

A Need or a Want?

Objective

This activity will help your child differentiate between a need and a want. They will also learn that a purchase can fulfil one or the other.

Preparation

Our homes are filled with objects (games, clothing, sporting goods, etc.) that were bought or received as gifts and that nobody uses. To begin the activity, ask your child to name things in the house and tell you if they think these are essential items, that is, whether these items meet needs.

Steps

1. It's important for your child to understand the difference between a need and a want. Explain that needs must absolutely be met. If we want to survive and thrive, we need to satisfy our need for: food, water, clothing, shelter, warmth, safety, relationships with others, etc. That means we have no choice but to buy food and clothing and to pay for a roof over our heads, electricity, and so on.

Needs are easy to recognize because they are universal in nature: everyone has the same ones. They stem from a lack or will cause one if not met. For example, a lack of food leads to hunger. If your child doesn't meet this need, they'll run out of energy and won't be able to concentrate in class.

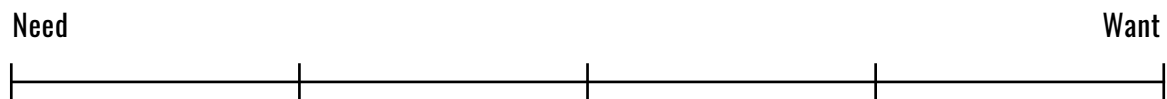
As for wants (or desires), they are closer to a wish than a necessity. Satisfying a want is not essential, but it can make life more pleasant. Wants include the desire to eat treats, buy a video game, get a new pair of trendy shoes, go to the movies or eat out at a restaurant. Unlike needs, wants are not the result of a lack and do not cause one if they are unmet. The decision on whether or not to fulfil a want is a matter of priorities and personal taste, two elements that shape our buying decisions. Satisfying a want can make us feel good, but only for a short time.

We often confuse **needs** and **wants**. Why? Because a need can also be met in a non-essential way, if we let ourselves be influenced by our wants. We have to make choices according to our means. For example, do I need to buy a \$500 top-of-the-line bike to get to school when it's only three blocks from my place? Could my brother's used bike be good enough? When I shop for groceries, do I absolutely have to buy brand-name products? Could the store brand be good enough?

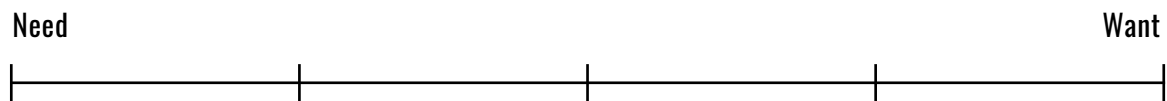
2. Your child has learned to differentiate between a need and a want. Now they're ready to apply what they've learned. Ask your child to rate each situation below on the need-want continuum by marking every continuum with an X.

The answers to certain situations should be nuanced. These situations will require your child to think critically and will encourage discussions. The [answer key](#) on the last page provides avenues for further reflection on this topic.

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- A. Naomi wants in-line skates for her birthday.



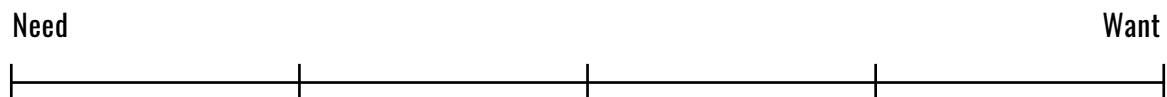
- B. Lisa's parents buy her a mattress to sleep on.



- C. For breakfast, Frank eats whole-wheat bread.



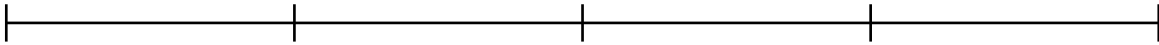
- D. Lee looks up a scientific book at the library.



E. Cora takes the bus to school.

Need

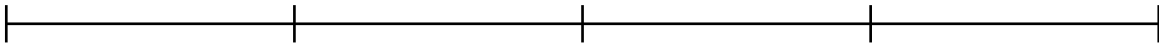
Want



F. Audrey wants a cell phone so she can send text messages to her friends.

Need

Want



G. Xavier is headed to Maine for a vacation with his parents.

Need

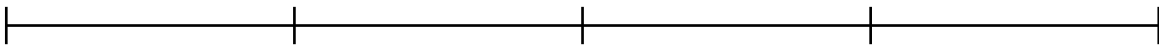
Want



H. Matilda and John are replacing their old fridge with a new one.

Need

Want



I. Matthew wants to buy the same coat as his friends at school are wearing.

Need

Want



J. Julian is buying soap to wash himself.

Need

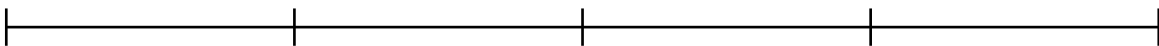
Want



K. Samuel wants his mother to buy him ChocoMallow cereal bars for his lunches at day camp.

Need

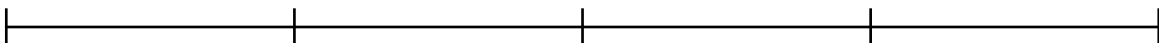
Want



L. Rania is shopping for a pair of running shoes for her gym class.

Need

Want



Conclusion

Your child can now differentiate between a need and a want. To develop their reflexes as an informed consumer, ask your child what relevant questions they could ask before making their next purchase. The purpose is to determine whether the purchase meets a need or a want. You can use the questions below to guide the discussion.

- What need do I intend to meet by buying this product?
- Is it an essential need or not?
- Am I really going to use this product more than once?
- How could I meet this need in a more cost-effective and environmentally friendly way?
- Is this a purchase I've thought about or an impulse purchase?
- If I don't buy this product right away, what will the consequences be?
- Is there something that could replace this product?
- Is there some way I can get this item otherwise than by buying it in (trading with a friend, buying used, renting, borrowing, etc.)?

Answer Key

The answers provided serve as examples only, as perceptions may vary.

A. Naomi wants in-line skates for her birthday.

Explanation: *Desire, as in-line skates are not part of Naomi's basic needs. However, if Naomi practices the sport intensively and seriously, which is good for her health and her personal fulfilment, and her current pair of in-line skates is broken and cannot be repaired, we could say that buying a new pair of skates is practically an essential need. What are the differences between asking for skates for your birthday and just buying them as a routine purchase?*

B. Lisa's parents buy her a mattress to sleep on.

Explanation: *Need, because sleep is a basic need. If they buy a king-sized mattress with massage and heat functions, this would be to fulfil a desire rather than a need.*

C. For breakfast, Frank eats whole-wheat bread.

Explanation: *Need, because eating is a basic need. However, if he buys brand-name bread, which is much more expensive than the store brand, that falls more under a want. What is the difference between brand-name products and store brands? Why buy one instead of the other?*

D. Lee looks up a scientific book at the library.

Explanation: *Need, because Lee is fulfilling a need to be informed and to learn. In addition, by choosing to consult the book at the library instead of buying it at the bookstore, she is meeting her need in a cost-saving and environmentally friendly manner.*

E. Cora takes the bus to school.

Explanation: *Need, unless the school is within a reasonable distance from Cora's house. In this case, she would be able to go on foot or bicycle.*

F. Audrey wants a cell phone so she can send text messages to her friends.

Explanation: *Want, because communicating is the basic need. A cell phone with text messages is not essential and could very well be replaced by a good old telephone with a landline.*

G. Xavier is headed to Maine for a vacation with his parents.

Explanation: *Want, because they could very well take their vacation but spend it at home. Taking a vacation to rest is a need, but you don't have to leave home for that.*

H. Matilda and John are replacing their old fridge with a new one.

Explanation: *Need, if the old fridge is broken, or is no longer keeping food cold and cannot be repaired. In this case, Matilda and John must replace it, because they need to keep their perishable foods cold. However, if the old fridge is still working well but they want to replace it because it's out of fashion, Matilda and John are fulfilling a want.*

I. Matthew wants to buy the same coat as his friends at school are wearing.

Explanation: *Want, because buying the same coat as his friends will make him look more like them and be part of the group. Matthew does indeed need a coat to stay warm, but there is nothing essential about choosing the same coat as his friends. Having the same thing as his friends may meet a need in terms of self-esteem or belonging, which is normal. It's important to remember that we rarely choose our best friends based on the brands they wear.*

J. Julian is buying soap to wash himself.

Explanation: *Need, as this is a matter of hygiene. This basic need could be met in a non-essential way if Julian decides to buy very expensive soap with supposedly extraordinary (but not necessarily real) characteristics.*

K. Samuel wants his mother to buy him ChocoMallow cereal bars for his lunches at day camp.

Explanation: *Want, because cereal bars are a treat and, as such, do not meet a basic need. The need is for Samuel to eat healthfully and in sufficient quantity at lunchtime.*

- L. Rania is shopping for a pair of running shoes for her gym class.

Explanation: *Need, because Rania must participate in her gym class and needs running shoes to do so. However, in meeting this need, it is not necessary to buy costly or brand-name running shoes. That would be fulfilling a want rather than a need.*