Secrets of Shoe Shopping, Today’s Parent magazine, 2010

By Karan Smith

Indoor shoes. Outdoor shoes. Sandals. Rain boots. Winter boots. Whose front entrance isn’t jammed with a jumble of footwear? Those firemen wellies, shiny Mary Janes and blue skater shoes can pile up – and add up on your credit card bill too. So how can parents seek value, without sacrificing fit and support for growing feet?

“The practical reality is that parents don’t want to spend a lot of money on shoes that a child’s not going to wear very long,” says Dr. David Greenberg, a podiatrist in Ottawa.

The good news: It is possible to have quality, a proper fit and value, if you know what to look for.

**Tips for fit**

Children need shoes once they start walking to protect against the elements -- indoors stick with bare feet or socks -- and the biggest consideration is how they feel. (Sorry kids, it’s not whether the runners flash or whether the ballet flats are metallic).

**\*The pinch test:** Here’s how to judge fit, according to the Canadian Paediatric Society:

Shoes should feel snug at the heel, but be roomy enough – your thumb’s width between the big toe and the tip – when measured while your child is standing. To figure out the width, pinch along the sides; the material should give a bit.

**\*Take two:** “Always try both shoes,” says Dr. Barbara Grueger, the lead author on the CPS statement and a paediatrician who works in Whitehorse and Calgary. “Often there is a size discrepancy between feet.” (Buy for the bigger foot; if there’s a substantial difference, use an insole to balance out the fit).

**\*No super-sizing:** Tempted to buy big to make it last? Shoes that are too loose are as bad as shoes that are too tight as they won’t be supporting the foot properly and can cause discomfort and blisters, says Dr. Grueger.

**\*Testing required:** And sadly, for parents who dream of averting meltdowns by simply scooping up footwear they think is the right size, your child does have to try them on as sizing between brands varies.

**Does price matter?**

It’s not the cost – which can run from $10 to $100 for even preschoolers’ slip-ons – as much as the fit and quality that is important.

Look for breathable material, such as leather or meshes over vinyl or synthetic material,so the foot doesn’t get clammy. Press the heel to make sure it doesn’t compress too easily and then bend the shoe at the arch to test for some firmness. “You don’t want a shoe that you sort of twist it around and it looks like spaghetti,” says Dr. Greenberg. “The best advice I can give is to go to a place where they know children’s shoes. It’s not a matter of how much money you spend. It’s the expertise you’re looking for.”

**Wiggle room**

The Canadian Podiatry Association warns against hand-me-downs. But who among us hasn’t nudged their girl toward the navy Sorels thinking they’ll fit her little brother in a few snows.

Dr. Greenberg says second-hand shoes are fine, as long as they’re in good condition.

 “The hand-me-down becomes a problem when it has the shape and the influence of somebody else’s foot.” Make sure the back of the shoe isn’t scrunched and that the sole isn’t worn down.

And remember to keep the search for the perfect shoes in perspective -- soon enough your son will be growing out of those boots for sandals. In fact, the CPS estimatesthat toddlers’ feet grow a size every six to eight months and after age three, kids’ feet grow a size every year.So, your sneaking suspicion that you’re always buying shoes is indeed right.

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