

Answer Key for A Need or a Want? and Avenues for Further Reflection

For each of the situations presented, determine whether a need or a want is being expressed.

The purpose is for the student to form an opinion on the differences between a need and a desire. The answers provided serve as examples only, as perceptions may vary.

1. Naomi wants in-line skates for her birthday.
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?
2. Lisa's parents buy her a mattress to sleep on.
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.
3. For breakfast, Frank eats whole-wheat bread.
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?
4. Lee looks up a scientific book at the library.
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.
5. Cora takes the bus to school.
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.
6. Audrey wants a cell phone so she can send text messages to her friends.
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.

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

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

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

10. Julian is buying soap to wash himself.
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.

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

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

Activity wrap-up: Ask students to name the questions they can ask themselves (or their parents) before an upcoming purchase. The purpose is to determine whether the purchase meets a need or a want and, in so doing, become a more responsible consumer.

List of questions:

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

What are the students taking away from the activity?