

Children of various ages steal for different reasons

Your child does her homework on time, helps you clear the table after dinner, and even helps with housework on the weekends. So can it be true that this child was really caught shoplifting?



cris lovington

• prevention center

physical punishment, of the child is unnecessary and can be counterproductive. It can make the child angry

Before you do anything, it helps to know a little about why kids steal and where you can get help. Children steal for many reasons. And kids of different ages — preschoolers, 6-or-7-year-olds and teens — can be tempted to steal for different reasons:

- Very young children sometimes take things they want without knowing or 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 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 shoplifting. Some might believe they can get away with it. As they are given more control over their lives, some teens may become rebellious and act out by stealing.

And there may be more complex reasons why some children 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.

"They might steal if they're mad, or if there's a bad marriage, to try to pull their parents together. And sometimes they steal because they just want it," says Mary C. Gentile, a psychotherapist in Pasadena, Maryland, who works with adolescents and families.

Some kids might steal because they can't afford to pay for what

they need or want. In some cases, kids and teens may steal to get popular name-brand items or to support drug habits. Parents need to find out the root of the behavior and address problems that surface, like drug abuse.

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

"If it's a one-time deal and [the child seems] remorseful or upset by the consequences, then it stops," Gentile says. "If it happens again, then there could be problems."

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 she's already eaten the candy, parents can take the child back to the store and help her apologize and pay for it.

With school-age children, too, it's important to return the item that was stolen. By the first and second grades, children should know stealing is wrong. They may need a lesson in the consequences, however.

Having to return a stolen item can provide the embarrassment that makes for an everlasting lesson on why stealing is wrong. It's important for parents to support their kids and let them know that they understand the whole experience is embarrassing.

Further punishment, particularly

and lead to even worse behavior.

If a preteen comes home with a friend's bracelet in her backpack and it's clear she took it without her friend's permission, the parent should talk to the child about how she would feel if a friend took something of hers. The parent should encourage the daughter to call her friend to apologize and explain what happened and that she'll return it.

When teens steal, Gentile recommends that parents follow through with stricter consequences.

For example, when a teen was caught stealing from a store, she recommended the parent take the child back to the store and meet with the security department to explain and apologize for what happened.

The experience worked. The teen hasn't had any more problems with stealing.

If it's a first-time offense, stores and businesses may accept a teen's apology and won't necessarily press charges. However, there's little sympathy for repeat offenders.

Children of all ages need to know that shoplifting affects how people run their businesses and that it raises prices for other consumers.

They should know that stealing is a crime and can lead to consequences far worse than being grounded, including juvenile detention centers and prison.

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



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