

When Children Steal: Part 1

by Carolyn Warnemuende, M.S.

What a rush of feelings engulf you when you learn that your child took something that doesn't belong to him. When a teacher, another parent or store manager uses the words **STOLE** or **STEAL** in telling you about your child's actions, you probably feel both fear and embarrassment. You are not alone. Children **DO** take things that don't belong to them. When you know how to handle the situation, your confidence is not shaken by the unfortunate news.

Rarely do children reach adulthood without taking something that does not belong to them. Children under the age of three often pick up toys that entice them in others' homes or the store. They may get home with these items unless parents are astute and observant. Children this young are not aware that their behavior is inappropriate. Children in the three-to-five-year-old range have the developmental maturity to know what does and does not belong to them. They may not, however, have developed the self-discipline to restrain themselves from taking something that belongs to another. Children

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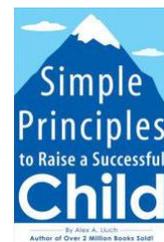
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older than five are aware of taking what does not belong to them. When they take something that is not theirs, they know they are doing something that society considers wrong.

This article addresses stealing that seems to be a normal part of the maturation process. Stealing of this nature includes items such as small toys, pencils, erasers, pens, candy and small change. If stealing occurs more than occasionally in young children, includes large items or continues into preadolescence, professional help should be sought. If you believe that stealing is done to support a drug habit, immediately seek professional help.

Regardless of the child's age, when he takes something that is not his, he needs to be told that his behavior is inappropriate. He also must experience a consequence for the behavior and be given a plan of action for the future when he sees something he wants that is not his.

Understandably, parents feel strong dismay upon learning that their child has stolen something. They may think that this means their offspring is doomed for delinquency. They may punish the child for her actions and refer to the situation in future discussions about inappropriate behavior. Neither of these responses helps either you or the child. Let's look at what makes a child steal and how to handle the situation responsibly and compassionately.

WHAT MAKES CHILDREN STEAL

When children reach the age where they know that stealing is wrong, there is a reason that they do it. Some reasons for stealing are:

Children think taking something is the only way they can get what they want.

Stealing is a way of seeking attention.

Stealing is done for revenge or to hurt

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somebody.

Children steal because they think they can get away with it.

The child may not have learned to respect the rights of others.

Older children may steal because they like the risk.

Stealing may occur to support a drug habit.

WHAT TO DO

Knowing why a child steals is important for appropriately addressing the underlying cause. Regardless of the underlying cause, when children steal you, as an informed parent, must consistently take certain steps.

When you know your child has taken something that does not belong to him or her, address the situation straightforwardly and compassionately. Speak about your concern and directly state what must be done. You might say, "I'm disappointed that you took the pen that didn't belong to you. You will need to return it or replace it if you no longer have it. We can work on a plan together. In the future, if you need a pen talk to me and we'll work something out." This kind of message lets the child know that what he did was wrong. It teaches him that there is a consequence for the behavior. It teaches him what he can do in the future instead of stealing. It also shows your support by assisting him in developing a plan of action.

If the child declares that she has not taken something that you know she has, simply say, for example, "I know that you took the money, and you will need to return it or we'll work out a way for you to pay it back."

Do not ask whether a child has stolen something if you know she has. This evades the issue and

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sets the scene for power struggles.

Sometimes parents are not sure who has taken an item that doesn't belong to him or her. When this occurs, have a family meeting. Say, for example, "Someone has taken some money from my purse. I don't know who. You may put the money on my dresser in the next hour while I'm not in my room." This gives a child a chance to save face. If the money appears, thank your children for being responsible. Then drop the issue. Whether the money appears or not, plan a time to talk about how it feels to have something taken from you. Ask how it might feel to take something. Ask what people could do besides stealing if they see something they want that's not theirs. Explore with "what" and "how" question. "Why" questions are not useful.

A SUMMARY OF POINTERS

Unless stealing is persistent, in which case professional guidance is needed, the following pointers will assist in dealing with the problem. When used with consistency, most stealing becomes short-lived.

Address the situation straightforwardly and without anger.

Assist the child in developing a plan for returning or replacing the stolen item.

Follow through on whatever plan you and your child decide.

Acknowledge that you know returning or replacing the stolen item is difficult and embarrassing.

Support the child but do not bail him or her out. The consequences of the actions must be experienced for responsible behavior to develop.

Once the situation is handled, drop it. Do not refer to it when discussing other behaviors or

hold it over the child's head as a warning.

Keep small change and enticing objects out of sight.

If necessary, use environmental control. Lock up your purse, wallet or enticing items.

Seek professional help when necessary.

Address the underlying cause.

Discovering that a child steals causes concern. Children who steal need guidance and need to experience consequences for their actions. Overreacting does not help the child and may inappropriately give him or her desired attention. By handling stealing in children straightforwardly, consistently, compassionately and with follow through, the problem will more than likely cease in a short time.

Next month we will address how to handle the underlying causes for stealing.

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When Children Steal: Part 2

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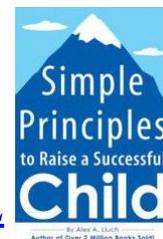
Last month we talked about how to effectively handle the situation when your child steals. We covered the following points:

1. Address the situation straightforwardly and compassionately.
2. Let your child know that you are concerned and that his behavior is inappropriate.
3. Work out a plan with the child for returning or replacing the stolen object.
4. Support your child in the solution but do not rescue him by taking care of the problem for him.
5. Allow the child to experience the consequences for himself.
6. Seek professional help when necessary.

We indicated that causes underlie the stealing once a child has reached the age where she knows that taking someone else's things is wrong. This

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usually occurs between the ages of three and five. In this article, we will discuss ways to handle the underlying causes of stealing.

WHY CHILDREN STEAL

Regardless of why children steal, the stealing itself must be handled by following the steps enumerated above. Knowing what lies behind the stealing helps you recognize patterns that may be occurring in other parts of your child's life. It also assists you in understanding needs that aren't being met in his life that you can teach him to meet in socially appropriate and effective ways. These are the primary reasons children and adolescents steal:

They think taking something is the only way they can get what they want.

It is a way of seeking attention.

It is done for revenge or to hurt somebody.

They think they can get away with it.

They may not have learned to respect the rights of others.

Older children may like the risk.

It may support a drug habit.

WHAT TO DO

When children take items like money, toys, pens, pencils and erasers, they think that is the only way to easily get these items. Brainstorming ideas with your child about how to appropriately get what he wants lets him know you want him to meet his needs successfully. If he receives an allowance, offer suggestions about how he might earn extra money to buy the school supplies or toys he wants. Assist him in planning a savings budget for

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wanted items. Model for him how to ask for the extra money he desires. For example, you might say, "It is not okay for you to take money from my purse. (your sister's room, etc.). If you want or need money, come to me and say, 'I need extra money for pencils', or 'I want money for candy.' Sometimes we might work out a loan. Sometimes I will say that I can't give you the money. When that happens, we'll see if we can create a plan together."

If stealing is done to seek attention, the child usually does it in such a way that he is easily caught. Handle the stealing straightforwardly but give no extra attention to it. Do not discuss it past the time of returning or replacing the taken item. Look for positive behaviors the child exhibits and begin acknowledging them regularly. When children feel acknowledged for appropriate behavior, they seek less negative attention.

Sometimes children steal to hurt their victim or to get revenge. This can be a way siblings inappropriately handle hurt feelings with each other. Their motive is, "I'm going to make you feel as bad as you make me feel." If your child wants to hurt you because she feels picked on or misunderstood, she may take money from your purse or wallet. She may take something from your dresser drawer. What better way to arouse your hurt and concern?

Your own injured feelings can be a sign that this was your child's motive for stealing. Address your own feelings with her; then explore her hurt. You might say something like, "I feel sad and scared when you take money from me. I know you were angry this morning when I yelled at you for missing the bus. I said some unkind things. Taking my money won't solve our problem. I'm sorry I was mean. I know you weren't feeling well and didn't want to go to school." Let her know that she can tell you she is angry. She doesn't need to take your money. If you are wrong about the motive, your child will let you know in such a way that you can continue exploring through positive

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communication. Only attempt this kind of communication when you have time to complete the process.

Children may steal because they think they can get away with it. This is particularly true when parents are inconsistent in following through with consequences for not complying with household standards or when deviant behavior has been inconsistently addressed in the past. When we are inconsistent in our effective parenting, children know that they have a strong chance of getting away with inappropriate behavior. In assisting our children toward appropriate behavior, we must be willing to take the necessary time and energy for following through on set consequences for family standards.

The best way we can assist a child in learning to respect the rights of others is to model that respect ourselves. If we take sugar packets from restaurants, don't tell a cashier if we have received too much change or are dishonest in business transactions, we are letting our children know this behavior is acceptable. If we take items from our children's rooms or backpacks without asking, we are not respecting their rights. Be a good model. Teach the respect you want your child to give to you and others through your own respect for the rights and property of others.

When older children and adolescents who do not have a criminal history engage in stealing, it may be to experience the high risk factor at play. Like younger children, the motive is to see if they can get away without being caught. The stakes are high. Shoplifting or taking hubcaps or hood ornaments from cars are common choices. The sooner the adolescent needs to face the consequences of such behavior, the less likely he is to continue in it.

It is important to remember that straightforward and compassionate handling of the problem is called for. Verbally attacking the adolescent will not solve the problem, nor will consequences

unrelated to the incident. If the police are involved, the consequences may not be in your hands. You may want to seek professional help if your older child or adolescent steals.

Children and adolescents who are involved with drugs steal to support the drug habit. If you have any reason to believe that this is the motive for stealing, seek professional help immediately. As parents, we don't want to believe our children use illegal drugs. Closing our eyes to the possibility is not the answer. Neither is demanding answers from our offspring or indiscriminately punishing them. Children and teens who use drugs are hurting. They need guidance beyond what most parents are able to provide. Professional intervention offers the best opportunity for positive outcomes.

A short article just begins to address the ramifications of stealing in children. The above suggestions will assist you onto a positive path in dealing with this sensitive issue. For further information, look under stealing in the indexes of parenting guides in your local bookstore. You may also find information by going to "stealing in children" or "children who steal" on the internet.

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