

Self-Study Course

Dealing with Lying and Stealing: Looking at Dishonest Behaviors

March 1999

3 Hours Credit

This self-study course was adapted from the following materials:

Dishonesty: Foster Family System, Susan L. Smith, Daniel Memorial Institute, Inc., Jacksonville, Florida, 1990.

“Why Kids Lie” Jane Marks, in Parents Magazine, June 1987.

Fostering or Adopting the Troubled Child Jane Clayton Glatz, Audenreed Press, 1998

The Healing Power of the Family Richard Delaney 1997 Wood ‘N’ Barnes Publishing

The Parent’s Guide Stephen McCarney and Angela Bauer, Hawthorne Press, 1989

Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness Paul Ekman, Penguin Press 1989.

Alaska Center for Resource Families The Young Child in Foster Care: Developmental Issues, Self-Study Course, June 1998

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DEALING WITH LYING AND STEALING

Introduction

Lying and stealing are two behaviors that often trouble foster parents. All parents have strong reactions when their children lie or steal. While most children will at some time experiment with stealing or lying, sometimes it becomes a destructive pattern in children.

This self study hopes to help you learn more about why children might steal or lie and give you some ideas of how to handle these behaviors. Lying and stealing are dishonest behaviors. Developing either honest or dishonest patterns is part of a child's moral development. **Part One** will look at moral development in children and what either encourages or discourages honest behavior in children. **Part Two** will look at why children lie, what is "normal" lying and what should cause concern, and how foster parents can respond. **Part Three** will explore why children steal, when it becomes a chronic problem, and how foster parents can respond to stealing behaviors.

Most people have times where they "bend the truth" a little. They may borrow things from the workplace, or don't return the extra change given by a supermarket checker, or tell a white lie not to hurt someone's feelings. It is very important that throughout this self-study, foster parents look at the kind of honest or dishonest behaviors we are modeling for the children in our care. The most effective teachers of honesty in a child's life are his parents, his caregivers and the adults in his life. While we cannot control what a child has seen in past caregivers, we can look at our own behavior. We can provide a model of honest behavior, then expect our children to do the same.



DEALING WITH LYING AND STEALING

Part One: What Is Normal? What Is Not?

Before we discuss strategies to deal with dishonest behaviors such as stealing or lying, we need to explore the many roots of dishonest behavior. The concept that lying and stealing is wrong is not a lesson we are born with, but one we learn as we grow up. This is called *moral development*. Moral development is how we learn what is right and what is wrong. Generally, children who have problems such as lying, stealing, and cheating are immature in their moral development. Moral development will be affected by normal **childhood stages of development** and the kind of **parenting** a child receives during childhood.

STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT: How We Learn Right From Wrong

We are not born with values. We are not born knowing that it is not accepted to tell a lie and not okay to steal. We learn our values as we grow from children into adulthood. Children come into your care who have not had an opportunity to learn positive values. Knowing how these values develop during childhood will help you understand a child's behavior.



Infants And Toddlers (Birth To 2 Years)

When children are very young, they do not have the capacity to deliberately lie or steal. Toddlers may take something that another child is playing with or may grab something that belongs to another child and refuse to give it back, but this is not in a sense stealing. The child does not yet have the sense of ownership and right and wrong. Still, the seeds of moral development are being planted during these early years. Attachment and bonding occurs during these first years of life. If a child feels attached to a positive caregiver and feels loved and cared for, this will help them feel connected to the world. They bond to a caregiver and tend to adopt that caregiver's values as they grow. Infants and toddlers are also learning that the world is either a safe place or an unsafe place. Children who grow up thinking the world is an unsafe place also grow up with a keen sense of survival skills. The development of positive values depends on a feeling of connection to the world.

To Assist In Moral Development In Infants And Toddlers: For infants and toddlers, provide a warm caring relationship with lots of positive physical touch and interaction with children. Respond to their basic physical needs quickly and appropriately and build a strong attachment. Don't spank, punish, or shame a child this age. Provide limits and safety by changing the environment, redirecting a child, physically removing them from situations, and keeping them safe.



Early Childhood (3 To 6 Years)

The preschool years are incredible years where a child is learning by leaps and bounds. It is during these years that we may see behaviors that may appear to be lying. This is a time of great imagination and fantasy. Children may often put their wishes into words that sound like untruths or stories that seem to be lying. For example, “Daddy is buying me a horse” may really mean that I wish my Daddy would buy me a horse.” Children may also experiment with lies to avoid punishment. A child may blame a sibling or an imaginary friend when a lamp is broken or cookies are eaten without permission. During this stage, external controls guide a child's moral development. Gradually, the child internalizes the rules and the sense of what is right and what is wrong. Children can be quite impulsive at this age and take things they want without asking or for paying for them (such as small toys or candy at the store.) They are practicing the ideas of sharing and ownership and how to treat others correctly. How parents respond at this age is critical for helping children internalize the basic values of what is right and what is wrong.

***Goal Of Parent To Assist In Moral Development:** Gently help children learn the difference between a story and the truth. When children take things, help them return it and say I'm sorry or replace it. Now is the time to establish clear expectations of telling the truth, but at this age, avoid punishing a child for “telling tales.” Talk to them about the importance of telling the truth. Help them learn to respect the property of others. With young children who demonstrate excessive fantasy behavior, their attention can be gently directed to the difference between fantasy and reality by comments such as “That’s make believe, isn’t it?” This is a time to talk about how one’s actions affect others in order to nurture empathy. (For example, “When you call Billy a name like that, that makes him feel bad and hurts his feelings. You don’t like to be called names, do you? Either does Billy.”)*



Middle Childhood (6 To 12 Years)

The child internalizes rules and standards to some extent, especially those of his peer group. The child believes in authority, fixed rules, obeying the law and keeping the social norm. The child believes the rules to be right and wants to please others. The consequence of the act (whether you got away with it or got a gain from it) determines whether it is good or bad. Peers become very important influences, but parents still are the biggest force in helping develop values. This is a time that self-concept begins to solidify, and children begin to see themselves as “good” kids, or “bad” kids. It is a time of “tattling” when others break the rules. Children are able to deliberately mislead through lies, and may feel guilty for doing so. Children this age may lie to boost their self-concept or look good in other’s eyes. They may lie to escape punishment or consequences. This is a critical age for laying down good values in children and be consistent. Younger grade school age children tend to follow the rules because a grownup tells them too; older children tend to try to please others.

Goal Of Parent To Assist In Moral Development: This is a good age to get children involved in positive peer groups such as Scouts, sports, church groups, or Boys and Girls clubs. Dishonest behavior needs to be dealt with firmly with consequences and expectations that honest behavior is expected. This is a good time to talk to children about problem solving and use role playing to practice what you would do in situations where someone asks you to steal or do something wrong. Supervision of children is very important. Know where your children are and who they are with. You have more power as a parent to keep kids away from bad influences and questionable peers during this age than perhaps you do during adolescence. Try to get kids involved in positive activities. Plan lots of activities together as a family.



Adolescence (13 To 18 Years)

The increasing ability to think abstractly assists the teenager in sorting through values. Moral reasoning often takes a lofty stand – teens may feel passionately about the environment, about justice and equality, about the care of animals, vegetarianism and other areas. The adolescent becomes very critical of hypocrisy (especially in others), but peers become a stronger influence in the values and actions of the teen. The child recognizes that there are universal ethics which groups and governments sometimes violate. All of these are dependent on the kinds of values that the child has internalized during earlier childhood. The adolescent will experiment with other values as well. Teens are often very protective and sensitive to what their peers and friends are doing and their actions will reflect this. A teen who has not internalized values of right and wrong may still be operating under a moral sense of what is right is whatever benefits me. They may be only repentant that they got caught. They may not be able to relate their behavior to its consequences on others. This is called *concrete thinking*. Concrete thinking is a rigid way of thinking that does not allow the person to take full responsibility for their actions, thus not allowing a full development of morality.

Goal Of Parent To Assist In Moral Development: Keep talking to your teens, and try to avoid lectures. Continue to help them with problem solving and moral reasoning and focus on the consequences of actions, being sure to tell the truth and not exaggerate! Keep firm in your values of honesty and safety. Let your child experience the consequences of his action—for example, don't protect him from consequences of breaking school policy or troubles with the law. Be supportive, but let him experience the consequences. Promote the concept of trust and the importance of being trustworthy.

THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTING: Guiding The Hand That Rocks The Cradle

Many other things influence these stages, including temperament, abuse and neglect, deprivation, trauma and parental involvement. Parental involvement is a strong factor in a child's moral development. There are several parts to parenting which restrict or promote moral behavior in children.

Parental warmth and acceptance more than any other characteristic affects a child's overall development as well as his/her moral development. These can include the level of warmth and acceptance that a child feels from his parents. If a child feels rejected from his caregivers, he will be likely to develop destructive patterns of in response to their feelings of hurt and anger. These are the destructive behaviors that they bring into the foster home.

Another factor in parenting is the *appropriate level of parental control*. Children need at least moderate control for best development. The best kind of parental control is to offer clearly defined and enforced limits to children. This should change as the child matures and internalizes rules. As children gain their own self-control, there can be less dependence on external control such as rewards and punishments and more dependence on measures such as reasoning with the child. A child who gradually learns self control will be better to make choices based on right and wrong. A child who has not had any guidance or self control instilled in him will tend to make choices based solely on what he wants, not on what is right or wrong.

The third parenting factor is the level of *parental involvement in the child's life*. Supervision and parental involvement are serious when teaching honesty and when attempting to detect the occurrence of dishonest behaviors. Detached parents who do not interact much with their children have little influence over their children's behavior or developing values. It is also possible for parents to be too involved in a child's life, to the extent that they smother a child's development of independence, individuality and judgment. Sometimes life can be the best teacher.

Parental Factors That Influence Moral Development in Children

Parental Warmth
And Acceptance

Level Of Parental
Control

Level Of Parental
Involvement

There is no easy recipe for raising "good" kids. When foster children come into your care, you may need to start at the beginning and undo some bad habits or values. Do the best you can and try to be as consistent and caring as you can be.



DEALING WITH LYING AND STEALING

Part Two: Lying In Children

Lying is the “*planned falsification of the truth with the intent to mislead others.*” Children tell lies for the same reason adults do – to avoid punishment, to get something they want or to make excuses for themselves. Children may lie when caught stealing to avoid punishment. A child may lie to build himself up in others eyes. Children may also lie about their birth parents, why they are in foster care, or about what happened to them in order to avoid facing reality. Lying often causes a strong negative reaction from adult caretakers and it creates mistrust in the parent-child relationship.

There are different types of lying. Lying is a “*deliberate falsification of the truth.*” It is important to remember that mistakes, misinformation or unintentional falsification are not lies. The fantasy of a young child is more of daydreaming, wishful thinking or defensive escape from reality. White lies are those fibs we tell in order not to hurt someone’s feelings or to get out of a commitment (“I really like your haircut.” “I’m sorry. I’m busy that night.”) Fabrication is the creation of stories to get attention or impress others and is a more serious kind of lie. Compulsive lying (the most serious) is lying which occurs frequently as a habit or an automatic reaction without any benefit in the situation.

Lying In Children

Lying is a natural protective reaction and occasional lying is common in children. The frequency and character of lying determines the extent to which it is a problem. Children mature through a series of development stages intellectually and morally which affect their perception of reality and lying.

Very young children (4 and under) often confuse fantasy and reality. Much of their play revolves around pretending and make-believe. This requires corrective measures only when fantasy is carried to an extreme and the child lives too much in an imaginary world as a substitute for the real world. The child then may need help distinguishing between what is real and make-believe. By age 5 or 6, most children comprehend the significance of telling the truth and will occasionally lie to avoid punishment or for other reasons. Children are better cognitively at deliberately telling a falsehood. As they get older, they begin to be better at making up a lie that sounds plausible and that parents will believe. Most children at sometime during their development tell a lie that they get away with. They then learn that sometimes lies work, and may be encouraged to use them again.

Teens may use lies to avoid punishment or to help them keep status with their peers (such as saying things they don’t believe in order to fit in, or lying about experiences they may or may not

have had.) Teens also may use lies to protect their privacy. They may use lies to keep part of themselves private from their parents. Since teens are separating from their parents and establishing their identity, a few lies may be part of that process. Some teens become quite sophisticated in telling lies that are somewhat truthful, but misleading. Technically they have told the truth, but it was told in a way that was intentionally misleading to a parent. Teenagers also respond better to the idea that telling lies breaks the trust between parent and child. Younger children can relate to the idea that telling the truth is important and there will be an extra punishment for lying. Teens are cognitively able to appreciate the importance of honoring trust in a relationship both with a parent and with a friend.

REASONS FOR CHILDREN'S LYING

1. To escape criticism, punishment or other unpleasant consequences.
2. To get attention or appear better than they feel themselves to be.
3. To avoid embarrassment.
4. To escape unpleasant reality or boredom.
5. To imitate a parent who lies or to follow instructions to deceive others.
6. To seek revenge for unfair treatment.
7. To gain power through controlling other's attitudes or actions with false information.
8. To maintain secrecy and protect self from others.
9. To gain recognition; to be part of the gang or enhance reputation.

GRAPH #1: *Reasons for Lying In Children*

Lying is a common problem in foster children. "Children who have been harshly treated early in life often do not trust adults enough to tell them the truth," says Richard Delaney, Ph.D. Children who have been abused may rely on lying to protect themselves, leading to reflexive lying even when an innocuous questions because it is misperceived as an interrogation. This is why it is important to deal with the lying behavior, but to also explore why a child is resorting to lying. If a child lies to protect himself, we need to develop an atmosphere of trust and safety. If a child lies to build himself up in other eyes, we need to help a child build up his self-esteem and confidence. Many children may have seen lying in their own families as a way to protect yourself and gain advantage. These children need adult role models of honesty.

Problem lying poses a vicious cycle with children lying, and parents accusing, investigating and doubting. This results in a loss of trust and a feeling of desperation for the parent. Children who have problems with lying frequently have other problem behaviors associated with conduct disorders such as substance abuse, fire setting and stealing. With children who have a chronic lying problem, you need to attack the problem aggressively. Not all children who lie are going to

become juvenile delinquents, but there is a higher level of lying behavior in conduct disordered and aggressive children than in children without those behaviors. Intervene early and get professional help for the child.



Strategies For Dealing With Lying

In determining what you are going to do when a child lies, keep in mind why the child is lying in the first place. You may not always know, but when a child has a pattern of lying, you can often detect a pattern. Does he lie to keep from getting punished? Are his lies actually stories that are fantasies that make him feel better about himself? Is he lying as a way to keep the foster parent at a distance? Or is he manipulating the foster parent? These are clues that will help you deal with the underlying problem as well.

Meanwhile, here are several suggestions to help you deal with a child's lying:

1. **Establish a rule to tell the truth.** The rule should be consistent and followed by everyone in the home. Talk about the rule often
2. When a child admits to breaking a rule, or confesses to something he did, **congratulate him on telling the truth.** Give him a kiss on the cheek or a hug and say you were proud of him for telling the truth.
3. If you know that something happened, **deal with it matter of factly.** Do *not* put a child in a situation where he will be tempted to lie to you. Just focus on what happened.
4. When your child lies, **explain exactly what he is doing wrong and why.** "William, you did not make your bed and you told me you did. That's called lying. The next time I ask, you need to tell the truth. When you do not tell the truth, people will learn to not believe other things that you tell them."
5. You will not always be able to tell when your child is lying, but when you know, **always address lying when it happens.** Do not promise a child that he won't get in trouble if he only tells the truth. But always express your disappointment or give some kind of consequence for lying.
6. **Do not punish a child excessively.** If you tend to come down hard on a child for misbehavior, a child might be encouraged to lie to avoid punishment. Make sure you are fair, kind and consistent.

7. Make certain your child understand **he cannot get out of doing something because of lying**. For example, if your child lies about finishing a chore, he still needs to do the chore plus he may have a consequence for lying.
8. **Take a deep breath and remain calm** when you child lies. Choose your word carefully. Do not appear shocked or surprised, hurt or wounded or angry. Deal with it firmly and matter of factly.
9. Before beginning a conversation with your child, if you feel he may be tempted to lie, **remind your child that telling the truth the first time can save further punishment**. Example: One parent wrote that if he suspected his teen has broken curfew but wasn't sure, he might say, "I want you to think before you reply to me. I think you might have come in past your curfew last night. Please don't lie if you did; that would be much worse than breaking the curfew. But you know there is a reason for that curfew and I have to know why you broke it."
10. **Avoid arguing with your child about whether or not he or she is lying**. Simply explain that he is not being completely honest about the situation.
11. **Encourage your child to come to you when there is a problem** (e.g. doing homework, dealing with peer pressure) in order that you can help your child and prevent the need to lie.
12. If a child's main motivation in lying is to increase his self-esteem, **help the child gain achievement and self-worth to erase this need** to invent tales. Focus on giving the child praise daily which is specific to appropriate action or good qualities.
13. **Review your house rules** to be sure that the child is not put into positions of lying about behavior that should really be within his own discretion. Allow privacy in appropriate areas and don't snoop!
14. Remember to **demonstrate your own honesty**, setting an example and providing a good role model.
15. **Avoid playing "gotcha!"** Don't set kids up to try to catch them in a lie. That builds distrust on the part of the child. Be aware and pay attention, but don't try to trip a child up or "catch them in the act."



DEALING WITH LYING AND STEALING

Part Three: Stealing In Children

Stealing is defined as “*taking the possessions of others without their permission*”. Like lying, stealing is difficult to deal with. Stealing often goes undetected and adults often have strong negative reactions to children’s attempts to steal. Stealing is different from lying in that stealing is also against the law. There may be legal consequences for a child who steals.

Taking the possessions of another cannot be labeled as stealing until a child is old enough to know what is private property. Very young children frequently grab objects they want and learn the meaning of “mine” before they appreciate the meaning of “not mine”. Minor stealing in early childhood is common but it becomes a problem if the child continues to steal on an ongoing basis after entering school. A survey of foster parents revealed that 36% of their foster children had a problem with stealing. If stealing persists through childhood and adolescence and occurs across several settings, the chances are high the youth will become a serious adult offender.

Stealing is related to opportunity. The more things are available for theft and the lower the chance of getting caught, the more children will steal. It is also easier for children and adults to steal from an anonymous victim like a store, the government, or a corporation than to steal from someone they know.

Development Of Stealing Problems In Children

Most young children gradually develop a respect for other’s property within their home. In some families and cultures, there is little emphasis placed on individual ownership within the family. Everything is share by all family members. Keep this in mind if you are parenting a child from a culture other than your own. Usually by age 4 or 5, a child can learn the difference between what is his and what belongs to others. Some children who grew up in homes where respect for others’ property was not taught, or where parents or older children stole things without being punished, have learned to steal by example. Other children may learn to steal in order to meet very basic needs. For example, children who steal food from the cupboard or off grocery shelves may have been deprived of food in their birth homes.

Children who are very young often take things impulsively. They want it so they take it. As children get older, they may steal for a variety of reasons. These include wanting something that someone else has but not knowing how to get it; stealing to fill up a need; stealing to get back at someone; stealing to get the benefit or power of the item (such as a gun or drugs); or stealing out of a sense of guilt for being a bad person.

Sometimes children take toys or borrow clothes from a sister or brother without asking or taking a cookie without asking. This is dishonest behavior, but it stems from a need to better learn respect for other's possessions or to follow rules. More serious stealing situations may include taking money from a foster mother's purse, stealing candy or makeup or clothes from a store, or breaking into schools and taking computer equipment. Certainly these are the more serious types of stealing and the ones that cause the most concern to foster families. It is important to address *all* stealing problems. The seemingly harmless pilfering of the grade school children if not addressed can grow into the illegal theft of the adolescent.

REASONS WHY CHILDREN MIGHT STEAL

1. To get valuable objects which may not be easily obtained otherwise.
2. To retaliate and express anger indirectly.
3. To get objects to substitute for love.
4. To give gifts to gain approval or attention.
5. To achieve power or a sense of accomplishment.
6. To achieve emotional excitement of risk taking.
7. To gain acceptance by peer group.
8. To finance a drug habit.
9. To fill a sense of entitlement "You owe me."

GRAPH #2: Why Children Might Steal

Children with chronic stealing problems are similar to those with chronic lying problems. Children who steal on a regularly basis are likely: (From **Dishonesty: Foster Family System**)

- * *to have rejecting mothers.*
- * *to receive little discipline, often in the form of critical commands.*
- * *to be allowed to wander and are not required to account for their activities.*
- * *to have no curfew or set times for meals.*

Children with stealing problems are likely to have:

- * *poor problem solving skills.*
- * *difficulty empathizing with the feelings of others.*
- * *poor relationships with other children.*



Strategies For Dealing With Stealing

Strive to promote the value of honest behavior in children. Following are several strategies for preventing and dealing with stealing behaviors:

1. **Establish rules that will help children learn good habits** (e.g. ask permission to borrow things, share return things when you are finished using them.) These rules should be consistent and followed by everyone in the home. Talk about the rules often. Acknowledge and praise when children follow these practices.
2. **Supervise your child** at all times when visiting someone's home or going to the store.
3. **Model good behavior.** Always return items to their owner when you are finished using them. Ask permission before using people's things. Give back extra change at the grocery store.
4. Make sure that your child **sees the relationship between his or her behavior and the consequence** that follows. (e.g. When a child steals, talk about why they need to replace it. Talk about how people don't like to be around someone they cannot trust. Talk about consequences with the law.)
5. **Do not encourage your child to steal** by allowing him to go into a store unsupervised or leaving valuables such as purses, money, jewelry or car keys unattended. This is especially important for a child with a pattern of stealing.
6. **Make sure that your child returns all items that are stolen** as soon as possible and have them apologize in person. If the item cannot be return, then your child should make reparations and replace the items. (SEE CONSEQUENCES SECTION)
7. Make certain your child understand **that things that are desired can be earned.** Anything can be earned to avoid stealing or forcefully taking things from others. If children are stealing because they want certain things, help the child learn appropriate ways to earn them.
8. With the preschool child who often takes what he/she wants, **teach them how to ask permission to use items belonging to others** and remind them often to do so. With children of all ages, establish clear rules and reinforce them about respecting possessions. Establish a practice of not borrowing clothes unless you have expressed permission of the owner. Parents should also show respect for the possessions of the children.
9. In addition, children should be **taught clear rules about property outside the home.** They need to learn how to ask to borrow and return other's property both for friends and at school.
10. **Children need regular supervision to decrease the opportunity for stealing** and to help the parent know what is going on with the child. They need to have an established curfew and a mechanism for checking in to let you know their whereabouts. Get to know their friends.

Impulsiveness And Stealing: The Child With Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Some children have problems with impulsiveness, or acting out of desire without thinking about the consequences. This is especially common in children with fetal alcohol syndrome. When a child is exposed to alcohol prenatally, the alcohol can impact different parts of the brain. Due to developmental delays, alcohol affected children may also be acting from the self-centered orientation of a younger child. "I want it, I take it." The idea of ownership, especially with unattended objects, may be difficult for an affected child to grasp. Using only consequences will not be as effective as a proactive approach of spending time with this kind of child to teach him this concept of not taking what is not yours.

From **Fantastic Antone Succeeds: Experience in Educating Children with FAS**
Kleinfeld and Wescott, et.al. University of Alaska Press, 1993

Using Consequences For Stealing

All stealing should be treated seriously and with self-control on the parents' part. You need to be firm but not angry or shaming toward the child. Acceptance and understanding of the child's feelings are important. But when a child steals, he should feel a consequence so that he understands that this behavior is not okay and will not be accepted.

Each time a child steals, you should:

1. *Guide the child to return the object.*
2. *Guide the child to apologize.*
3. *Guide the child to make repairs or repayment.*

If the child does not have money to repay the loss, he/she should be required to "work off" the amount or have it cut from his or her allowance. A consequence should be administered for each stealing event, usually extra work (chores, writing or math practice, etc.) and suspension of privileges, (phone, TV, socializing, etc.) for a reasonable time. Parents should not avoid enforcing consequences because of temper tantrums and excuses of children.

Whenever a child steals from a store, have him talk directly to the storeowner. Talk to the storeowner ahead of time. Sometimes people have a tendency to excuse a child with a simple, "just don't do it again." Tell the storeowner you would like the child to repay the debt so that he learns that stealing is not okay.

Serious Stealing Problems

With serious stealing problems parents should question the circumstances of children's stealing to determine the extent and motive of the child's stealing. For example, you need to determine:

What is stolen? When? Where? Was the child alone or with friends?

What was done with the stolen objects?

If a child is involved with others in a planned systematic stealing of other people's properties, this is a serious sign of delinquency. If possible, determine the child's reason for stealing and

institute remedies if possible. For example, if the child steals to extend his budget, he needs to find an alternative means of acquiring material goods such as a part time job. If a child steals in order to get money for drugs or alcohol, the child needs counseling for substance abuse. The reason for the stealing should never excuse the stealing, but will help the foster parent get at the cause of the behavior.

Dealing Aggressively With The Chronic Stealer

If your child has a chronic stealing problem, you will need to be more firm and aggressive with dealing with the problem. It is helpful to work with a therapist to address these issues. When aggressively dealing with stealing, be clear with children what stealing is. Stealing is defined as “the taking or being in possession of anything that clearly does not belong to you”. Parents, teachers or other adults are the only judges. They may label an act as stealing by observing it, by having it reported to them, or by noticing that something is missing. Keep in mind at all times:

1. *There is no arguing about guilt or innocence.*
2. *It is the child’s job to be sure he is not accused.*
3. *The value of the object is irrelevant.*
4. *Trading and borrowing are not permissible.*

For the aggressive stealer, establish a rule that there is no borrowing of clothes or possessions, period. This seems harsh, but a child needs to learn to respect possessions. Any purchase of clothes, school supplies, or electronics that the child brings home must have a receipt. Otherwise, they are to be returned and consequences applied. Every stealing episode must be labeled and consequences given. Avoid arguing or shaming. Avoid using excessive detective tactics such as searches. Just keep your eyes open and investigate the origins of new property. Consequences for stealing should be restrictions and loss of privileges for the day the stealing occurred. Allow basic privileges only on the following weekend. Special privileges can be earned again on the following day. Give a child a way to earn back privileges through showing honest behavior. We don’t want to target a child as a thief, but unless we act firmly and consistently, a child who is a chronic stealer is heading toward many problems as an adult.

A Reminder

Stealing goes hand in hand with wandering and with not knowing the whereabouts of your child. Check-in times are recommended if stealing is a problem. Be sure to enforce curfews.

Do not tempt your child. Keep items your child has stolen in the past away from the child. For example, avoid leaving your wallet or cigarette packs in view or unwatched or leaving loose change around the house.

Stealing may occur no matter how many possessions your child has, so don’t try to give him material things to make him stop stealing. Your child should, however, have some way of earning his or her own money so that he or she may have a choice of things to buy. Don’t make payments or repairs of items yourself,

but determine a way for the child to earn the required amount. An exception may be when the amount is so high as to be unrealistic for a child to earn. In this case, the adult may need to work with the child to make the payment or repair.

TEST