

10 pieces to brighten up back-to-school time

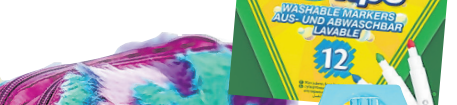


Lily & Dan space lunch bag, €6.99, Aldi



Pencil sharpener, €4.99, Easons

Crayola Super Tips markers, €2.99, Lidl



Furry pencil case, €4.95, schoolbooks.ie



Roll N Eat reusable snack bag, €9.50, faerly.ie



Monster stickers, €5.95, Art & Hobby

Hand sanitiser, €4.99 reduced from €8.99, Claire's



Alphabet stamper set, €3.50, Penneys

Olivia Burton squirrel pen, €13.99 reduced from €19.99, LittlewoodsIreland.ie

Back to School



Weigh up the options: Choose a school bag that will reduce the risk of neck and back pain PHOTO POSED BY MODEL

Expert guide to buying the essentials

Shopping for the right school bag, coat and shoes is more than just about style and price. Meadhbh McGrath finds that our choices can also have a lasting effect on children's health and wellbeing

WHETHER you're replacing outgrown items or gearing up for a first day, shopping for the back-to-school season can be stressful. Finding a proper fit is crucial so your child gets enough wear out of a pair of shoes or coat — and so you don't end up making a repeat visit to stores in a few months' time — but you'll want to make sure you're also getting good value for money. Here, we round up some expert tips on what you need to know when buying coats, shoes and bags for the coming school year.

BAGS

"It's important to pick a good school bag to reduce the risk of neck pain and back pain," says Sinéad de Freitas, a chartered physiotherapist specialising in paediatrics. She notes that excessive load-bearing on a growing spine can increase the risk of both, and that it's recommended a child carries a maximum of 10pc of their own body weight, with the weight evenly carried across their back.

Aoife McCarthy is a specialist paediatric physiotherapist with the Compass Physio Clinics in Meath and Kildare, and says there are three main things to consider when

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daughter, who is about to start senior infants, and also recommends the backpacks by Jansport (from €44.95, SchoolBooks.ie), Ridge 53 (from €24.95, SchoolBooks.ie) and Lily & Dan (€14.99, Aldi). "They are all well structured, have two thick, padded, adjustable shoulder straps and a protective back-piece," she says.

For children who cycle to school, Sinéad recommends choosing a backpack with a waist strap, like you'd typically see on a hiking bag, to stop the bag swinging around, or using panniers to distribute the weight evenly."

When packing the bag, "always pack the heaviest things first to keep the weight balanced," she adds. "It's worth ensuring children do a regular review of what's in their bag — often extra books or leftover lunch can get left on the bottom, adding unnecessary weight."

COATS

You may be tempted to buy baggy coats two sizes up to save yourself rushing back to the shops after your child's next growth spurt, but there are other ways to tell if a coat will last.

"We would always say to try to get a year out of a coat — that's what we aim for when we're fitting," says Jenny Erwin, childrenswear buyer for Arnotts. "The kids always want them as tight as possible, so a trick that we do is to make them stand and put their arms out horizontally, and the sleeve must stay to their wrist. If the sleeve is halfway up their arm, then you'll say: 'That's too small!'"

She advises picking a coat with a hood so they're prepared for changeable weather, and a style that features reflective panels for better visibility. "Most of the jackets these days are fantastic because they have reflectors on them so you can be seen in the dark on grotty winter mornings," Jenny explains.

When it comes to waterproofing, she notes that your choices will often depend on your budget. Many of the coats available in stores are 'water-repellent' rather than waterproof, which means water cannot easily penetrate the material, but it's not completely impenetrable and the child won't be protected from very heavy showers. Waterproof coats typically carry a significantly higher price tag.

"A brand like Polarn O Pyret is fantastic for a full-on waterproof, fully taped seam coat, but you're talking about €90 for that, whereas if you're looking at a really good coat that's water-repellent, an entry price would be €36 or €40," Jenny explains, naming Losan and Blue Seven as two of her top picks for brands that make excellent water-repellent school coats at affordable prices.

On the higher end, she recommends Barbour and The North Face as the most "hard-wearing" options. The lightweight, waterproof Resolve jacket for boys and girls is currently reduced in The North Face store's summer sale (€40, down from €80, TheNorthFace.ie).

On a lower budget, Trespass has waterproof insulated jackets with reflective details, available in dark blue or pink, included in the summer sale for kids up to age 12 (€39.99, reduced from €79.99, Trespass), and Next offers a red or blue/green fleecelined waterproof jacket with taped seams for up to age 16 (from €33, Next).

SHOES

Experts recommend getting your children's feet measured by a professional, something that has been especially difficult in the past year with limited access to fitting services.

Marta Leamy, proprietor of specialised children's boutique Chicos & Chicas Shoes in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, is a qualified shoe fitter and member of the Children's Foot



Ridge 53 backpack, €24.95, School Books.ie



Lily & Dan backpack, €14.99, Aldi



Jansport bag, €69.95, School Books.ie



Waterproof jacket, €39.99 reduced from €79.99, Trespass



Waterproof jacket, from €33, Next



Resolve jacket, €40 reduced from €80, TheNorth Face.ie



Below, from left to right: Geox shoes, from €63, Next; Lelli Kelly school shoes, €65, Chicos & Chicas; Pablosky boys' school shoe, €54, Chicos & Chicas



Health Register, and says ensuring kids' feet are properly supported is just as important as making sure they brush their teeth or eat a healthy diet.

"Poorly fitted shoes don't wear well as they tend to crack or break due to over-creasing on the parts of the shoe where there is an excess of growing room," she explains. "They also can lead to a lifetime of foot problems — some problems are visible immediately, like in-grown toenails, athlete's foot, calluses and corns, and some develop over time, like pronation and supination, or overlapping toes, just to mention a few."

She recommends children over the age of four should get their feet measured every 10 to 12 weeks. "That's not to say that a customer needs to purchase a pair of shoes every time the child gets checked," she adds. "But children's feet grow erratically in fits and starts — during this time feet can grow by at least half a size, so it's wise to be regularly checked."

When buying school shoes, Marta advises confirming there is sufficient growing room, which means around 1.5 or 2cm in length. "Any more than that and the shoe will become a tripping hazard and the child will have to drag their feet or curl the toes to hold onto the shoes," she says, noting that shoes should be the correct width as well as length. "If the velcro fastening is too short, the shoe is too narrow, and if the fastening is overlapping the closing point excessively, then the shoe is too wide."

Marta points out that most shoes now have removable insoles, which can be used as a way to check the correct fit by taking the insoles out and getting the child to stand on them. She warns, however, not to ask very young children if the shoes fit comfortably. "Cramping and distortion may occur without feeling any pain or discomfort," she explains. "Most of the time a child will say that a pair of shoes are comfortable if they like them."

Breathable materials such as leather are best for keeping children's feet warm and dry, and will conform to the shape of the foot for a better fit, while waterproof membranes such as Gore-Tex or Sympatex and non-slip outsoles are highly recommended.

Paediatric physiotherapist Aoife McCarthy notes that shoes should be well-structured with a supportive heel cup at the back. "Flimsy shoes such as plimssoles or ballet-type shoes are a bit of a no-go for an everyday shoe," she explains, adding that laces that can be firmly tied or a velcro fastening across the front work best to "ensure support and stability for the child's foot and ankle."

She recommends the ranges by Geox (from €42, chicosandchicasshoes.ie), Pablosky (from €54, chicosandchicasshoes.ie) and Biomechanics (from €48, chicosandchicasshoes.ie) as the most supportive, particularly for children with flatter feet.

Marta echoes this recommendation, noting that these brands "manufacture the best quality school shoes, with light and flexible outsoles, soft leathers and patent leathers, scuff guards and supportive heel counters".

For a more fashionable option for girls, she recommends Lelli Kelly, which offers patent Mary Janes with interchangeable straps featuring embroidered brooches with rainbows, puppies and unicorns (€65, chicosandchicasshoes.ie). "They still tick all the boxes for durability, support and comfort," says Marta.