

Children Who Steal

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Stealing is taking things that belong to others without their permission. The act is common in young children because they tend to be self-centered and feel that it is all right to take what they want from others. A child's true understanding of the concept of stealing usually occurs between the ages of five and seven. By this time, children can understand the idea of ownership and realize that taking things that belong to others is wrong.

Motives for stealing can differ from child to child, and any one child can steal for a variety of reasons. Children may steal because:

1. They have poor impulse control and want instant gratification.
2. They want an adult's attention.
3. They have not been taught that stealing is wrong.
4. They have observed the adults in their life take and keep things that did not belong to them -- for example, dad bringing home office supplies or mom keeping incorrect change when the store clerk made a mistake.
5. They lack family closeness and feel neglected; a stolen object might serve as a substitute for love.
6. They are suffering a form of abuse and need help.
7. They are expressing displaced feelings of anxiety, anger, or alienation resulting from a major life change such as parental divorce, moving to a new school, or being rejected by peers.
8. They want revenge for the pain they feel others have inflicted on them so they steal to get even or to hurt someone.
9. They crave what others have but they cannot buy -- for example: food treats, popular name-brand clothing or electronic equipment.
10. They want to appear tough, bold, and important.
11. They desire to fit in with a peer group that steals.
12. They like the thrill that comes from stealing.
13. They think they can get away with it.
14. They are rebelling against authority.
15. They need money to buy drugs.

Children who frequently steal tend to exhibit the following characteristics: impulsivity, loneliness, detachment, insensitivity, boredom, anger and low self-esteem. They often have difficulty trusting others and forming close relationships. When school personnel demonstrate regard for all students and provide a mutually supportive school environment, theft is less likely to occur.

What can teachers do?

1. Explain that stealing means taking something that belongs to someone else and that it is wrong, unacceptable and dishonest. Clarify that when an individual takes something without asking or paying for it, someone will be hurt. For example, if a child takes someone's pencil, he will be unable to do his work. If girl's bracelet is stolen, she might get in trouble at home.
2. Teach the concept of ownership and how it makes others feel to have something stolen from them. Use examples and ask children questions like, "How would you feel if someone liked your new coat, took it, and said it was his?"
3. Compliment and reinforce honest behavior in students.
4. Ask the guidance counselor to teach lessons on honesty.
5. Invite a police officer as a guest speaker to explain the ramifications of theft.

When a child is caught stealing, an adult's reaction should depend on whether it is the first time or if there is a pattern of stealing. When it is the first time, the focus should be on the reason for the theft rather than on the deed itself.

How to Handle a Stealing Situation for First Offenders

1. Remain calm. Deal with the situation in a straightforward manner. Show your disapproval, but do not interrogate, lecture or humiliate the child.
2. If you are sure who took an item, talk to the child privately. Do not ask, "Did you take the money?" Instead say something like, "I know you took the money. I am disappointed because I thought I could trust you." Then you might ask, "Is there a reason you needed the money?" Then listen and try to understand the problems the child may be having.

One teacher reported that she talks discreetly with a child who has been caught stealing. She said that she points out that as a class everyone depends on everyone else. She said that she tells the student that he or she is a fine person and if he takes things from others, they won't know just how great he is. Then she expresses confidence that the student will not steal again. The teacher also makes it a policy at an unrelated time to put the child in the role of being responsible so that she can compliment him in front of his peers.

3. Students who steal need to experience a consequence such as apologizing, returning or replacing the item or making restitution in some other way, as well as losing a privilege. You need to decide what will happen if the child steals again and let him or her know what the consequence will be.
4. If you are not sure who took an item, provide an opportunity for the "taker" to return it and save face. For example say, "Whoever found Adam's hat needs to return it." Or say, "Everyone look in your backpack to see if Adam's hat was accidentally put in it."
5. Do not label the child "bad" or a "thief." Let the child experience a "clean slate."
6. Take time to ask yourself why the behavior occurred:
 - * What personal problems could the child be having?
 - * Is the child stealing to call attention to him or herself?
 - * Which of the reasons listed above fit this child?

Then decide on a way to get to know the child better. Examples are eating lunch with him or her and one or two other children, talking with the child on the playground, or meeting with him or her before or after school.

7. Limit the opportunity for theft to occur by locking up valuable items and by closely observing the child.

What if the above methods are ineffective, and the student does not express remorse, continues to steal, or has other behavioral problems?

1. Follow the school guidelines.
2. Contact the school administrator.
3. Make sure the parent is aware of the concern.
4. Involve the school counselor or school psychologist who can help the child learn appropriate ways of behaving. An evaluation by a child psychiatrist may be necessary.

Habitual stealing in children and youth is a major social problem because it can lead to other unlawful behaviors. However, if the underlying problems of frequent offenders can be addressed at an early age, further anti-social behaviors will be less likely to occur. Teachers have a responsibility to deal constructively with the child who steals, to follow the school rules regarding theft, and to seek assistance from other professionals when considered necessary.