A FREE GUIDE FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

Spending Ed

DRIVER'S ED FOR MONEY

We give our kids Driver's Ed. Why not Spending Ed?
We don't start any other subject in the middle.

Our Mindful Spending Coach, Kay.

Three graduated licenses:
1) Pause 2) Protect 3) Plan
One money-smart kid, starting before high school.

GIFTING SENSE®

THE BIG IDEA

We give them Driver's Ed. Why not Spending Ed?

We don't hand teenagers car keys and hope for the best. We give them the basics, make them earn a learner's permit, then sit in the passenger seat — holding our breath — while they practice driving in empty parking lots, *long before* they merge onto the highway. We want our kids to build good driving habits while the stakes are low, so when the stakes get high, the good habits are already there.

At home and at school, we teach spending very differently, sometimes unconsciously, almost by accident. Most kids make real money choices years before we give them a structured way to think about it. Not because we don't care, but because teaching kids about money can feel like lessons in deprivation and constant nagging. And that's no fun for anyone.

We don't start any other subject in the middle.

Reading starts with the alphabet, not Shakespeare.

Math starts with counting, not calculus.

Science starts with curiosity, not chemistry.

Looking for a Quick Start? → Spending Ed Landing Page

Meanwhile, research shows money habits and beliefs begin forming as early as age seven.* By high school, most kids already have years of real spending experience. **That's not anyone's fault. It's simply the order in which life introduces money.**

(Most of us get at least a little bit to spend long before we find ourselves receiving any sort of formal personal finance instruction. Whether it's a few dollars, a birthday gift, or a school-supply budget, the skill of spending money wisely is the same — and helps the most when there's the least to spare.)

Still, that order creates a gap between when students start making financial decisions and when we formally begin teaching them how to think about those decisions. This makes teaching kids about money a much harder (pedagogical) task and one we can meaningfully ease if we start earlier. Young people arrive in high school already grounded in math, science, and language arts. What if personal finance made that list?

One promising low-cost next step may be to start one chapter earlier than high school. In middle school, habits and beliefs aren't yet set, money is still new and exciting, and because financial cynicism hasn't yet taken hold, questions come easily. Behaviors introduced between ages 9 and 14 don't have to fight years of momentum — they can become the momentum.

WHY NOW?

The world has changed.

How and where kids spend today is built to pull a quick “yes” out of all of us — endless feeds, one-tap checkouts, “buy now, pay later.” These tools aren't neutral; they're made to keep us scrolling and get us to commit fast. Just as speed makes the consequences of poor driving decisions more severe, hastily made consumer decisions can create harsher-than-anticipated consequences. A child who lands in today’s frictionless spending environment without a practiced habit of pausing, gathering information and reflecting (before deciding to spend) is up against a far tougher setup than we ever were. That's why building the habit of thinking before buying early isn't a nice-to-have — it's a must-have.

Spending Ed teaches young people to build their own "spending speed bumps"—simple habits that slow fast buying decisions down just enough for good judgment to catch up. This is the simple idea we’ve been delivering in workshops for over a decade.

The belief gap. Unfortunately, many young people quietly absorb another costly belief: that the financial tools adults use to build wealth are meant for “someone else”. Spending Ed is also designed to interrupt that belief early. When a middle-schooler discovers firsthand that they can use “money” information to make better decisions today, tomorrow’s financial tools (from budgeting to investing) begin to feel like tools they can confidently use, too. That mindset—“I can shape my own future”—is what Spending Ed is designed to build, creating a foundation for later financial knowledge and, ultimately, ownership.

Lifelong financial capability takes more than one ingredient.

MINDSET

Spending Ed

Kids discover that money tools are real, useful and meant for them.

+

KNOWLEDGE

High-school personal finance and beyond

Strong courses that build on earlier learning, the way other subjects do.

+

OWNERSHIP

Early investment accounts

Can give kids and their families an early stake in a system they may not be sure is for them.

Research points to starting before high school.

Age 7

Money habits begin to form*

9–14

Habits become momentum and identity

Age 15

A gender gap in financial literacy is often measurable**

*Sources: *Whitebread & Bingham, University of Cambridge (2013); **Bottazzi, L. & Lusardi, A., "Stereotypes in Financial Literacy: Evidence from PISA," Journal of Corporate Finance, vol. 71, 101831 (2021).*

THE ROADMAP

Three licenses, one money-smart kid.

At home or school, Spending Ed gives young people practice before the stakes become high. Each license introduces another spending speed bump—first learning to Pause before making a purchase, then to Protect themselves from the pressure to buy, and finally to Plan spending every dollar with purpose. The goal isn't to spend less; it's to slow down long enough to choose intentionally and build confidence. Let's help our kids experience firsthand that spending with a plan isn't difficult *and* is worth it.

A roadmap to the money freedom and responsibility they seek: Each license unlocks greater independence, earned after an upbeat talk and a short quiz. The second license includes a family agreement (which teachers can assign as optional homework or substitute with a reflection activity). The third adds a pre-commitment to the future a young person dreams of.

1

Smart Spending Permit

STAGE 1 · PAUSE

Practice the pause — build the habit of asking "Should I buy this?"

Talk it through → Take the quiz → Issue the permit

~5 min quiz | Pass 8/10

2

Defensive Spending License

STAGE 2 · PROTECT

Spot the pressure — identify the ads, aisles & apps designed to encourage us to buy. Spend independently within categories.

Talk it through → Quiz → Family Agreement → Issue the license

~6 min quiz | Pass 9/10 | *+ a Family Agreement you both sign*

3

Strategic Spending License

STAGE 3 · PLAN

Direct every dollar — even the "fun ones", toward the future a young person wants to build. Name possible roadblocks and guardrails.

Talk it through → Quiz → Pre-Commitment → Issue the license

~7 min quiz | Pass 10/10 | *+ a Pre-Commitment they sign first*

What they earn, up close.

Each license is printable and personalized — with each child's or student's name on it. The signature grows up, too: printed on the permit, then typed onto the Defensive License, and written in their own cursive on the full license. The spending tools may change with age (from coins and cash to debit cards and phones) but the habits stay the same: Pause. Protect. Plan.

GIFTING SENSE®

SMART SPENDING PERMIT ISSUED TO:

Maya Morgan

This permit authorizes the holder to practice smart spending, building skills today for future financial freedom.

As a permit holder, I will:

- Ask questions to understand what things cost & how I'll use them.
- Compare available options before deciding.
- Pause before spending my money ***or*** anyone else's.
- Reflect on my purchases - what worked, what didn't.

To PAUSE
The Smart Spending (Learner's) Permit

Kids start to see they can dodge disappointment and regret (not to mention waste) just by pausing before they spend their money, or anyone else's.

GIFTING SENSE®

DEFENSIVE SPENDING LICENSE ISSUED TO:

Maya Morgan

This license certifies a defensive spender — alert to the pressures and tactics designed to make us buy.

As a defensive spender, I will:

- Notice when an ad or an aisle is rushing me into a decision.
- Question whether I'll truly use or appreciate an item or experience.
- Hold off on spending my money **or** anyone else's — until I'm sure.
- Walk away from the wrong purchase, even when it's tempting.

To PROTECT
The Intermediate (Defensive Spending) License

Young teens become much more careful when spending “their own money” within a dollar or category range kids and parents set together.

GIFTING SENSE®

STRATEGIC SPENDING LICENSE ISSUED TO:

Maya Morgan

This license certifies a strategic spender — directing every dollar toward what matters most to me and my family.

As a strategic spender, I will:

- Direct every dollar, even those I use “just for fun”!
- Understand that overspending in one area of my life will crowd out planned spending elsewhere.
- Save toward what's worth the wait, the goals that build my future.
- Help someone else spend wisely when they ask.

To PLAN
The Full (Strategic Spending) License.

Older teens prepare to manage the real spending trade-offs that come with life after high school. They learn to direct every dollar (even the fun ones).

LEARNER'S PERMIT SKILLS · LEVEL 1 · PAUSE

Practice pausing to ask: "Should I buy this?"

The heart of mindful spending isn't a simulation or a spreadsheet. It's a question nearly every young person already has occasion to ask: *"Should I buy (or ask for!) these school supplies, those jeans, these running shoes, this pizza, that concert ticket?"* When we give kids a quick, repeatable way to answer that question well, we're preparing them for the bigger trade-offs that lie ahead.

Before money becomes numbers on a screen, children benefit from seeing it, counting it, spending it, and watching it leave their hands. Spending cash helps them understand that buying something means giving something up. The key habit, pausing before spending, remains the same regardless of payment method. Handing over cash naturally creates that pause, while digital payments (tapping a phone or clicking "Buy Now") often remove the natural friction that helps us think before we buy.

Think of Thinking Before Buying as the ABCs or 123s of becoming "good with money". Mastering the basics of any subject is what gives us the appetite and confidence to want to know more. Why would personal finance be any different?

> **FOR EDUCATORS,** Students meet these ideas as lived experience first in middle school, and as technical vocabulary later. The child who has practiced pausing since middle school has already experienced "opportunity cost" — your high school (or beyond) classroom gives her the name for what she can now easily recognize.

1 **Will I actually use this as much as I think I will?**
Opportunity cost

2 **Do I know what this truly costs — all in?**
True cost

3 **Am I excited right now, or will I still want this next week?**
Delayed gratification

4 **Did I really think this through, or did I just click "buy"?**
Decision architecture

> **Need help practicing the pause?** Our free mindful spending tool, the DIMS — DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE Calculator walks kids through these very questions in any checkout line.
>
> *No login. No email. No paywall. On the homepage → GiftingSense.org*
>
> **DIMS SCORE® Calculator**

Spot the pressure to buy.

Almost everything in a kid's path today is built to pull them into a fast “yes.” Defensive drivers do what they can to prepare for unexpected moves on the road. Similarly, Defensive Spenders learn to spot the pressure to spend — and ask who benefits.

Imagine how many unsatisfying purchases can be avoided by becoming a defensive spender. Imagine how many fewer items will end up in landfills as a result! *(Educators, there are many ways to tie responsible consumption into STEM lesson plans.)*

- **Manufactured scarcity.** “Only 2 left!” “14 people are looking.” The clock (and the crowd) are usually designed to rush you past thinking a purchase through.
- **False urgency.** Countdown timers and “Today only!” Many deals are still good tomorrow. If a planned purchase is available on sale, you’ll be able to act quickly with confidence.
- **Shrinking the price.** “Buy now, pay later” turns $80 into four little $20s — so you commit before you've really decided, because “it’s only $20!” Don’t lose sight of the actual full cost.
- **Removing the pause.** One-tap checkout is built so you don't stop. That's the whole point of it. If you had to hand over cash instead, would you still buy it?
- **The nudge.** “Free shipping over $50” when your cart says $38 — spend $15 more to “save” $7. Do the math. Make sure what you’re “saving” is worth it.
- **Paid persuasion.** “Link in bio — run, don't walk.” Pressure dressed up as a friend's tip.
- **The countdown is the product.** Limited-time skins and loot boxes. Many games sell "limited-time" extras — special outfits for a character, or mystery packs where you pay without knowing what's inside. The “excitement” of buying before time runs out is what’s really being sold.

Ask your children or students:
“What's the trick here — and who's it working for?”

Direct every dollar.

By the full license, the question grows up — from “Should I buy this?” to “If I buy this, what will I no longer be able to buy?” Because money is scarce for many, and finite for all.

Whether your money is cash in your wallet or numbers on a screen, every dollar can only be spent once.

By preparing our kids for the trade-offs that are part and parcel of life after school, we help them enter adulthood better equipped to avoid common early financial pitfalls. They can build financial security without having to first unwind earlier mistakes. They’re experiencing that spending with a plan *isn’t* overly difficult and *is* very helpful. What a gift.

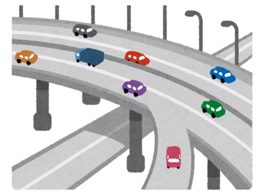
- **The $400 surprise.** $10 of snacks a week is $400 over a school year — a real dent in the purchase of a new device. The point isn't to always “skip it.” It's seeing the whole road in front of you, then choosing on purpose. How quickly things add up can be a big surprise.
- **True cost over time.** That $9-a-month subscription isn't $9. It's $108 a year — quietly — until someone cancels it. And history shows us, we often forget to.
- **The sunk-cost trap.** Don't buy the $20 add-on for the $40 game you don't even like, just to “get your money's worth.” That's good money chasing a decision you’re already not happy with.
- **Give every dollar a job.** Decide in advance roughly how much you want to spend each month on fun (fun matters), how much you’d like to save, and for what you’re saving. It’s a lot easier to forgo a snack when you know you’re only $15.00 away from being able to afford a jacket you want. As you can imagine, this type of planning in high school really helps young adults avoid overcommitting to lifestyle choices that few people can afford in their twenties.

ALIGNMENT > RESTRAINT

Wise spending isn't about restraint — it's about alignment, avoiding the “meh” buys that crowd out meaningful ones. One family put our Worth the Wait Goal Tracker on the fridge while saving for their son's computer. When he asked for pizza, his mom just pointed. No lecture. Same song sheet. You're not teaching kids to say “no” to everything — you're teaching them how to say “yes,” and not regret it.

PRACTICE GROUNDS

Three on-ramps families don't have to manufacture.



They're already on the calendar. Each one quietly builds a different muscle, no worksheet or “Lesson” required.

Making Plans

BUILDS: PATIENCE

Let kids see the trade-offs you're already making: "We can do the movie or the ice cream, not both—which will we remember?" If they have a few dollars of their own, let them plan how to spend it. A small misstep kids actually feel teaches more than one you smoothly prevent; a cheap lesson now helps prevent an expensive one later.

Ask: “Will you actually use this at home, or is this more of a ‘right now’ feeling?”

Holiday or Birthday Gift-Giving

BUILDS: EMPATHY

Choosing a gift on a small budget turns a kid into a tiny strategist: What does my friend actually like? What will still be loved in a month? A budget makes the lesson sharper, not weaker — it's where a child discovers that thoughtfulness beats price tag. It’s also how they learn to be gracious when receiving a disappointing gift - chances are, the gift giver really tried.

Ask: “What would make their face light up when they open it?”

Back-to-School Shopping

BUILDS: DOLLAR-STRETCHING

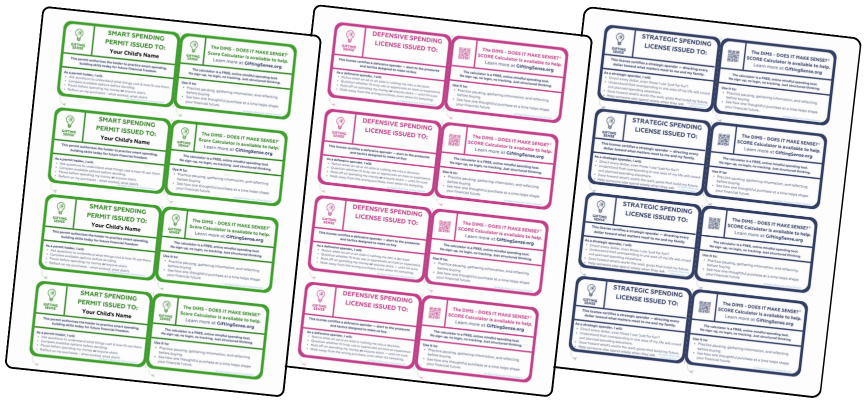
The shopping aisles (online or in-person) are designed to make us want things — which makes them the best practice ground there is. Once they’ve made a list, give them the family budget. Let young people discover firsthand that eye-level isn't the best deal, and that a cuter folder, times nine items, adds up fast.

Ask: “You're in charge of spending this wisely this year. What's your plan?”

PRINT & PREPARE

Keep it real.

These tools are meant to be held, not just read. Here's how to get the licenses (as well as the Worth-the-Wait Goal Tracker and Back-to-School List Builder) off the screen and into your child's or student's hands.



1 **Print them anywhere.** Every page has a white background, so it prints easily from any printer — color or black-and-white, at home or in the library. Re-print as often as you like; it's free, always.

2 **Add the name to the licenses first.** Type your child's or student's name on the license before you print it, or write it in by hand. Cardstock makes it feel sturdier, but regular paper works just fine. In fact, it's the better choice if you plan to laminate.

3 **Cut and fold along the dashed line.** Each license is sized to cut out like a real ID card — four to a page — so there's a chance you'll only need one sheet of paper per family.

4 **Laminate it — worth it.** A laminated license feels like the real thing. No laminator? A strip of clear packing tape over both sides works surprisingly well, or grab a self-laminating pouch at any office store. Then slip it in a wallet or clip it to a backpack.

5 **Make a small ceremony of it.** Whether at home or in the classroom, hand these tools over the way the DMV/licensing office hands over a permit — with a little formality and some eye contact. The card in their hand, the list they've made, the goal tracker on the fridge are the point: they make privileges observable and earned.

A tangible card can make a real difference. Kids hold onto what they earn — and a license they can see and touch, is a license they'll live up to.

EVERYTHING HERE IS FREE

We made these tools for you.

Start with a mindful spending workshop to teach kids to think before they buy. Then visit Spending Ed to see how our graduated licenses and tools work together to help make the habit of thinking before buying stick. No logins. No paywalls. No upsell — ever. Yes, you can absolutely deliver a workshop yourself!

Book a Workshop
https://giftingsense.org/book-a-workshop/

Bring a mindful spending workshop to your family, community or school.

Spending Ed
https://giftingsense.org/spending-ed/

See how our workshops, graduated licenses and tools work together.

DIMS SCORE® Calculator (How It Works)
https://giftingsense.org/how-it-works/

The pause, made easy — in any checkout line.

Smart Spending Learner's Permit
https://giftingsense.org/happy-summer-time-for-spending-ed-drivers-ed-for-money/

Level 1— practice pausing before you buy.

Defensive Spending License
https://giftingsense.org/spending-ed-two-the-defensive-spending-license/

Level 2 — spot the pressure in ads, aisles & apps.

Strategic Spending License
https://giftingsense.org/spending-ed-three-the-strategic-spending-license/

Level 3 — aim every dollar at what matters most.

Worth the Wait Goal Tracker
https://giftingsense.org/five-fun-financial-literacy-activities-for-kids/

Keep the family aligned on a goal worth saving for.

Back-to-School List Builder
https://giftingsense.org/a-boss-back-to-school-list-builder/

Put kids in the planning seat for the big shop.

For Parents
https://giftingsense.org/for-parents/

Your home base — and how to start tonight.

For Teachers
https://giftingsense.org/for-teachers/

Free lesson plans & workshops for your classroom.

GIFTING SENSE®

We help parents & educators teach their kids to think before they buy.

Spending Ed—its framework, the three licenses, and the directives behind them—is the sole property of Gifting Sense. It was developed through more than a decade of on-the-ground work with young people, their parents, and teachers. We welcome independent researchers interested in evaluating its effectiveness and refining the framework. It is offered free to families, educators, and community groups because we believe every young person deserves the chance to build wise spending habits before the stakes get high. Our hope is simple: that every young person enters adulthood knowing—from early success with thinking before buying—that they can shape their personal financial future, one thoughtful choice at a time. Everything Gifting Sense creates is offered free of charge. If you'd like to help us keep it that way, we'd be deeply grateful for your support.

NOTES

Notes

A place to jot goals, the agreements you've made, wins worth remembering, and what to revisit next time.