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Consignment shopping eases pain of rising prices for families

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Michael Surryhne, 3, peruses a book while his mother and other shoppers check out used clothing at the Just Between Friends consignment show at the convention center. LEZLIE STERLING /

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Sari Pogue, Kirsten Whitefleet and Jennifer Ramos have something in common: The three young Sacramento mothers share the pain of rising costs for everything from food to gasoline to clothing for their growing children.

That's why on Friday, they and more than 1,000 other moms and a handful of dads sorted through sales tables and scoured racks of "gently used" clothing at a Sacramento Convention Center exhibit hall, searching for bargain buys.

"Every. Penny. Counts," said Pogue, the mother of four, pausing between words for emphasis. "Especially in this economy, the way it is, this needs to happen much more."

Just Between Friends, the massive three-day consignment show that ends Sunday, is another barometer of a struggling economy as parents skip the trip to the Gap or Target in favor of deals on used children's clothing, strollers, cribs and toys. Started in 1997 by Tulsa, Okla., duo Daven Tackett and Shannon Wilburn, their idea grew from their first living room consignment sales to 65 franchises in 16 states.

Housing and food are the two greatest expenses in raising children, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. Sometimes deals on those two items can be hard to come by – but clothing can be another matter.

And in the urban West – the most expensive region in the nation in which to raise a child, according to the USDA figures – that's important.

"We spend a lot on clothes, probably \$2,000 a year on clothes and shoes because they turn over so quickly," said Melissa Morris of Elk Grove,

a mother of a 1-year-old boy and a 3-year-old girl.

Friday, in the convention center, the huge exhibit hall took on the look of Sacramento's largest – and most popular – rummage sale. Tables were covered with used clothes, toys, books and games. Cribs and strollers were in the back, and racks of hanging clothes stretched along the sides.

Whitefleet is the mother of a 2-year-old girl, and she doesn't need federal statistics to tell her that she will spend hundreds of dollars a year to clothe her daughter. As for Pogue, who has four children, she just spent up to \$200 getting each of her three school-age children ready for the classroom.

Don't get her started, though, on the cost of shoes.

"They lose them. They ruin them. The dog chews them," Pogue said. "Clothes are the casualty of childhood."

Ramos, a stay-at-home mother whose husband works for a local grocery, knows how to pinch pennies, watching everything from the price of gas to bottles and baby formula. Her daughter is 4 months old.

A \$14 can of formula is \$8 at the Just Between Friends consignment sale. A six-pack of baby bottles is \$5; one bottle is \$4 at Wal-Mart, she said. The baby stroller doubling as a cart for her haul of winter clothes: \$55. At another store, the stroller "would be at least \$150," Ramos said. Just Between Friends has been in Sacramento for five years. It's Ramos' third sale, and the event is on her family's calendar.

"We save and save and we come here and spend," she said. "It's expensive nowadays. You can only go so many places without running out of gas, and baby stuffs extremely expensive."

That's what initially drew Shannon Carter to Just Between Friends' Sacramento sales in 2003. Now a Just Between Friends franchisee who holds twice yearly sales in Sacramento, Carter said those early events helped the family get by.

"I have six children myself. This was a huge savior," she said.

Carter said she expects this consignment concept – she calls it a "multifamily garage sale times 500" – to grow across the region as higher prices push demand for bargain items. Another sale is set for September at the Placer County Fairgrounds.

Alisa Harrison, spokeswoman for the International Franchise Association, the Washington, D.C.-based trade organization for franchisees, said franchises are poised to do well in a slowing economy.

"Franchise businesses can grow rapidly to respond to growing consumer needs," she said. "Logic will tell you there's a demand here and there's also potential for growth."

On a patch of exhibit room floor, Pogue and Whitefleet sat face to face, chatting and going over the day's haul: several dresses, a couple of pairs of shoes, winter boots.

And one more find: A print dress originally purchased at the Gap. Pogue bought two.

"Where else can you get two Gap dresses for the price of a gallon of milk?" she asked.

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GROWING PAINS

The costs of raising a child change by age and income levels. This table shows the estimated annual expenditures on a child by husband-wife families in the urban West.

AGE OF CHILD	TOTAL COST	HOUSING	FOOD	CLOTHING
Before-tax income: Less than \$46,300 (Average: \$28,900)				
0 to 2	\$8,770	\$3,670	\$1,190	\$340
3 to 5	8,970	3,650	1,310	330
6 to 8	9,040	3,600	1,690	370
9 to 11	9,060	3,390	2,020	410
12 to 14	9,900	3,640	2,110	690
15 to 17	9,910	3,130	2,280	600
TOTAL	\$166,950	\$63,240	\$31,800	\$8,220
Before-tax income: \$46,300 to \$78,000 (Average: \$61,600)				
0 to 2	\$11,910	\$4,720	\$1,390	\$400
3 to 5	12,260	4,700	1,600	390
6 to 8	12,170	4,650	2,040	430
9 to 11	12,070	4,440	2,410	480
12 to 14	12,770	4,690	2,410	800
15 to 17	13,160	4,180	2,680	710
TOTAL	\$223,020	\$82,140	\$37,590	\$9,630
Before-tax income: More than \$78,000 (Average: \$116,700)				
0 to 2	\$17,140	\$6,990	\$1,800	\$520
3 to 5	17,570	6,970	2,030	510
6 to 8	17,240	6,920	2,440	560
9 to 11	16,980	6,710	2,850	610
12 to 14	17,780	6,960	2,980	1,010
15 to 17	18,510	6,450	3,140	910
TOTAL	\$315,660	\$123,000	\$45,720	\$12,360

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion

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Sabrina Romero, 2, tries to climb out of her stroller, which is packed with items her mother, Sue Romero, found at a consignment sale extravaganza at the Sacramento Community Center exhibit hall. Finds included used clothing, toys, books and games - and even strollers and cribs. LEZLIE STERLING / lsterling@sacbee.com

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Ava Lambert, 2 months old, sleeps in a sling worn by her mother, Anne Lambert of Sacramento. Lambert was looking for bargains at the Just Between Friends consignment show. A franchisee called the consignment concept "a multifamily garage sale times 500." LEZLIE STERLING / lsterling@sacbee.com

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