

For back to school, it's all uniform

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To get ahead this back-to-school season, kidswear retailers are moving uniforms to the head of the class.

The crucial selling season is already under way, and many children's clothing sellers, including The Children's Place Retail Stores Inc. and J.C. Penney Co., are turning to their uniform divisions to boost revenue. While many consumers associate uniforms with plaid skirts and parochial schools, stores from Target to Macy's now separate their basics—blazers, polo or oxford shirts, khaki bottoms and classic cardigans—into one "uniform shop" where parents can mix and match everyday wear. Their children, typically 5 to 11 years old, might not even attend schools with dress codes.

"Before, you had to hunt for it, but now each store is putting a small section in and calling it uniform," says Lisa Walters, principal of consultancy Retail Eye Partners. "There's definitely a push to put it in every store."

The classic items, usually priced under \$10, are budget-friendly, making them an especially compelling buy in the current economic climate. Several stores have expanded their in-store divisions this season. Others are adding more colors and offering more fashionable elements to entice tweens who are starting to assert their own sense of style.

"Uniforms are classic, basic pieces parents can invest in and wardrobe a lot of things around," says Jamie Ross, creative director at fashion forecaster The Doneger Group.

Kidswear retailers need an edge. Sales of children's apparel have dropped steadily over the last two years, most recently falling 2%, to \$19.5 billion, for the 12 months ended in May, according to NPD Group Inc. Furthermore, 75% of shoppers surveyed by WSL Strategic Retail plan to spend the same or less than they did last year on back-to-school purchases.

Year-round option

After a nearly 20% increase in sales in its uniform business last year compared with 2007, Secaucus, N.J.-based The Children's Place is considering offering uniforms throughout the year, instead of just between July and September. The retailer, with \$1.6 billion in sales, may also add a spring uniform division, which would include seasonal products such as Bermuda knit shorts.

"Each year, the demand grows a little bit more," says senior director of apparel A.K. LaMonica, adding that The Children's Place sells coordinated items, from headbands to shoes. Same-store sales for the chain were down 4% in July.

Meanwhile, according to Penney's, which last month opened its first Manhattan store, kids are wearing its uniforms for both school and play. The retailer partners with clothier Izod in its uniform business and has benefited from the liquidation last fall of Mervyn's, a department store chain heavily focused on uniforms.

"We've been ramping up our uniform business because our customers tell us that's what they want," says Clark McNaught, senior vice president of Penney's children's division.

Though uniforms are by nature simple, many stores are adding small fashion details to certain pieces to increase variety. For example, Penney's now sells flat-front khaki trousers and Capri-length pants for children, in addition to the regular pleated and full-length versions. The Children's Place adds Peter Pan collars or cap sleeves to its girls' shirts to make them more hip.

Gymboree plays along

Another retailer, Gymboree, which has three Manhattan shops, is emphasizing uniforms in its stores this year and has also expanded its boys' uniform business. Many shoppers like to accessorize the division's items, such as a cardigan or polo shirt, with jeans to make a more fashionable outfit, according to a company spokesman.

"Uniforms leave it up to the consumer to style items how they see fit," says Khalym Schell, children's editor at trend tracker Stylesight.