

# Your Money's Worth

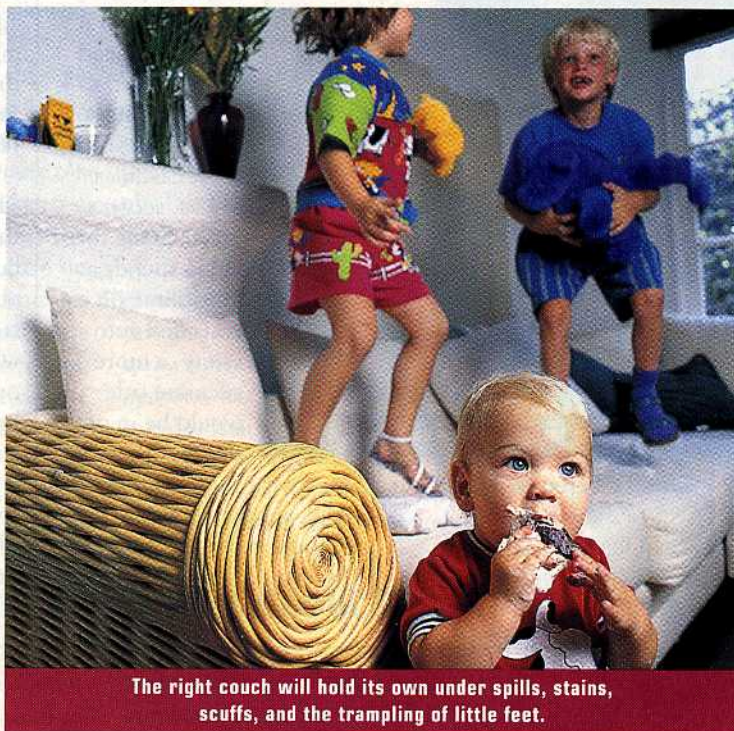
SHOPPING FOR COUCHES • ECO-STOCKS • TAX DOLLAR STRATEGIES

## SOFA, SO GOOD

When parents look at a sofa, they see the focal point of the living room, the promise of satisfying hours kicking back with the newspaper, the lure of leisurely conversations. Trouble is, when kids see a sofa, they see a fort, a trampoline, a perfect place to slurp ice cream. Fear not, it is possible to reconcile these two worldviews: Armed with the facts about durable sofa construction and sturdy coverings, you can shop intelligently and equip yourself with a sofa that not only appeals to adult

notions of serenity but that can also survive the kids' daily thrashings.

● **LIFE EXPECTANCY** Nearly everyone can recount a story about the Sofa That Would Not Die, a couch built like a brick and still in the family after three generations. Normally, though, a medium-price sofa (\$500 to \$1,200 in a retail store; \$1,500 to \$2,500 through designers or decorators, who generally offer



The right couch will hold its own under spills, stains, scuffs, and the trampling of little feet.

better-quality lines) should last from five to ten years. For high-quality sofas (\$2,500 and up), expect five to ten years from the covering and at least fifteen years from the frame. A sofa that sells for less than \$500 probably means another shopping trip in just a few years.

● **COVERING** To hide the inevitable food spills, scuffs, and stains, look for fabrics with a thick nap in medium to dark colors or woven (rather than printed) patterns. In general, the tighter the weave and thicker the fabric, the better the wear. Stick to latex-backed cotton-blends, corduroy, chenille, low-pile printed velvets with nylon added for strength, plaids, mini-prints, and "flame" stitches (zigzag patterns stitched into the fabric). Avoid silks, unbacked thin cottons, large floral prints,

solid colors, lightweight curtain fabric, and any material of a flat texture. Good leather furniture stands up well to abrasion and spills, but a high-quality vinyl fabric like Naugahyde holds up better than a low-quality leather.

● **FRAME** Here, the goal is to find hardwood (elm, oak, alder, hickory, ash, birch, maple, pecan) in key areas such as the base, arms, and back. Peek under the sofa and make sure that dowels hold the frame together rather than only staples, nails, or screws. Corners should be reinforced with wood blocks.

● **SPRINGS** Eight-way, hand-tied springs remain the industry quality standard, and they can be found in a medium-price sofa. There should be a minimum of 9 to 12 springs per seat, but since you probably won't be able to see the springs, ask the salesperson. Sinuous wire springs (also known as no-sag) are a lower-price, adequate alternative.

● **DESIGN** Shop for a good-looking couch that won't pose hazards to your children. Avoid sharp edges, exposed wood trim that will be hard on little heads, and fringes that can ensnare fingers. If the sofa sits on casters, make sure they lock. Skirtless models allow kids to spot lost toys; low-to-the-ground varieties prevent babies from crawling underneath and getting stuck. Consider purchasing extra pillows so kids won't be tempted to rip out those attached to the sofa when the pillow fights begin.

● **STUFFING** The top choice here is polyurethane foam (with a density of at least 1.8 pounds per square foot) wrapped in polyester batting. The upholstery fabric

**Battery Basics** With Christmas just around the bend, it's time for Mom and Dad to start stocking up on that ultimate holiday necessity, the battery. But don't simply grab a handful of disposable batteries at the supermarket. According to comprehensive research conducted by Consumer Reports magazine, rechargeable batteries are far and away a better option. True, the up-front cost is considerable: You'll pay about \$20 for the recharging unit and \$2.35 to \$8 per battery, compared with \$.66 to \$1.50 for a single-use cell. But over the long haul, the investment pays off in hundreds more hours of buzzing, whirling, clacking toys. Recharging takes just a few hours, and what's more, multiple-use batteries are easier on the environment because they don't wind up in landfills. **MICHELLE WOODSON**

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should cover both sides of the cushions (so they can be flipped). Polyester batting, the usual stuffing, is also fine, but avoid shredded foam, a lumpy alternative that can leak out and be swallowed by young kids.

● **SHOPPING** When you set out to the sofa store, leave the children with a babysitter. You'll be doing a lot of comparison sitting and you'll need to concentrate. As soon as you find a model you like, test the seams by pulling hard along the stitching. The fabric should close up neatly after a good tug and show no loose threads. Also, check for adequate padding. When sizing up a leather sofa, scratch an inconspicuous spot on the back with a fingernail to see how the hide holds up under abrasion.

With any couch, pay attention to the "cleanability" code, which tells how the

fabric should be cleaned: using water (W), solvents (S), either one (WS), or only by a professional (X). If you're concerned about the use of chemical solvents around your children, choose fabrics that can be cleaned with water-based products. Spray-on fabric treatments offered by furniture dealers for \$45 to \$80 are usually not necessary, since many manufacturers routinely apply fabric protection before the sofa leaves the factory. The treatments prevent liquids—but not crayons or grease—from penetrating fabrics, and can also be purchased for much less in spray form at the supermarket. But no matter what precautions you take, remember that your sparkling clean couch won't stay unblemished for long. So save your emotional attachments for the kids, not the furniture. **CHERYL BUNDY BOWLAN**