



Posted 8/22/2004 9:42 PM Updated 8/22/2004 11:19 PM

School shopping goes pro

By Olivia Barker, USA TODAY

DENVER — Combing through the racks at Forever 21, a still-14 Aislinn Barnett is coveting a pink corduroy mini whose ruffled hem grazes her thighs in a way that makes cheerleading skirts look downright matronly.



Ayesha Khatun, right, shops with her daughter Nagwa, 10, center, and son Mashir at Office Depot in Duluth, Ga.

By Craig Moore,
AP/Gwinnett Daily Post

Her mom, Becky Barnett, is having "a little trouble" with the length. "I know that's how they wear it, but when it's your own, it's a little different. Her dad will have a cow."

He's not here, but there's another adjudicator on this back-to-school trip at the Cherry Creek Shopping Center who is contributing her two cents.

In a small but burgeoning movement, parents are hiring personal shoppers and image consultants like Lindquist to ease the back-to-school shopping burden, largely for limits-pushing daughters. Who has time, moms say, to negotiate stacks of jeans, let alone navigate the throngs at the mall? Who has the desire to play taste police in the dressing room, administering cleavage checks both above and below the waist? And whose ego — and wallet — enjoys seeing closets full of Mom-chosen clothes go unworn?

The service is far from a luxury or indulgence, say personal shoppers and their clients. "It's nice when you as a parent can say, 'Here are some guidelines, here's the budget, now goodbye,'" says Linda Lee, head of personal shopping for Macy's East. She's "absolutely" seeing more moms and dads engage the free service for their children.

For kids, the benefit lies in finding a shopping guide who's ostensibly more clued in to fashion than fuddy-duddy Mom. For parents, it's knowing that regardless of the shopper's savvy style sense, she's not going to pick out a tube top for little Susie's first day of school.

But there are larger cultural factors at work, too. "We're in an era where we're away from doing everything for ourselves," says Lindquist, a vice president with the Association of Image Consultants International (AICI). "We're in the expert era. We don't cater a party or landscape a garden" or, increasingly, outfit our children. About 15% to 20% of Lindquist's clients are young people who hail from her Denver hometown or fly in from as far as Boston.

In recent years, Lindquist says, her role has been even more important "because the standard has for some time been the trashiest thing around" — the scarcely covered look that only the scarce few can pull off. And then, not particularly elegantly.

"Kids today are more assertive with their parents, and more demanding," says Lisa Bain, executive editor of Parenting magazine. "And there's just more stuff available to them" — a mix of factors that makes the experience more complicated and more stressful. Bain says that though she finds the idea of personal shoppers rummaging through the children's department a bit extreme, she'd "never judge another parent for doing something to save her sanity."

Serious business

According to The NPD Group, a market research company, 71% of consumers plan to buy apparel this back-to-school season, spending about \$255 per child — 4.5% more than last year.

What these personal shoppers emphasize is that they're professionals, primed to spot the right trends that will suit the right body types. Chain stores and boutiques are their satellite offices, where they can swoop in and edit selections quickly, creating clothing combinations that a mother or daughter might not readily see — and vetoing some of those they do. Browsing is not the goal.

For Houston-based Suzie Wilson, that means arriving with a rising college freshman client at the Galleria mall at the opening bell — 10 a.m. — and staying until nearly 6 p.m. Shod in comfy yet chic Aerosoles shoes, Wilson totes a bottle of water and tucks two PowerBars into her purse, one for her and one for her client, who's bound for places like Baylor University and Texas Tech.

In fact, Wilson pre-shops before the pair's arrival, scouting out possibilities based on an initial at-home closet inspection. (Some shoppers hand out questionnaires, inquiring after clothing likes and dislikes. Others photograph their charges in favorite outfits, compile the pictures on a CD and conduct an often cringe-inducing PowerPoint presentation.)

Dose of objectivity

At first, the young women are nervous, says Wilson, 50: "This old lady, what does she know?" A lot, like how to convince a thrifty mom that \$160 Earl jeans are worth it, that "your daughter is going to get so much confidence from them."

Wilson extracts the emotional aspect from shopping. "There are a lot of things a mother can't tell her daughter that it's easy for me to tell. They need me to be brutally honest about their clothes, and when they roll their eyes or go 'ugh,' it doesn't offend me."

That objectivity is a major reason Deborah Pittman employed Wilson last summer to help her daughter get ready for her first year at Memphis' Rhodes College.

"It would have hurt her feelings if I'd said one thing about something not looking good on her," says Pittman, 55. "And if she'd selected something I really didn't like, it would have been a really traumatic decision for me, because I know the rest of the day would have been torture."

The day was far from it. "Suzie helped pick styles that flatter my figure and show my own style," says Joelle Pittman, 19 — flirty, feminine miniskirts and tops in a preponderance of pink. This instead of her "extremely, extremely, extremely conservative" mother trying to "put on me what she'd put on herself."

Like a turtleneck-and-long-skirt duo. Or the little black skirt suit from Ann Taylor Loft. The younger Pittman, who says she succumbed to the suit as a bargaining chip "so I'd get what I wanted," wore it to high school. One of her teachers was clad in the exact same ensemble.

Trawling the mall presents a conundrum, Joelle Pittman says. She can't go by herself because she's "really picky" and craves a second opinion. "I can't go with my mom because it's a war, and sometimes my friends are just too nice — when I know I look horrible." On the other hand, "when you're hanging out with someone and it's their job to make you look cute ... it's very liberating."

Sometimes Lindquist sides with Mom in the perennial conflict between "Pretty please?" and "No way!" Especially when it's a question of the dreaded bare midriff. Lindquist counsels her clients about "focal points": "Do you really want your belly to be the focus of your ninth-grade teacher?" Or she'll reverse the question: "What are you trying to communicate with the way you are dressing? Lazy, slovenly, low IQ? You are too special to allow that to happen."

And she delivers her critiques with warmth and wit. Wrinkling her nose at a pastoral-print T-shirt Aislinn is eyeing, Lindquist declares it "kind of Grandma Moses."

"I'm gentle. I'm not preachy," Lindquist says.

Michelle Sterling is attempting to defuse some father-daughter friction. The daughter, 17, has "got this thing that she needs to wear black all the time," preferably black adorned with metal spikes, says San Francisco-based Sterling, who, in her efforts to achieve sartorial détente, calls herself a family coach. To lure her back toward the mainstream, Dad tosses Diesel jeans her way, which never emerge from her closet. The compromise? Black pieces, such as bootleg pants, culled from Armani Exchange.

For other young clients, whose numbers have doubled each year for Sterling, it's about correcting the overwhelming casualization of adolescence: flip-flops, sausage-casing T-shirts — "that's their standard uniform," Sterling says. "I try to polish that up."

A shopper's reward

For some personal shoppers, an aim is to spare their clients the kind of humiliation they endured in their youth. Anna Wildermuth may be the president of the AICI, but years ago she pranced around in a gray and red box-pleated plaid skirt and a puffy-sleeved blouse printed with a riot of orange, red and yellow flowers.

"Oh, God," says Wildermuth, who's based in Elmhurst, Ill. "I still remember it to this day." Fitting, then, that the mission for one of her clients, a high school senior boy, was to "make him look ungeeky."

Sometimes, teenage clients come to their own, ultimately correct conclusions. After selecting \$350 worth of skirts, jackets, tops and pants in three hours — 20 to 25 outfits in all, Lindquist crows — Aislinn is having second thoughts about that pink mini. Even her ballet training won't allow her to wear it gracefully: She can bend over only a few degrees and keep her dignity intact.

Mom Becky looks relieved.