

## **PARENT RESOURCES:**

### **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.
- Elementary school children usually know they're not supposed to take something without paying, but they may take it anyway because they lack enough self-control.
- Preteens and teens know they're not supposed to steal, but they may steal for the thrill of it or because their friends are doing it. Some might believe they can get away with it. As they're given more control over their lives, some teens may steal as a way of rebelling.

And there may be more complex reasons why some children and teens steal. They may be angry or want attention. Their behavior may reflect stressful problems they're having at home, at school, or with friends. Some may steal as a cry for help because of emotional or physical abuse they're enduring at home.

In other cases, kids and teens might steal because they can't afford to pay for what they need or want – for example, they may steal to get popular name-brand items. In some cases, they may take things to support drug habits and gambling.

Whatever the reason for stealing, parents need to find out the root of the behavior and address other underlying problems, like drug abuse, that may surface.

#### **What Should Parents Do?**

When a child has been caught stealing, a parent's reaction should depend on whether it's the first time or there's a pattern of stealing.

With very young children, parents need to help them understand that stealing is wrong - that when you take something without asking or paying for it, it hurts someone else. If a preschooler takes a piece of candy, for instance, parents can help the child return the item. If the child has already eaten the candy, parents can take the child back to the store to apologize and pay for it.

With school-age children, too, it's important to return the stolen item. By the first and second grades, kids should know stealing is wrong. But they may need a better understanding of the consequences.

Here's an example: If a child comes home with a friend's bracelet and it's clear the child took it without the friend's permission, the parent should talk to the child about how it would feel if a friend took something without asking first. The parent should encourage the child to call the friend to apologize, explain what happened, and promise to return it.

When teens steal, it's recommended that parents follow through with stricter consequences. For example, when a teen is caught stealing, the parent can take the child back to the store and meet with the security department to explain and apologize for what happened.

The child's embarrassment at facing up to what he or she did by having to return a stolen item makes for an everlasting lesson on why stealing is wrong. Further punishment, particularly physical punishment, of the child is unnecessary and may make the child angry and more likely to engage in even worse behavior. If it's a first-time offense, some stores and businesses may accept a child's or teen's apology and may not necessarily press charges. However, some stores may press charges the first time around. And there's often little sympathy for repeat offenders.

Children of all ages need to know that shoplifting isn't just about taking things from a store - it's taking money from the people who run the businesses. Plus, shoplifting makes prices higher for other customers. They should also know that stealing is a crime and can lead to consequences far worse than being grounded, including juvenile detention centers and even prison.

If a child steals money from a parent, the child should be offered options for paying back the money, like doing extra chores around the house. It's important, however, that a parent doesn't bait the child by leaving out money, in the hopes of catching the child in the act. That could damage the sense of trust between a parent and child.

### **When Your Child Keeps Stealing**

If your child has stolen on more than one occasion, you may consider getting professional help. Repeat offenses may indicate a bigger problem.

One third of juveniles who've been caught shoplifting say it's difficult for them to quit. So, it's important to help kids and teens understand why stealing is wrong and that they may face serious consequences if they continue to steal.

Others who may be able to talk to you and/or your child about the problem and help you address it include a:

- family therapist or counselor
- family doctor (who may be able to refer you to a family therapist or counselor)
- minister, priest, or rabbi
- school counselor (especially if your child is stealing from the school)
- support group, such as the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention or Cleptomaniacs and Shoplifters Anonymous in the USA, which may be able to provide information or help (look in your phone book for groups in your area)

Although ordinary acts of theft or shoplifting can be deliberate, motivated by a need, a desire, peer pressure, or rebellion, in extremely rare cases, a person who steals may have kleptomania. With this disorder, which makes up a very small portion of all shoplifting cases, a person repeatedly fails to resist impulses to steal, even though the stolen object is of little value. Individuals with kleptomania often discard the objects after stealing them and also have other personality or eating disorders.

Whatever the underlying cause, if stealing is becoming a habit with your child or teen, you may want to speak with a doctor or therapist to get to the cause of the behavior.

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