

## Pre-Schoolers

# STEALING



Stealing is the taking of things or being in possession of things that belong to someone else without their permission. Stealing is a common behavior in young children. Almost all children take things that don't belong to them at one time or another. Stealing, however, is a behavior that can be quite upsetting to parents. Many parents who have caught their children stealing worry that their children are on the road to becoming hardened criminals. These parents should be relieved to know that the vast majority of children who occasionally steal grow up to be law abiding citizens. While stealing is often considered a normal or common behavior in young children, it must still be addressed and corrected. Here are some things that parents can do to prevent and deal with stealing behaviors in their children.

Stealing is a common, normal behavior in pre-school-aged children. Under the age of six, most children have difficulty understanding the concept of private property. They have difficulty understanding that they don't have rights to property that belongs to someone else. This is because children at this age are generally self-centered. They feel that they can take what they want, and often don't understand that this might be wrong. Because most pre-school aged children do not yet understand that stealing is wrong, it is usually not a good idea for parents to punish them for stealing. Instead, this is an excellent time for parents to begin teaching their children about ownership and the concept that stealing is wrong.

## School-Aged Children

By the time children are about the age of six, they are beginning to better understand the concept of ownership. They are also beginning to understand that stealing is wrong. Once children begin to show an understanding of these concepts, parents should begin setting limits on stealing behaviors, and providing punishment when such behavior occurs.

## Why Children Steal

Children take things that do not belong to them for many different reasons. These reasons can differ from child to child, or any one child can steal for a number of different reasons.

**\*Parents may knowingly or unknowingly reinforce stealing behavior.** Parents who do not punish their children when they take things that do not belong to them may be reinforcing the behavior.

**\*Modeling.** Children learn by watching their parents. Parents who take things that do not belong to them, for example, parents who take supplies from the office for use at home, may be teaching their children that in some instances stealing is all right.

**\*Some children have no money of their own to buy what they want.** Children who don't have their own money to spend may steal what they want.

**\*To make themselves look good in front of peers.** Some children begin stealing because their peers are doing it and they want to be accepted by a certain peer group.

**\*A sign of behavioral/emotional problems.** Some children may steal as a symptom of some underlying problem.

### Prevention

There are many things that parents can do to prevent the onset of stealing behavior in their children.

**\*Discuss and explain why stealing is wrong.** Parents should make sure that their children know why stealing is wrong. Parents can point out that stealing means taking something that rightfully belongs to someone else.

**\*Teach ownership.** While children are very young it is a good idea for parents to begin teaching their children what ownership means. Parents can explain that people have a right to their own property, and that it is wrong to take something that belongs to someone else. Parents can use examples, such as, "How would you feel if someone wanted your favorite stuffed animal and just decided to take it?" Parents can also use examples that occur in everyday life, such as by explaining to children how one pays for things at the store and borrows books from the library, by pointing out things in the home that belong to different people, what gifts are, etc.

**\*Teach appropriate ways of getting what one wants.** Parents should teach their children how to get what they want without stealing. For example, parents can suggest that children ask for things they want, save up their money to buy the things they want, etc.

**\*Model appropriate behavior.** Parents should set a good example for their children by asking before they borrow things, by not taking things that don't belong to them, and by being open and honest.

**\*Develop a close, open relationship with children.** Parents should make every effort to communicate effectively with their children. Children who are close to their parents are much more likely to take on their beliefs and values than children who don't have a close relationship with their parents.

**\*Praise and reward honest behavior.** Parents should make every attempt to praise their children for being honest. The more parents praise their children's honesty, the more likely they will continue to be honest in the future.

## **Intervention**

There are many things that parents can do to address stealing after it has occurred.

**\*Remain calm.** When parents discover that their child has stolen something it is very important that they don't overreact. Parents should keep in mind that all children take things that don't belong to them at one time or another. Parents who become overly upset may instill feelings of guilt and shame in their child, which can affect self-esteem. Parents should try to remain calm instead, and should deal with stealing behaviors in as matter-of-fact a manner as possible.

**\*Confront quickly.** Just as it's important for parents not to overreact, it is also important that parents don't underreact. When parents find out that their child is stealing, they should confront and deal with the stealing immediately. The longer stealing is allowed to continue uncorrected, the more difficult it is to correct later on.

**\*Apply consequences.** Parents should decide what the specific consequences are for stealing, and apply them every time stealing

occurs. Parents should inform their children of these consequences before they are used. Consistency is very important. Here are some suggestions:

**>Correct the behavior.**

Correcting means making some kind of restitution. For example, if a child takes a candy bar from a store, correcting would involve requiring the child to return to the store and return the candy bar (if it isn't half-eaten), or if the candy bar can't be returned, paying for the candy bar. If the child has no money to pay for what he or she has taken, parents can loan the child the money and then subtract it from an allowance, or require that the child do chores around the house to earn the money to pay for it. It might also be a good idea for parents to require that the child apologize to the person from whom the item was stolen. Sometimes this is very difficult for children, so parents may not want force the issue if their child is unable to make an apology. It is, however, very important that the child go along on the trip to make the return. It is very important

that the child assume responsibility for correcting the misbehavior.

**>Apply natural consequences.**

After correcting the behavior, consequences should be applied. Having to do extra chores around the house to earn the money to pay for a stolen item is an example of a natural consequence. Another example is not allowing the child who stole the candy bar to have sweets for a certain period of time.

**\*Label the behavior.** It is very important that parents call the behavior exactly what it is. For example, parents shouldn't call taking (without permission) what doesn't belong to one's self as "borrowing." Children who are able to understand the concept of ownership should be told that they are "stealing" when they take something that does not belong to them.

**\*Provide adequate supervision.**

Parents should make sure that they know what their children are up to. Children who are not monitored closely by their parents tend to be more likely to steal and to engage in other problem behaviors.

**\*Understand why the behavior occurred.** Different children steal for different reasons. Because of this, it is important for parents to try to find out why their children steal. Asking a child why he or she has stolen something will probably not give parents the answers they need. They may need to look at what's going on in the child's life, what personal problems the child may be having, etc. Once parents find out why, corrective measures can be taken to eliminate or minimize the behavior. For example, parents could set up an allowance/chore system for a child who stole because he has no spending money of his own.

**\*Don't interrogate children or force them to self-incriminate.** Parents should not force their children to admit to stealing. Children often lie to protect themselves. If parents aren't pretty sure that their child has stolen something, they probably should not apply consequences. Instead, they should let their child know that they are skeptical, and express hope that their child will be honest with them.

**\*Help children find ways of earning their own money.** Parents should make sure that their children have

some sort of regular income. If children have money of their own to spend as they wish, they will be more likely to buy what they want instead of stealing it. Children can earn money by doing chores around the house, etc.

**\*Don't shame children for stealing.** Parents should try not to make their children feel guilty for stealing. They should also try not to call their children names, for example a thief or a liar. Such tactics can be very damaging to children's self-esteem. Instead, parents should let their children know that they are disappointed in their children's behavior, but this does not mean that they are bad people. They should then apply consequences and treat the situation matter-of-factly.

**\*Seek professional help for persistent problems.** If stealing becomes a chronic or significant problem, parents should contact a mental health professional for assistance.



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