

Watch as We Don't Buy, Not Just as We Do

By JEFF D. OPDYKE

My son walked into my office a few weeks ago and told me he needed \$30 for a school field trip, adding, "Can you believe how expensive that is?"

My response: "I guess \$30 is kind of pricey for a 14-year-old without any income. But it isn't so meaningful to me."

Talk about stupid. Ever since then, whenever Amy or I question some purchase he wants to make, he routinely fires back, "Well, Dad said \$30 isn't expensive, so clearly \$25 isn't."

On some level he's right: The occasional \$25 or \$30 or \$40 purchase won't break the family bank. Yet on a much more important level, he's dead wrong. And Amy and I are to blame.

The problem isn't just my stupid, throwaway comment. It's something much bigger. I am beginning to understand that our kids have spent a lifetime watching all the things we do buy, but never the things we don't. They see us throw away relatively small sums, but never witness the much-bigger sums we avoid. No wonder they think \$30 is nothing.

Understanding the issue, however, is the easy part. How, I wonder, do we instill in our children this amorphous notion of nonspending? How do we get them to see that our seemingly cavalier spending is the direct result of not-so-cavalier thriftiness? How, in other words, do we make the invisible visible?

As I've written many times, Amy and I are savers. From our very first paychecks as a married couple, we have put some of our income into savings accounts, retirement plans and various investments.

Similarly, we have bought cars and houses that cost less than what we could have afforded. We never carry credit-card debt. We didn't begin taking vacations until four or five years into our marriage, and even then those early ones were just four-day weekends here and there.

It's not that we've lived like hermits or hoarded our money. We just both come from families that didn't have a lot of money, and we both believe that we alone are responsible for our own financial security.

But like key plays in a football game that don't show up in the statistics, many of the crucial decisions we've made in our nearly 20 years of marriage never show up in our visible actions -- the actions our kids see.

They see us regularly go to dinner and drop \$40 -- maybe even \$80 if it's sushi night. They see me pop into an office-supply store and spend \$80 on printer ink. They see Amy spend \$60 on new shoes for our son.

To the kids, I have to imagine, it all seems as if those expenses are no big deal. But if Mom and Dad don't think much of spending \$40 or \$60 or \$80, then a \$30 videogame must be really inconsequential.

One of my friends says that it's important to remember that kids can't read our minds, and that there's no way for them to intuitively understand family decisions they don't participate in. How many of us recount for our kids the litany of financial choices we've made over many years -- often long before the kids were born?

My friend, for instance, says he has always been willing to spend \$50 for a lot of dinners with his kids because they are "important family rituals."

But, he says, he can only afford these dinners because of the many other things he doesn't spend money on. He buys used cars and drives them for 200,000 miles or until the car just stops. He doesn't care about fixing dents in the cars, or painting the house when it needs it. Family vacations are often at a relative's house.

"I save tens of thousands of dollars on big purchases compared to other people," he says. "So I can afford the dinners. But that's a hard message to teach kids. They see me spending all this money, and don't see me not spending money on a new car. Which do you think will stick with them?"

Amy and I know the message we want to impart to our kids. We want to make them understand that money isn't a commodity you throw around just because you have it. We want them to realize there are priorities when it comes to saving vs. spending, and priorities when deciding what to buy and what not to buy. We want them to think about price and value, about the present and future, about deferred gratification and about the amount of sweat that goes into buying whatever we decide to buy.

But as my friend says, those are hard messages to convey -- and made even harder when I dismiss \$30 as nothing.

So now the question is: How to undo the damage?

Since non-spending decisions aren't always visible, I need to make them so -- which means I might have to set up a straw man to tear down in front of my son. Maybe Amy and I let him in on a conversation about wanting to buy a new car, but then decide against it because the costs outweigh the benefits.

We're currently planning a family trip in January, and we could use that to help teach a lesson. We might bring him in on the hotel planning, let him see the costs of two rooms and explain the differences, and show him where we could decide to non-spend by choosing the cheaper room so that we can afford other costs on the trip.

And more generally, we can do a better job telling him about all the places we've cut back lately.

Ultimately, I want my son to better understand that -- thanks to a lot of luck and careful spending -- his mom and I have the luxury of not sweating the small stuff. I can only hope that he will be just as lucky, and just as careful.

jeff.opdyke@wsj.com