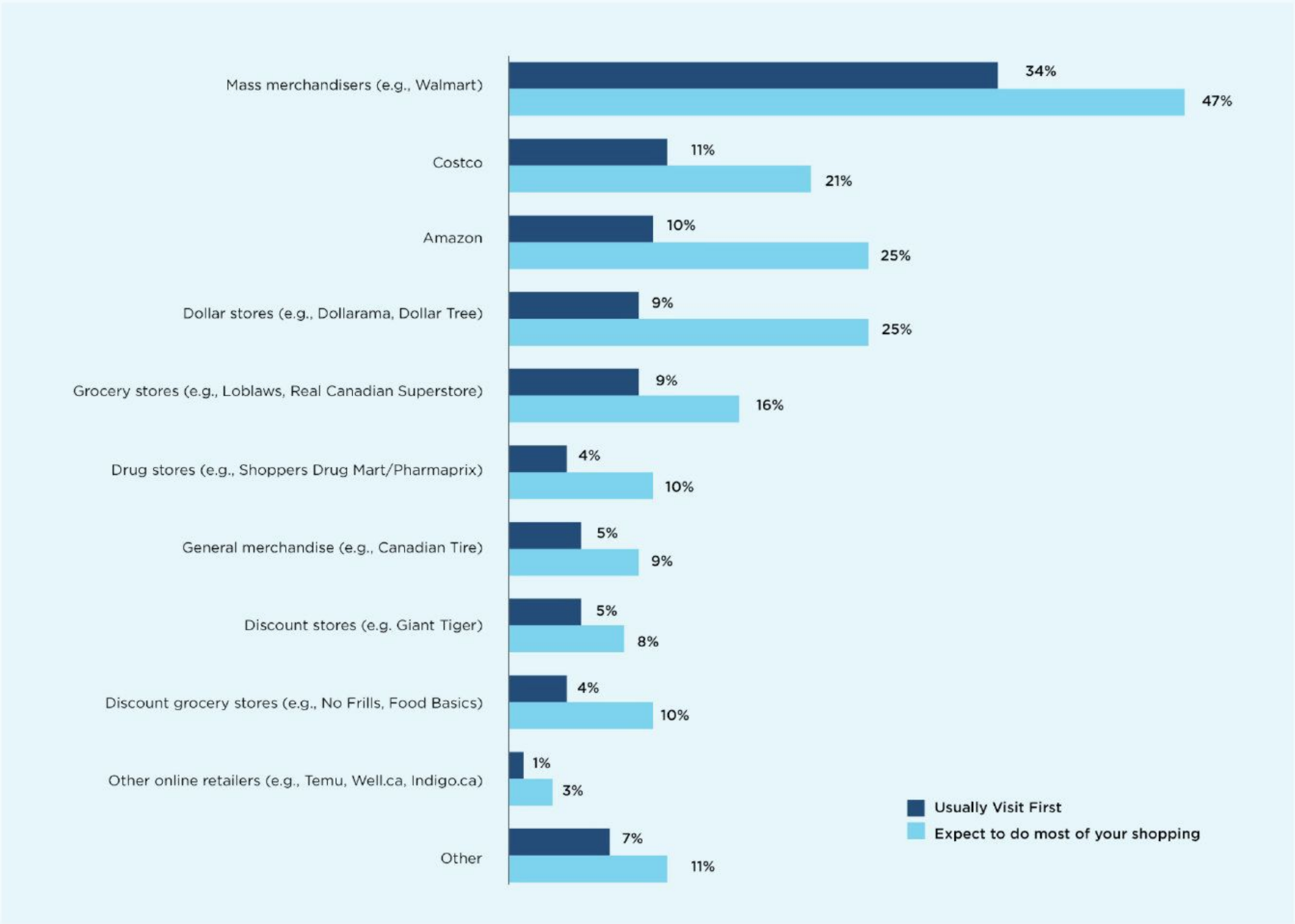
Which of the following items do you expect to buy IN-STORE for Back-to-School?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,188



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%) and account for the largest share of total spending (47%).

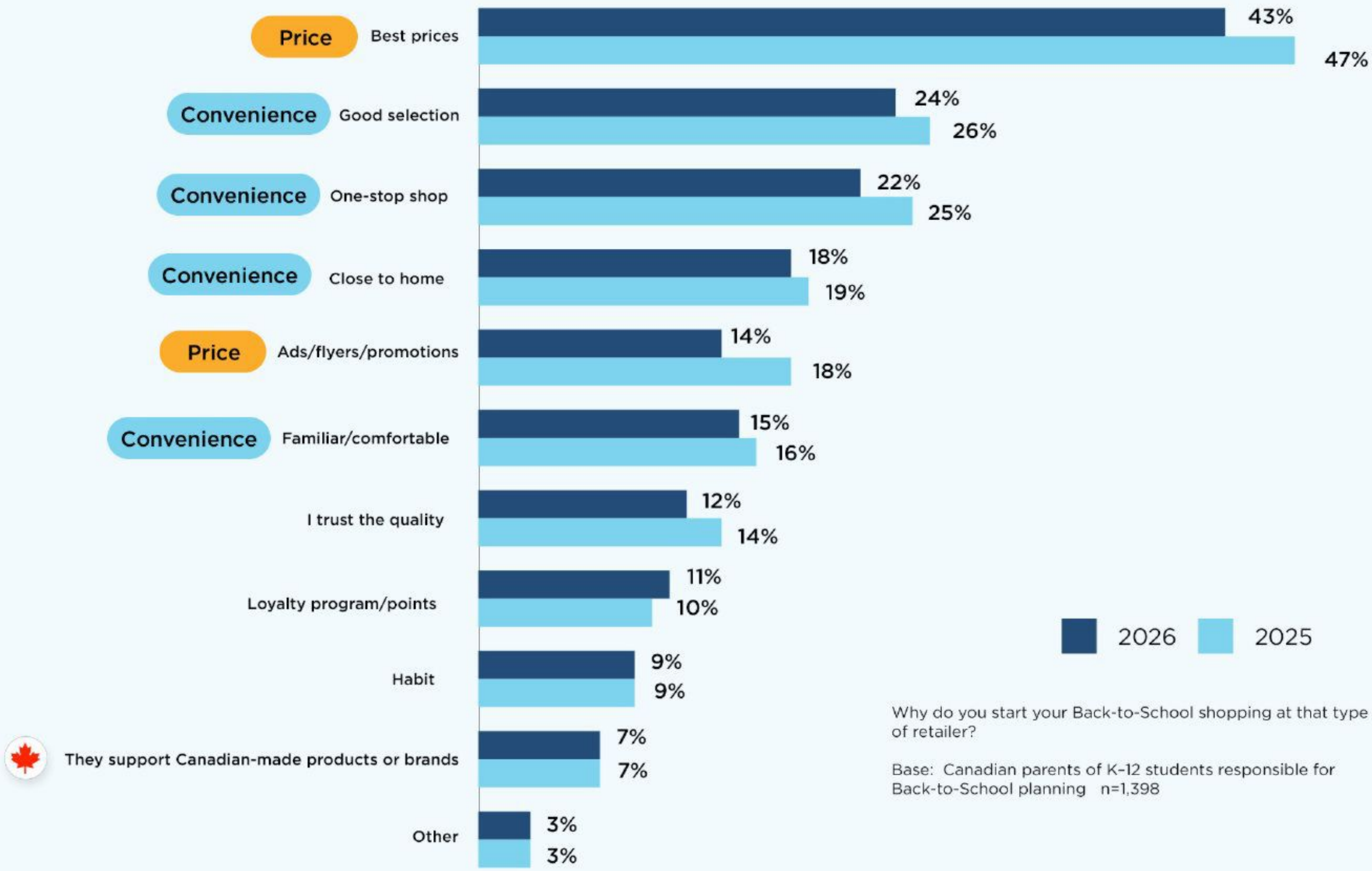


Which of type of retailer do you usually visit first for Back-to-School shopping? Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

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%). Strong selection and one-stop shopping convenience follow closely behind.

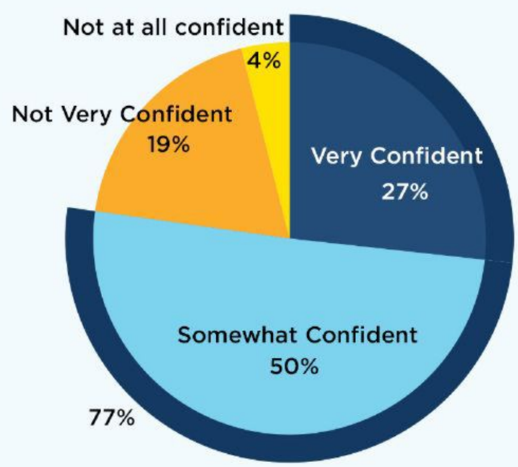


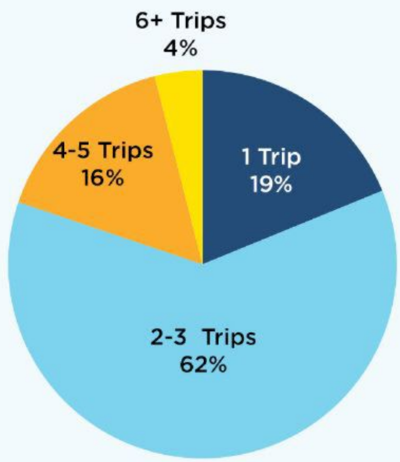
Why do you start your Back-to-School shopping at that type of retailer?

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

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% feel confident overall, while 62% expect to make two to three separate trips.





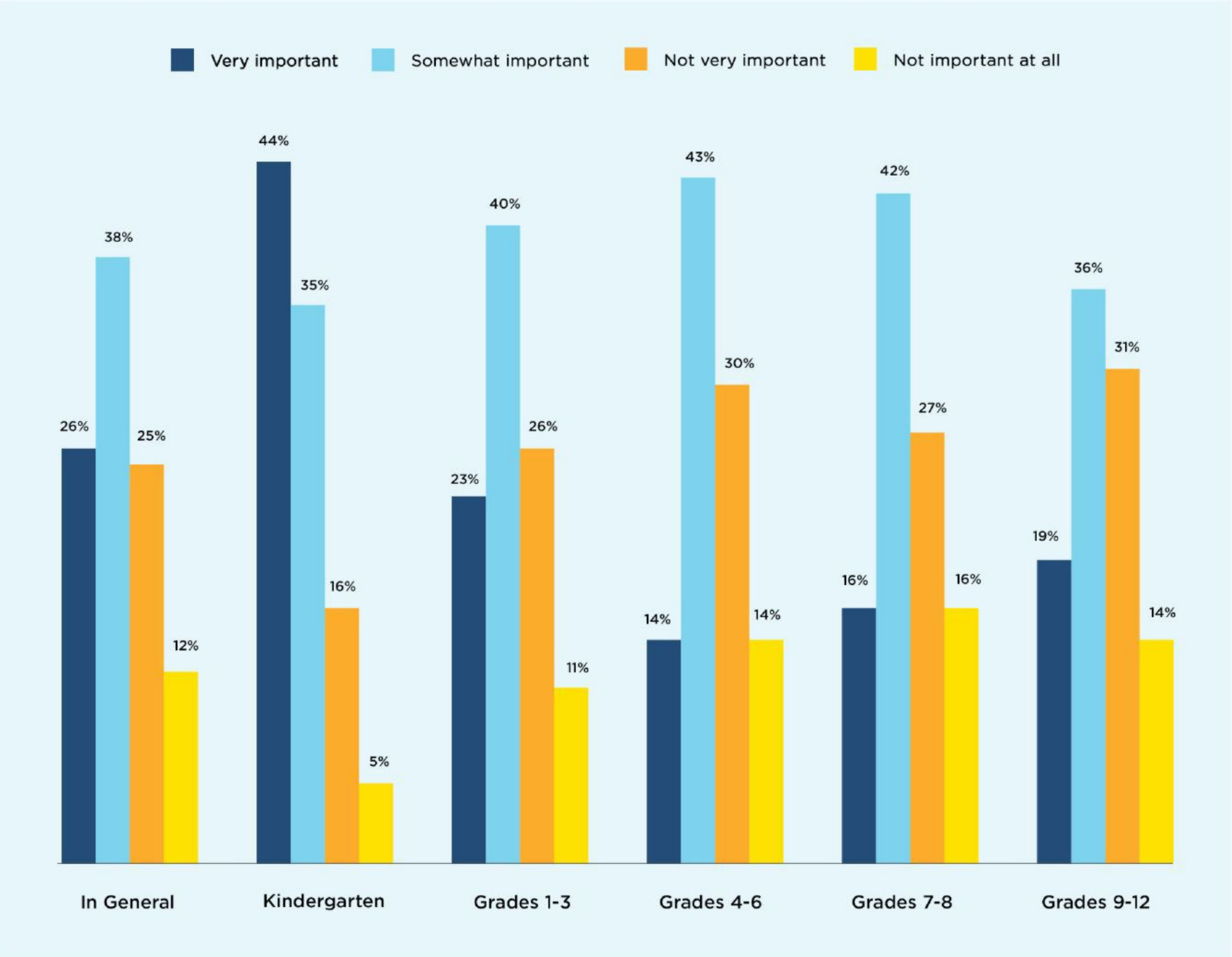
How confident are you in getting everything you need in one trip?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

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

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

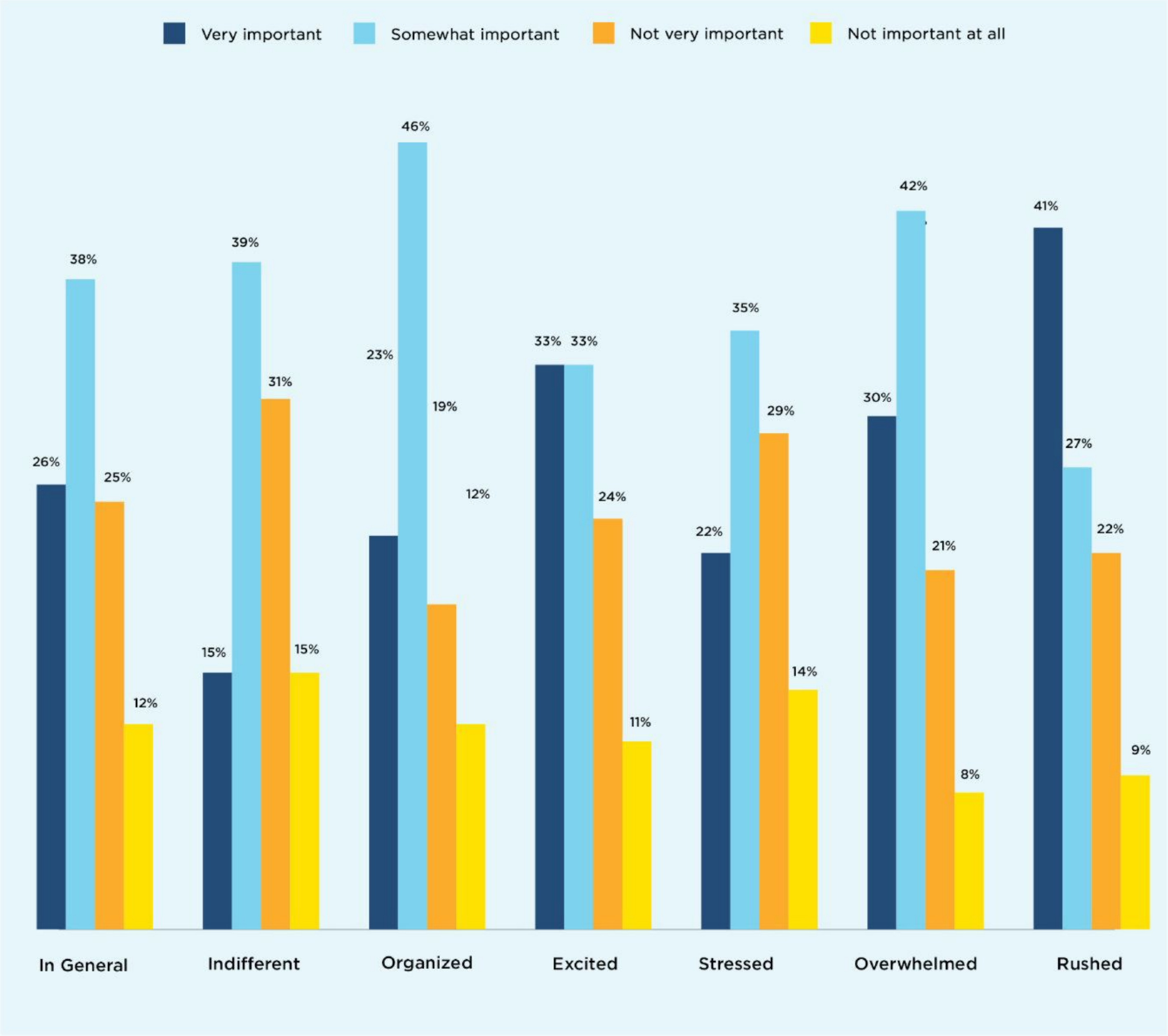
Reviews carry the greatest weight with parents of younger children. 51 percent of Kindergarten parents say ratings and reviews are very important, compared to just 17 percent of high school parents.



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

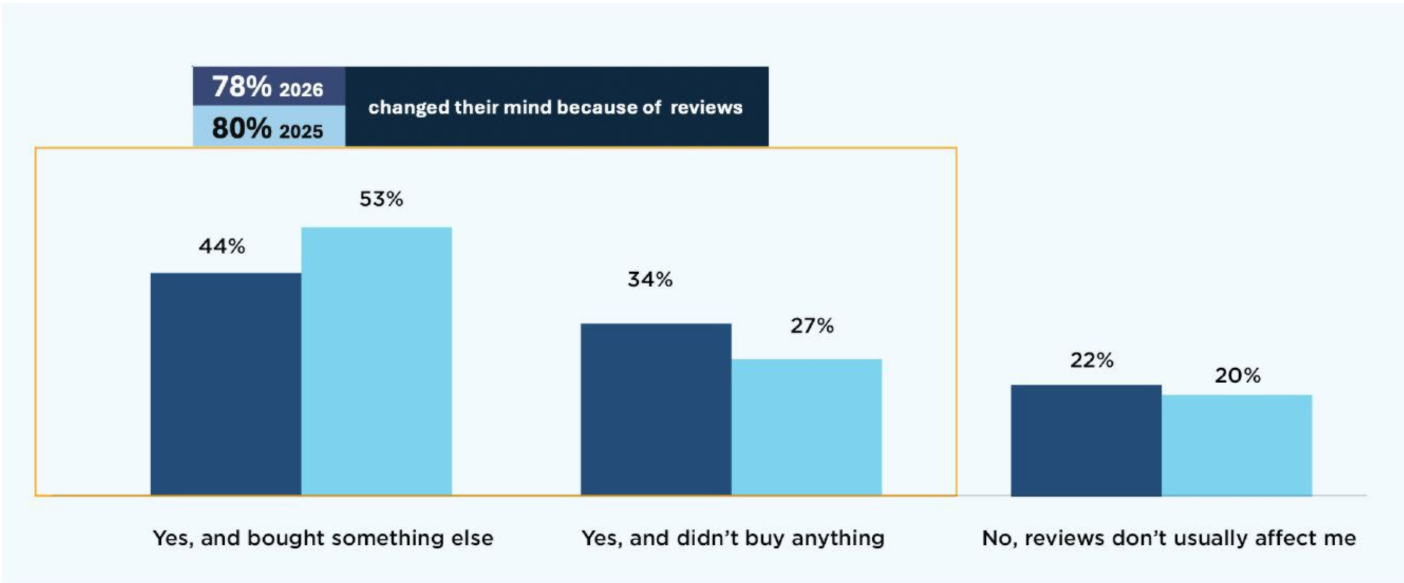
Parents experiencing excitement, stress, or feeling overwhelmed place higher importance on reviews when making purchase decisions.



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

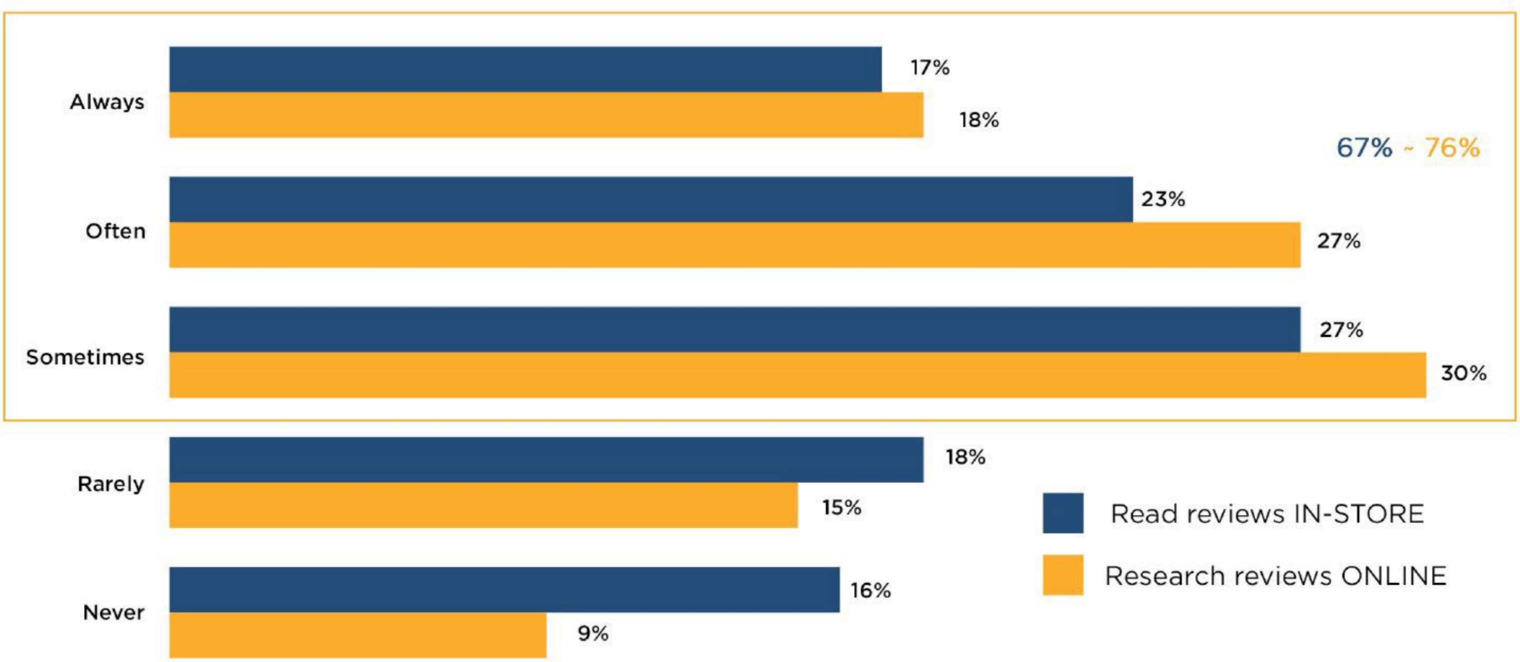
4 in 5 parents report that a review has influenced their final Back-to-School purchase decision. 78% changed their mind because of reviews this year (slightly down from 80% in 2025), often leading them to select a different item or skip the purchase altogether.



Have you ever changed your mind about a product after reading a review?
Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Parents Use Reviews Both In-Store and Online

Ratings and reviews guide decisions across channels. 71% check reviews while shopping IN-STORE, and 78% research items online before buying.

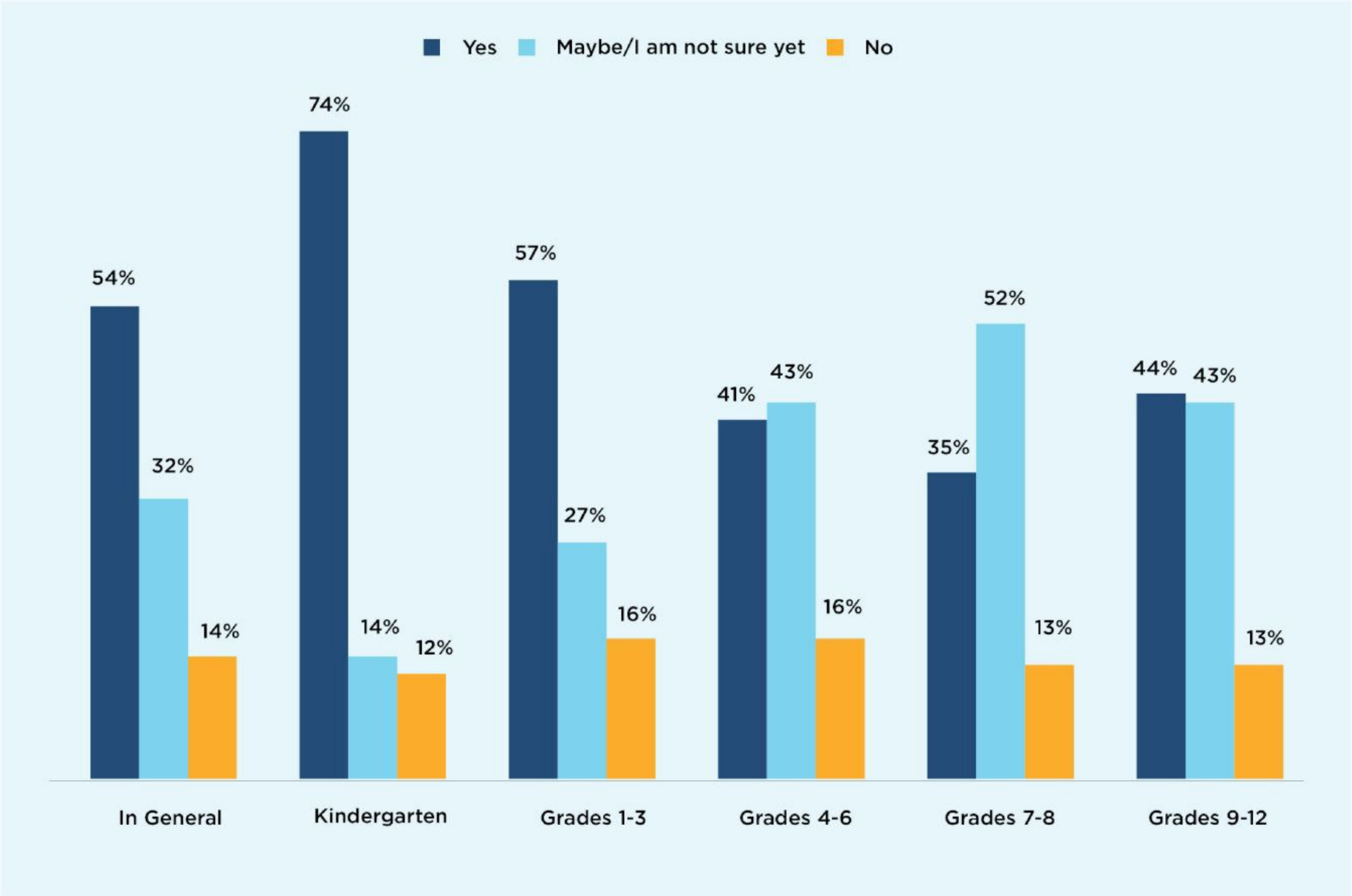


When shopping in-store, how often do you look at online reviews before choosing what to buy? How often do you research Back-to-School items online before buying them? Base: Canadian parents of K-12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

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

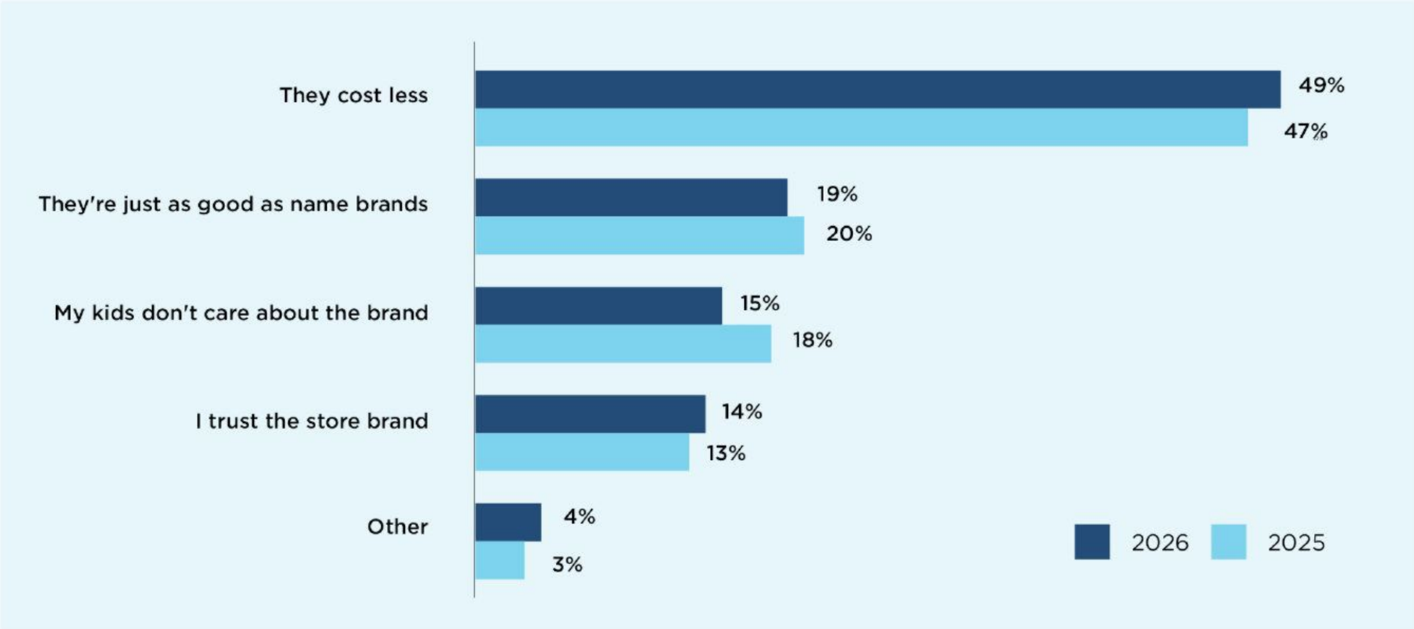
Private label products appeal strongly to parents of younger children. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of Kindergarten parents plan to buy store brands, yet interest declines steadily as students get older and brand preferences strengthen.



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

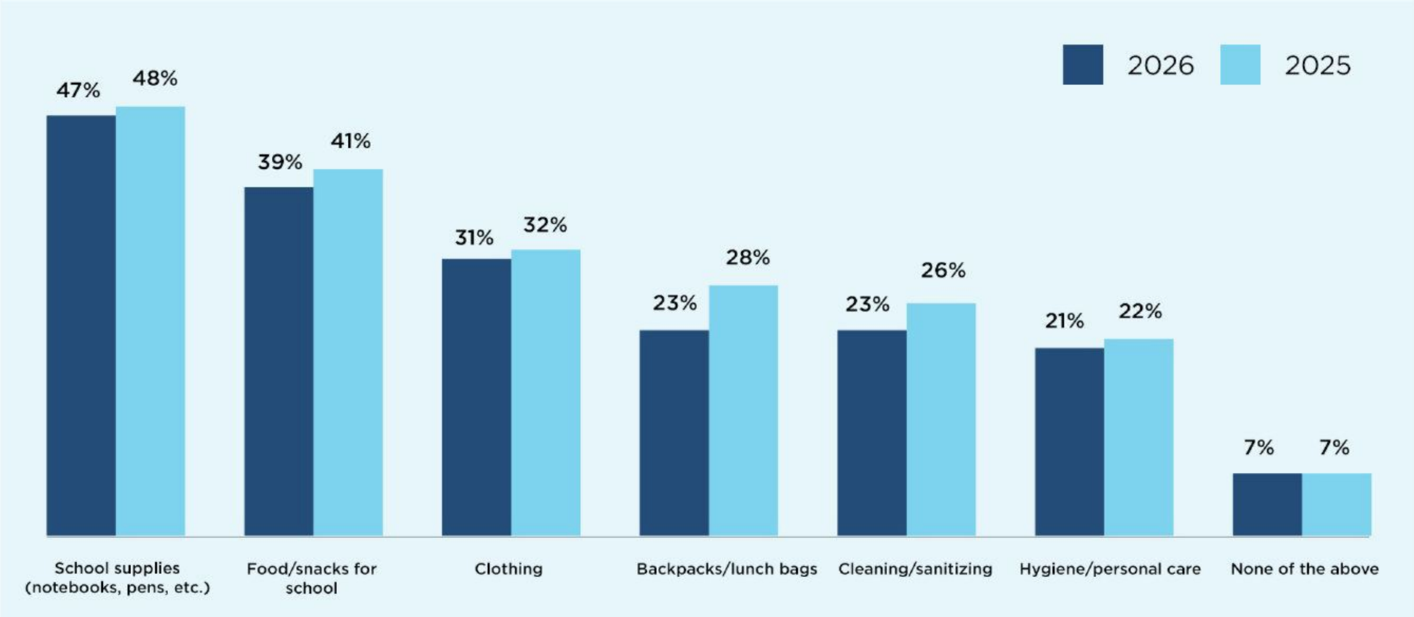
Lower cost remains the top reason parents choose private label items. Nearly half (49%) cite price as their main motivation (up slightly from 47% in 2025).



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

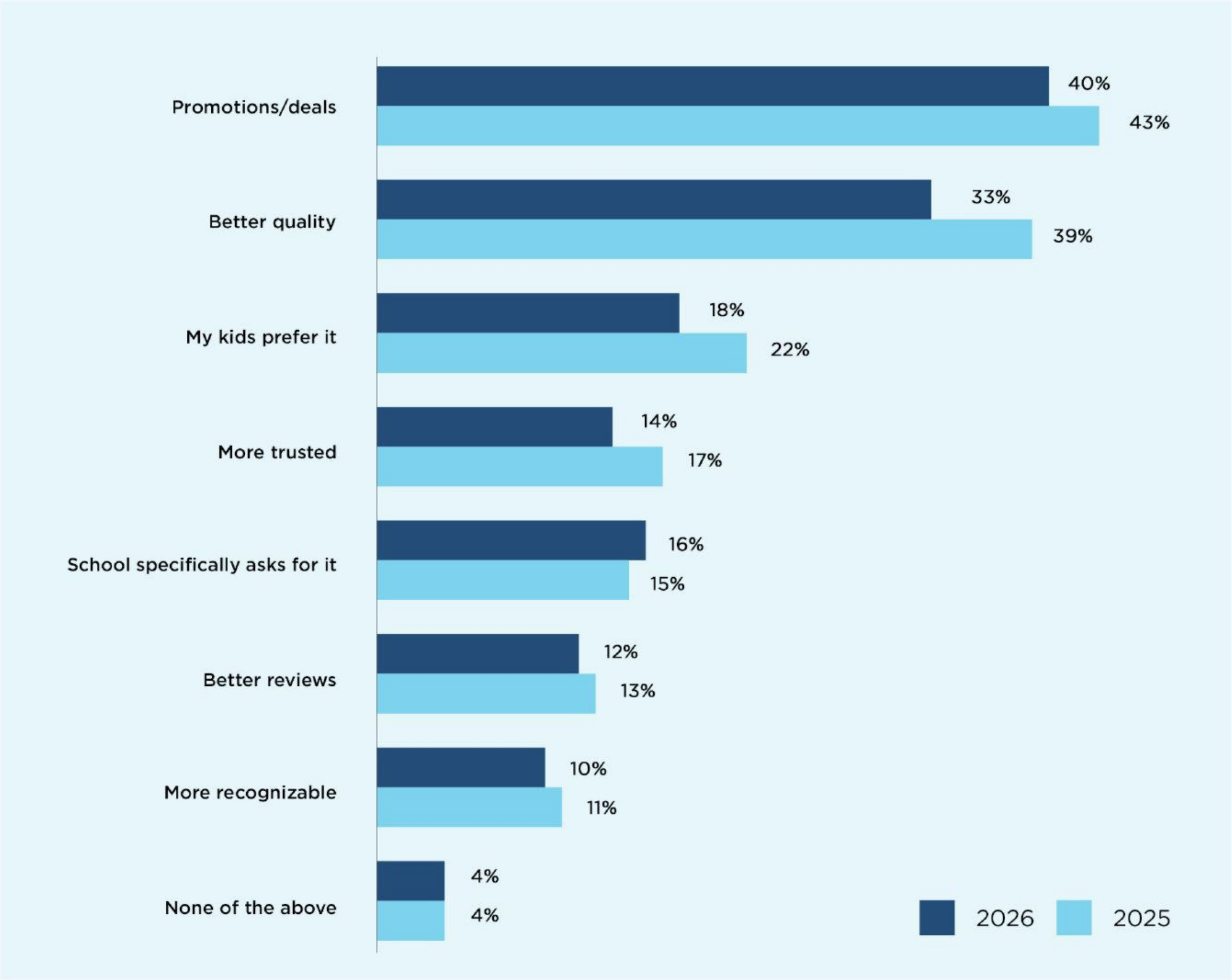
School supplies represent the category where parents feel most comfortable purchasing private label. 48% are open to store-brand notebooks, pens, and similar items.



What types of Back-to-School items are you comfortable buying as private label (store brands) ?
Base: Canadian parents of K–12 students responsible for Back-to-School planning n=1,398

Deals First, Trust Second: Why Parents Choose Name Brands

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



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

Conclusion

01

Early Planning Starts

61% Plan Ahead

02

Deals Drive Decisions

85% Seek Promotions

03

Emotions Influence Purchases

Reviews Matter More

04

Multiple Shopping Trips

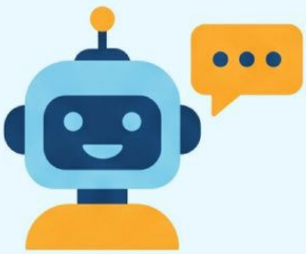
Only 19% Finish in One Visit

05

In-Store Dominates

99% Shop In Person

06



AI Shopping Tools Rise

44% Interested

Get in Touch

Email us: insights@caddle.ca