

Why do young children sometimes steal? And what should parents do about it?

May 8 2023, by Natalie Gately and Shane Rogers



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When children steal, naturally parents can be very concerned. They might wonder if they've taught their child correctly, whether it's just a phase or whether they're going to have a young offender on their hands.

But before parents panic, they need to consider why their [child](#) may have

taken something that doesn't belong to them.

First, it's important to consider the age of the child.

When do kids learn stealing is wrong?

Very young [children](#) don't have a concept of ownership. If they see something that interests them, they are likely to reach out and just take it.

Child experts [believe](#) a sense of their own property begins at about two years old, but fully understanding ownership rights of other people develops at three to five years old.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [advises](#) that age three to five is a particularly important time for parents to actively teach children about property and honesty. Model good behavior around respecting property, which means not bringing home extra stationery from work, or bragging about the cooked chicken on the supermarket trolley hook you got away with not paying for.

If they know it's wrong, why do they do it?

Motives for stealing need to be explored and understood before deciding on a course of action, as it's not necessarily a sign of moral failure.

Some [young children](#) with low impulse control might steal for [immediate gratification](#)—especially items perceived as low value. They might think it's only a few lollies, or a biscuit or two, no one will notice.

Others may have [difficulty imagining](#) anyone would be cross or disappointed if they took another person's belongings.

Bored children may steal simply for a sense of excitement or to gain attention.

Another important aspect is whether they steal alone or with peers. Children may steal as part of pranking behavior due to [peer pressure](#) or to impress their friends.

Children who come from impoverished backgrounds may steal to obtain items they can't afford. The item may be particularly valued within their [peer group](#), or it may be the latest fad item everyone else in the group has.

Some children may steal to gain attention from adults or peers. Or there may be emotional or psychological issues and the child uses stealing as a [method of coping](#).

Stealing may indicate a child is struggling with something deeper and needs help addressing the root cause of their behavior. Parents, caregivers and educators should approach the situation with empathy and understanding, and work with the child to find more constructive ways to cope with their emotions and needs.

My child has stolen something. What should I do?

Here are some steps parents and guardians can take:

- 1. Stay calm and avoid overreacting.** Approach the situation calmly. Shouting or punishing children harshly can make them more likely to steal again in the future.
- 2. Talk to the child.** Ask them why they stole and listen to their response. Try to understand what motivated them to steal and address any underlying issues. Explain why stealing is wrong and the

consequences it can have.

3. Tell them stealing is wrong. It's important to teach children the importance of honesty and trust. Explain how stealing can break trust between people and damage relationships.

4. Remove the goods, if possible. Make sure they don't benefit from the theft or keep any goods. Sometimes parents may decide not to return goods for fear of the consequences, but your child should not be able to keep the goods.

5. Set clear consequences. Make sure they understand there are consequences to their actions. This could include returning the stolen item, apologizing to the person they stole from, and completing chores or community service to make amends.

6. Avoid scare tactics. Don't threaten to tell the police or continually label them as naughty, a thief or bad person. Once you have dealt with it, avoid bringing it up again.

7. Monitor their behavior. Keep an eye on your child's behavior in the future to ensure they aren't stealing again. Praise them when they make good choices and show honesty.

8. Seek professional help. If your child's behavior continues or escalates, it may be necessary to seek professional help from a [psychologist](#) who specializes in working with children.

Remember, stealing is not necessarily a serious issue, however it should not be ignored. With the correct approach and right support, [parents](#) and guardians can help their child develop a sense of ownership, understand the consequences of stealing, and prevent them stealing in the future.

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