

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 12

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CHILDREN WHO STEAL

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

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- 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.

In treating a child who steals persistently, a child and adolescent psychiatrist will evaluate the underlying reasons for the child’s need to steal, and develop a plan of treatment. Important aspects of treatment are helping the child learn to establish trusting relationships and helping the family to support the child in changing to a more healthy path of development.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*: #1 Children and Divorce, #3 Teens: Alcohol and Other Drugs, #33 Conduct Disorder, #43 Discipline, and #44 Children and Lying. **See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).**

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