



Prom costs decline for first time in three years

Janelle Griffith/The Star-Ledger By Janelle Griffith/The Star-Ledger

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As teenagers make their way to prom this season, for the first time in three years, at least one thing will have changed significantly — the cost of the annual dance.

A nationwide survey conducted by Visa credit cards found that after steady increases from 2011 to 2013, the average American household will spend \$978 in 2014 on prom costs — a 14 percent decrease from last year.

But that doesn't mean parents are skimping on the taffeta, tulle and tuxedos. Parents still lay out plenty of money on the big dance — just a little bit less than in previous years.

"I think people are realizing that prom is a dance, and you don't have to spend like a celebrity to have a great time," Nat Sillin, Visa's head of U.S. Financial Education, said in a statement.

Count Nora Zappia of Edison, and her daughter Catherine, among those realizing that prom fun can still be had on a moderate budget.

"We really didn't discuss prices because I knew they were going to be expensive," Nora Zappia says. Before they started dress shopping, however, Zappia had a mental budget of no more than \$300 for Catherine, a student at Bishop Ahr in Edison, who decided at the last minute to attend prom.

The 17-year-old found a black dress on sale for \$83 at Deb Shops. Her mother was a fan of the way the dress fit — not too tight or revealing — and the price.

That's the ideal outcome for a prom shopping trip, experts say — and a little discussion of what both parties are looking for can help you get there, without tears or arguments.

"Mother and daughter should agree on the goal: buying a dress that makes her look and feel beautiful, is appropriate for the age and occasion and is reasonably priced," says Ellen Resnick of Randolph, who, with her daughter, Jenna Gebel, is the author of the parenting blog motherdaughterfriend.com — where both mother and daughter offer advice to other parent-child pairs.

"Mom should be understanding of the prom's importance in the mind of the daughter, but she should also point out that it's most likely she'll only wear the dress one time," adds Resnick, 56, a communications consultant. (Gebel, now 25, is a graduate student.)

"I think it would be helpful for parents to set a budget before they begin shopping to manage their daughter's expectations," says Resnick. "This helps avoid any misunderstandings or bickering and paves the way for a pleasant, memorable shopping experience."

Francine Rosenberg, a clinical psychologist with the Morris Psychological Group in Parsippany, agrees that the negotiation should begin long before the event.

"Anytime parents can talk to their kids and create appropriate expectations that will help prevent arguments down the road — whether you're talking about prom or anything to help prevent arguments down the road — I think that makes things a little bit easier down the line," Rosenberg says.

Kaylan Haughney, 18, and her mother Amy Haughney shopped at David's Bridal in East Brunswick for the Old Bridge High School prom. They had a favorable shopping experience in April at the store, which carries a wide range of dresses priced from \$99 to \$399 to cater to different budgets.

Like the Haughneys, Resnick says she gave her daughter the freedom to choose what she wanted to wear.

Idelle Newton was determined to make prom memorable for her only child, Keyarah. Even with cost-cutting measures, Newton anticipates spending more than the national average for her daughter to attend Roselle Catholic High School's prom.

Keyarah, 17, wanted a \$500 dress she found with her mother at a specialty store in Fanwood. Newton took her daughter to Group USA, believing they could find the dress at a discounted price at the large chain store. Her suspicion proved accurate; Newton bought the same pink mermaid dress for \$339.

Even with the \$161 saved, Newton will spend \$180 on two prom tickets for Keyarah and her date, \$190 for a tuxedo, more than \$100 toward a limo and an unspecified amount on her daughter's hair, makeup and dress alterations. To curb costs, Newton says she will have the dress altered at a dry cleaner and book a makeup appointment at a department store that does not charge for such visits. (Many retailers, such as Sephora, charge an upfront fee of \$50 to book an appointment.)

"Despite the drop this year, prom spending still remains disproportionately high and represents a major expense for American families with high school students," the Visa survey says.

The survey also shows that the cost of prom varies by region. Parents on the West Coast for example, spend the most, with an average of \$1,125 per household. Not far behind is the Northeast with reported costs at \$1,104. Families in the Midwest and South spend the least, at \$835 and \$926, respectively.

Rosenberg says teenage narcissism can also factor in to prom expenses.

"We tend to overindulge our kids or live vicariously through them," Rosenberg says. "Sometimes, it's the parents pushing the excess. You'll see both scenarios. The children, because they don't have the same world experience that adults do, that in that moment, that is the most important thing in the whole

world and nothing rises to that. I remember feeling that way when I was going to my prom. It's just a developmental problem."

Communication, at every point in the prom shopping experience, can avoid conflict, Rosenberg says.

"I would start by validating your child's needs for this to be wonderful and perfect and be open in a comfortable way," she says.

"Let your child voice their opinion, too. Help educate them on the value of money."