

BOOST THE BABY BANK

Money-saving ideas to help you beat the big squeeze as your little one grows

Raising a child is as expensive as it is enriching, with the latest figures revealing the cost can tot up to a jaw-dropping £7,200 in the first year alone. With so many things to pay for, the burden of bringing up a baby has increased by 60 per cent in recent years.

And that first year includes the double whammy of being on maternity leave and, therefore, a reduced income, as well as the possibility of facing large childcare bills when you return to work, or having to take a part-time or less well-paid role to fit work around your family responsibilities.

Having savings, working out a realistic budget (and sticking to it) and claiming any benefits you're entitled to will help, of course. But here are eight tried-and-tested tips to ensure you keep a bit more of that £7,200 in your pocket during that first year...



1 Invest wisely
Most baby purchases have a limited lifespan, but investing in key buys that grow with your child offers more bang for your buck in the long run – even if it means you pay out more initially. You'll save around £150 if you sidestep the Moses basket and cot, instead putting your baby into a cot bed from day one, if you have the space. Or consider a travel system with a carrycot that's suitable for overnight sleeping, so you can use that instead.

Another option is to invest in a multistage car seat to take you from baby up to toddler, and even beyond. And if you plan to have more than one child, consider a good-quality buggy that adapts from one to two children, and back again, from the get-go.



2 Don't buy toys – rent them
Children become more interested in toys from about 3 months, as hand-eye coordination starts to improve. Parents spend an average of £216 a year on toys, but renting them offers value for money while saving on space. So consider joining a local toy library where you can rent playthings from just 50p per week.

Maushami Saha, 33, from London, mum to Maya, 2, and Lili, 6 weeks, does exactly that. "If you rent toys before the centre closes prior to the school holidays you can keep them for the whole holiday period at the same two-week rental price. I rent huge things like mini bouncy castles for Maya, then only return them once school restarts," she says.

Playgroups are also a great way for your baby to experience different toys and develop social skills too, and most councils offer other activities for free.



3 Buy online
Internet shopping is far more fuss-free than carting a baby and a heavy buggy around, and if you're looking to tighten your purse strings, it's definitely the way forward. Websites often have special online-only deals, so it pays to stock up on essentials like nappies and wipes – and remember that own-brand goods are usually much cheaper than well-known brands but can still be good quality. Sign up to retailer baby clubs and you'll get notified every time there's a special money-saving event. If you do your research carefully, there are tons of savings to be made by using sites such as eBay and Freecycle, too.

"Make use of local mother-and-baby selling sites on Facebook as you avoid paying sellers' fees and don't have to worry about postage," recommends Kat Lewis, 37, from Berkshire, mum to 6-month-old twins Martha and Edward.

Also, make use of companies that offer free returns, such as Baby Gap and Amazon, so you don't have to pay out if items are unsuitable.



4 Earn while you spend
Take advantage of cashback cards and discount voucher sites like Groupon, that provide instant discounts or money back on your baby buys.

Claire Edwards, 32, from Enfield, mum to 4-month-old son Sam, says, "I always check Quidco when buying online in stores like Mothercare. It's a cashback site where you end up saving quite a bit over time. Even if it's only a pound here and there, the money soon builds up, and you can request that your cashback be transferred into your own account."

If you're a member of a travel or supermarket loyalty scheme, such as Avios or Nectar, always check where you can collect points before shopping online. They'll come in handy for future purchases. ➔

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Make your own food

When weaning time comes around, the convenience of ready-made food can be tempting, but also costly. For example, a shop-bought apple-and-banana pouch can cost £1, but is just 50p if you make your own. And research shows that a homemade purée results in up to double the nutrients of pre-prepared baby foods.

Buy ingredients in bulk, and look out for 'buy one get one free' offers in the supermarket. Then cook in batches and freeze in ice cube trays so you only need to defrost what you need. Zero wastage and 100 per cent convenience!



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Only buy what you really need

It sounds obvious, but it's one of the biggest ways to slash costs. Why buy an expensive changing table when you can just use a changing mat on the floor or bed? Opting for cloth nappies over disposables could also save you more than £1,650 by the time your child gets round to potty-training, while sterilising bottles with Milton tablets in a bowl of hot water will save you from spending on a microwave steriliser, plus avoiding hiked-up electricity bills, to boot.



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Plan ahead

If you've been inundated with baby clothes as gifts, have a sift through them all to see if any of the items could be exchanged for larger sizes of the same outfit. That way, you'll definitely get the most out of the clothes as your little one grows.

Becoming a savvy shopper will also help to stretch your budget. As a rule, if you see something on offer and you know you'll need it in the future, buy it now. That's what Nikkie Grimshaw, 33, from Buckinghamshire, does for her daughter Maia, 2. "I often buy next year's clothes in the sales from shops like John Lewis at bargain prices," she says.



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Start a swap shop

Host a swapping party for you and your baby. Every few months, invite a handful of your mum friends over, asking them to bring any items their child has outgrown, from books to shoes. Serve some nibbles, and let the swapping begin!

"You'll be surprised by how much fun it can be exchanging things with friends," says Gemma Johnson of myfamilyclub.co.uk

"A new item always feels like new, whether it's been bought, swapped or given."