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FEATURE ARTICLE

### **Smart Spending and Fair-Trade Practices: Back-to-School Tips for Fijian Parents**

The back-to-school season is an exciting yet challenging time for parents and guardians across Fiji. As the school term kicks off on January 27, families across Fiji are buzzing with preparations to ensure their children are ready to excel. This period, while exciting, can also bring significant financial strain as parents and guardians invest in uniforms, textbooks, stationery, and other school necessities.

The feature article provides parents and guardians in Fiji with practical tips for back-to-school shopping, focusing on ensuring smart spending and promoting fair-trade practices. It highlights common consumer challenges, such as exclusive dealing and conditional selling, and offers actionable advice to navigate these issues.

#### **Understanding the Back-to-School Landscape in Fiji**

Fiji's education system, with its diverse mix of urban and rural schools, poses unique challenges. Many parents in rural areas often face difficulties in accessing quality school supplies due to limited availability and higher transportation costs. Meanwhile, urban families contend with crowded stores and rising prices. In addition, government initiatives such as the \$200 back-to-school support program, free education grants and subsidized transport schemes have eased some burdens, but the responsibility of purchasing certain school essentials still falls on parents.

To navigate these challenges, it is crucial to plan and adopt strategies that ensure your child's needs are met efficiently.

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To make the most of your hard-earned money this season, here are some essential back-to-school shopping tips.

### 1. Plan Your Budget and Prioritize Needs

The first step to smart back-to-school shopping is creating a budget. List all the essentials your child needs, such as uniforms, books, shoes, and stationery. Allocate funds for each category and stick to your budget to avoid overspending. Prioritizing needs over wants is crucial. For instance, focus on purchasing uniforms and essential school supplies before considering extras like fancy lunchboxes or branded backpacks.

**Tip:** Take advantage of government assistance programs, such as e-wallets, but use them thoughtfully. Avoid impulsive spending on items that may not be necessary for the school term.

### 2. Compare Prices and Shop Around

One of the most effective ways to save money is by comparing prices across different retailers. Avoid falling into the trap of exclusive dealing—a practice where schools mandate parents to buy uniforms or supplies from specific shops at fixed prices. This practice is not only unethical but also illegal under the FCCC Act. By shopping around, parents can secure the best deals and avoid being overcharged.

**Tip:** If you encounter exclusive dealing or other unfair practices, report them immediately to the Consumer Council of Fiji through their toll-free helpline (155) or via email at [complaints@consumersfiji.org](mailto:complaints@consumersfiji.org).

### 3. Avoid Conditional Selling

During the back-to-school season, some traders may engage in conditional selling, forcing customers to buy additional items alongside essential products or access to certain products unless they buy in specific conditions. This tactic leads to unnecessary expenses and limits

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your freedom of choice. Stay vigilant and refuse bundled deals that include items you do not need. Instead, purchase only what is necessary for your child's education.

**Tip:** When faced with conditional selling, assert your rights as a consumer and report such incidents to the Council.

#### **4. Stay Safe from Scams and Fraud**

With the increasing use of e-wallets and online shopping platforms, the risk of scams is heightened during this busy season. Scammers often target consumers with deals that seem too good to be true. Verify the legitimacy of online vendors before making purchases, and never share sensitive information such as OTPs or PINs.

**Tip:** If in doubt, seek advice from trusted sources or consult the Council for guidance.

#### **5. Buy Quality Products**

Inspect goods thoroughly before purchasing. Check the quality of uniforms, shoes, and stationery to ensure they are durable and worth the investment. Cheap items may seem like a good deal initially but could cost more in the long run if they need frequent replacement.

**Tip:** Ask for receipts and warranties where applicable, as these are essential for exchanges or refunds if issues arise.

#### **6. Embrace Recycling and Reuse**

To further ease the financial burden, consider reusing items from previous school years. Inspect last year's uniforms, bags, and stationery to see what can be salvaged and reused. This practice not only saves money but also contributes to sustainability.

**Tip:** Organize a swap event with other parents to exchange gently used uniforms or books that their children no longer need.

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## 7. Engage Your Children in the Process

Involve your children in back-to-school shopping to teach them the value of money and the importance of making practical choices. Discuss the budget with them and explain why prioritizing essential items is necessary. This helps them develop good financial habits from a young age.

**Tip:** Use this opportunity to educate your children about consumer rights and the importance of ethical trading practices.

## 8. Plan Purchases Early

Avoid the last-minute rush by planning and purchasing school supplies well in advance. Early planning allows you to explore multiple options and avoid overpriced items during peak shopping periods.

**Tip:** Look out for discounts and promotions in the weeks leading up to the school term.

## 9. Leverage Government Assistance Wisely

For families receiving the \$200 government assistance, it is important to use these funds wisely. Prioritize essential items such as textbooks, uniforms, and shoes. Avoid spending on high-end products that may not add significant value to your child's education.

**Tip:** If unsure about what to purchase, consult your child's school for guidance on essential supplies.

## Conclusion

Back-to-school preparation in Fiji is an opportunity to equip your child with the tools they need to succeed while teaching them valuable life skills. With careful planning, a clear budget, and a focus on sustainability, you can navigate this season with confidence. Remember, education

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Consumer Council of Fiji



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is one of the most important investments you can make in your child's future, and every effort you put into their preparation is a step toward their success.

As the school year begins, embrace the journey with optimism and determination. With the right approach, this back-to-school season can be a time of excitement and growth for both you and your child. Remember, your choices as a consumer not only impact your family's finances but also contribute to promoting fair-trade practices and ethical business behavior in Fiji.

For any complaints or queries, you can contact the Council on our National Toll-free line 155.

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