

## **WHEN CHILDREN STEAL**

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Stealing is wrong. Stealing is the deliberate act of taking something that does not belong to you from someone else. Most parents I know would agree that the last thing they want is for their child to grow up and become the next thief written about in the local paper. Although it is natural to be concerned, there are a few things to keep in mind if you should discover your child has taken something which does not belong to them.

### **YOUNG CHILDREN**

Developmentally, when children reach the ages of 3 – 5 they become very interested in things and often respond out of impulse in their desire to obtain the item. Their emotional excitement supercedes their intellectual ability to think through the circumstances. Although technically considered stealing, their act of taking something is based in emotion and not in a planned out sequence of behaviors. By the time they reach first or second grade, they are able to discern that this behavior is wrong.

### **ELEMENTARY AGE CHILDREN**

The elementary years for children are a time when they become very literal in their thinking about life, themselves, and what is right or wrong. Elementary children usually know they are not supposed to take something without paying, but they may take it anyway. For an elementary age child to steal, there may be several things at work.

The first may be a lack of self-control. Because of the literal manner in which they are interpreting information, the response of the parent is important. The parental response can transmit the concept of consequence for behavior as well as promote the grace and mercy of God.

Secondly, the behavior of stealing may be a metaphorical representation of the child obtaining that which they are lacking on an emotional level. Children often repeatedly steal as a way of providing for themselves what they feel they did not get from the adults around them. The child may be focusing in on equality between family members. There may be increased stress at that time in some fashion for the family. Children need help during these times in putting words on what life is like for them. Because children assume their parents know when they are suffering, they may not talk about the stress they feel. When the parent does not respond to their pain, they assume they must be the “bad” one or they must care for themselves no matter what that requires.

### **ADOLESCENTS**

As the child progresses in age, there are times that stealing happens simply because they get a rush from it or because they know they can get away with it. At this stage, the adolescent may be just plain angry at some level about the perceived or real “lack” in their family relationships. The adolescent may not trust their ability to develop intimate

relationships and try to obtain favor through stealing. Thus, they may be trying to get away from the unspoken fear that they will never be able to get what they need from their family. They then attempt to get it themselves and in their manner.

At any age, stealing may be disconcerting to parents as the implications for later in life can be life changing. The biggest role models that children and teens will have is their parents. If parents feel free to help themselves to pens, paper, etc from work or church or brag about a mistake at the checkout counter, your lessons about honesty will be much harder for your child to understand.

SIDEBAR:

RESPONDING WHEN YOUR CHILD STEALS:

When you have found out your child has stolen:

- Help them pay for or return the object
- Make sure that the child does not benefit from the theft
- Avoid lecturing, predicting future bad behavior, or saying that they now consider the child to be a thief or bad person
- Make clear that his behavior is unacceptable with the family tradition
- Make clear they know that God's love and your love will not change towards them

When your teenager steals:

- Take them back to the store to return the item
- They must apologize for what happened
- The store may or may not press charges
- Store owners usually little compassion for repeat offenders

When they steal money from you:

- Have them pay it back by doing chores
- Don't bait the child by leaving money lying around to see if they will take it. This behavior will leave the child feeling tricked and it will damage the trust level between you and your child.

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