



Information

TraumaCare

Box 1807, Magaliesview, 2067

5a Franshoek Rd, Lonehill

Tel: 0715929690

Website: www.traumacare.co.za

Email: mail@traumacare.co.za

CHILDREN

When a child or teenager steals, parents are naturally concerned. They worry about what caused their child to steal, and they wonder whether their son or daughter is a "juvenile delinquent." It is normal for a very young child to take something which excites his or her interest. This should not be regarded as stealing until the youngster is old enough, usually three to five years old, to understand that taking something which belongs to another person is wrong. Parents should actively teach their children about property rights and the consideration of others.



Parents are also role models. If you come home with stationary or pens from the office or brag about a mistake at the supermarket checkout counter, your lessons about honesty will be a lot harder for your child to understand.

Although they have learned that theft is wrong, older children or teenagers steal for various reasons. A youngster may steal to make things equal if a brother or sister seems to be favored with affection or gifts. Sometimes, a child may steal as a show of bravery to friends, or to give presents to family or friends or to be more accepted by peers. Children may also steal out of a fear of dependency; they don't want to depend on anyone, so they take what they need.

Parents should consider whether the child has stolen out of a need for more attention. In these cases, the child may be expressing anger or trying to "get even" with his or her parents; the stolen object may become a substitute for love or affection. The parents should make an effort to give more recognition to the child as an important family member.

If parents take the proper measures, in most cases the stealing stops as the child grows older. Child and adolescent psychiatrists recommend that when parents find out their child has stolen, they:

- tell the child that stealing is wrong
- help the youngster to pay for or return the stolen object
- make sure that the child does not benefit from the theft in any way
- avoid lecturing, predicting future bad behavior, or saying that they now consider the child to be a thief or a bad person
- make clear that this behavior is totally unacceptable within the family tradition and the community

When the child has paid for or returned the stolen merchandise, the matter should not be brought up again by the parents, so that the child can begin again with a "clean slate."



If stealing is persistent or accompanied by other problem behaviors or symptoms, the stealing may be a sign of more serious problems in the child's emotional development or problems in the family. Children who repeatedly steal may also have difficulty trusting others and forming close relationships. Rather than feeling guilty, they may blame the behavior on others, arguing that, "Since they refuse to give me what I need, I will take it." These children would benefit from an evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

Why Kids and Teens Steal

Kids of all ages — from preschoolers to teens — can be tempted to steal for different reasons:

- ✓ Very young children sometimes take things they want without understanding that things cost money and that it's wrong to take something without paying for it.
- ✓ School-age kids usually know they're not supposed to take something without paying, but they might do so anyway because they lack enough self-control.
- ✓ Preteens and teens know they're not supposed to steal, but might steal for the thrill of it or because their friends do. Some might believe they can get away with it. As they're given more control over their lives, some teens steal as a way of rebelling.



And reasons Kids might be angry or want attention. Their behavior may reflect stress at home, school, or with friends. Some may steal as a cry for help because of emotional or physical abuse they're enduring.

Ways to Prevent and Discipline Stealing

1. Understand why kids steal

Like lying, "stealing" is an adult term that may not mean anything to young children. Candy found clutched in a sticky fist after going through a checkout line or a toy car that turns up in the pocket of a four-year-old after a visit to a friend's house is not proof that your child is already a delinquent.



To the preschool child, possession means ownership. Many preschool children can't curb their impulses. They see the toy, feel they must have it. Around five to seven years of age children develop a hazy notion of the wrongness of stealing. Also, by this age the child may become a more clever thief. Still his deterrent is more the fear of adult retaliation than an understanding of the immorality of stealing.

Stopping petty stealing and teaching its wrongness may seem to some like a smallie, but learning honesty in small matters paves the way for biggies later. A child must learn to control impulses, delay gratification, and respect the rights and property of others.

2. Practice attachment parenting

Because connected children are more sensitive, they are better able to understand and respect the rights of others. These concepts sink in deeper and at an earlier age. Connected children feel remorse when they have done wrong because they develop a finely-tuned conscience sooner. It's easier to teach values to attachment-parented children.

These kids have the ability to empathize and understand the effects of their actions on others. And they have parents who are putting their time in, being with their children enough to realize when they stray into these gray zones. Connected kids have an innate respect for maintaining trust between people. Lying, cheating, and stealing violate this sense of trust.

3. Lead them not into temptation

Children will take money from family members almost as though it is community property. They may even rationalize "I'll give it back when I can." Teach your children to keep their financial affairs private. Money should be kept in a locked box which is stored in a secret place.



4. Teach ownership

Toddlers have no concept of ownership. As the child grasps the idea of ownership and the rights that go along with it, teach the logical conclusion that ignoring these rights is wrong. What would you want him to do?" The best way to teach lasting values is to draw the lessons out of a child rather than imposing them.

5. Correct the steal

Getting the thief to give back the goods sometimes requires masterful negotiating. Encouraging and helping the child to return stolen goods teaches not only that stealing is wrong, but also that wrongs must be made right. If you find an empty candy wrapper, go ahead and trot the offender back to the store with payment and an apology.

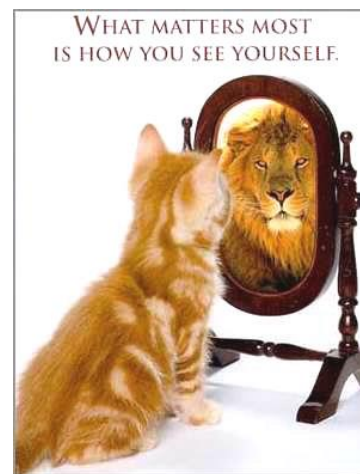
6. Identify the trigger

Find out what prompts the child to steal. The child who steals habitually despite your teaching about honesty usually has a deep-seated problem that needs fixing. Is the child angry? Does he steal to vent the anger? Does the child need money and feel that stealing is the only way he can get what he believes he needs? If so, offer an allowance. Help him get odd jobs. Help the child learn work ethics so that he can earn the toys instead of steal them. Most of the time a child who habitually steals is suffering from a poor self-image and needs to steal to boost his worth or get attention. As in handling all behavioral problems, it's often necessary to take inventory of your whole family situation. Does your child need more supervision? Perhaps, some redefining of priorities and reconnecting with your child is in order.

7. Identify the child at risk to steal

Watch for these risk factors:

- Poor self-esteem
- Impulsiveness: strong desire, but weak control
- Generally insensitive to others
- Not connected
- Angry
- Change in family situation, for example, divorce
- generally bored
- alone a lot



If you focus on helping your child deal with these risk factors, lying and stealing should subside.

It's important to get to the bottom of stealing. If the problems behind chronic stealing and lying are uncorrected, they tend to snowball. With repeated misdeeds, the child convinces himself that stealing is not really wrong. He desensitizes himself to his own conscience and to your teachings.

The child without remorse is at high risk for becoming an adult without controls. With attachment parenting, even if a child is not "caught in the act," he will punish himself sufficiently with the remorse he will feel. He won't want to repeat wrong actions.

8. Praise honesty

The five-year-old finds somebody's wallet and brings it to you. Praise him to the limit for his action! "Thank you for bringing Mommy the wallet you found. Now let's see if we can find out who it belongs to. I'll bet that person will be very happy you found it, just like you would feel if you lost something special and someone returned it." Avoid saying, "Thank you for telling the truth." Some children may not even have thought of keeping the wallet, and you don't want to plant in their minds the option of being dishonest. Whatever praise you give, convey the message that your child did just what you expected.

For most children, lying or stealing are practical matters, not moral matters.

CHILDREN CLOSE
THEIR EARS TO
ADVICE BUT
OPEN THEIR EYES
TO EXAMPLE.

This newsletter has been issued by:

TraumaCare, Box 1807, Magaliesview, Gauteng, 2067

www.traumacare.co.za * mail@traumacare.co.za * Tel: 071 592 9690

Play Therapy * Counselling * Trauma Counselling

Please note that this information must not be used for diagnostic purposes. Please visit a medical professional for a correct diagnosis.