

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives

## Stealing: why it happens and how to handle it

Children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect in their early lives commonly have difficulties with stealing and often this goes hand in hand with lying and other difficulties with honesty

### What you might see

- Things go missing and then magically reappear in the wrong place
- Those things you've kept for sentimental value are the very ones that go
- Your purse often seems to be emptier than you thought it should be
- Your birth children's possessions disappear from their rooms
- A child caught red handed will swear blind "it wasn't me!"; lies and excuses often accompany the stealing
- A child who seems to 'collect' things that do not belong to them, but that they do not appear to like or need

### How it can feel

- Stressful that you can't relax in your own home and have to constantly watch and remember where you put things!
- Overwhelming that it's your responsibility not to put things in temptation's way
- Perplexing - what is it about you that the child seems to think they can't ask?
- Tiring because you are endlessly interrogating the child and feeling suspicious
- Guilty that you end up dealing out strict discipline
- Confusing - you may begin to doubt your own sense of reality
- Annoying - especially if others suggest you might have got it wrong!



### Why do these children steal?

- Lack of early nurturing has delayed their conscience development
- Such developmental delay has also made right and wrong less clear to these children. This means they are much better at pretending to themselves that "it wasn't them what done it"
- The child may feel instinctively that all has been taken without asking from them: family, neighbourhood, their 'reality', their trust, so why not steal from those who may represent all that has gone?
- To control others because their early experiences have taught them it's safest to control everything
- Sometimes the child may enjoy the conflict - stirring up others can give him a break from feeling stirred up himself and can keep you at arm's length if the child feels that he is getting too close to you for comfort
- The child increasingly views possessions as unimportant due to the gradual loss of many of her things as she moves from placement to placement: black bin bags and lost special toys
- If the child has been neglected and had to fend for himself, he may have learnt that survival depends on taking when you can and preferably without being noticed
- The family culture is of theft as a way of life - it's almost a career path
- The child may have been taught to steal to fund a parent's substance misuse
- Feeling empty inside - the urge to 'comfort steal' to fill emotional gaps may take over. "If I have enough stuff may be the void will be filled". This may also fit well with a culture in which identity and worth are connected to quantity and quality of possessions
- This learned behaviour has become a habit

A number of these reasons may apply to the child for whom you are caring or there could be other reasons more specific to them not mentioned here.

### **Some suggestions of what you can do about stealing - pick ones that suit you and your child**

- Avoid confrontation and getting into arguments about 'the truth' - the more fearful or uptight the child gets, the less likely you are to get the truth
- Make it clear to the child that you know the truth already - "my magic eye" - and then give the child time to think about what to say
- Don't ask the child to admit to something that you know they have done
- Initially, just be brief and matter of fact and then let it go. Talk about their 'stealing' later when you are both calm and show the child that you will support them and believe they can be trustworthy
- This could just be a lack of understanding or not remembering the house rules. You may choose therefore to remind them of your rules about taking things without asking
- Skill up others in the house to keep things out of reach and warn people you visit, you can help the child by reducing the number of temptations. Alert school to the issue
- To 'It's not fair. You never believe me ' rather than explain why, say you'd love to be able to and that you're sure they can earn your trust
- Provide calm, logical consequences without irritation and anger e.g. repayment or payment in kind. Doing housework tasks achieves both repayment and life skill training
- If your instincts tell you it's serious, take time to discuss it with the relevant professionals to decide if you need to consider involving the police

### **Some suggestions of what you can do to help the child develop conscience skills**

- Set a great example of honest behaviour - no more bringing home pens from work, hand in to the police the £5 that you found on the pavement
- Always give a clear message that you expect ownership to be respected and that you believe that your child can do this
- Make sure they are aware that you respect their possessions and ensure everyone else in the house does too
- Talk through some of your own dilemmas about whether to take or borrow things without asking. Explicitly teaching the difference between borrowing with permission and "borrowing" permanently
- Take every opportunity to gently teach right and wrong in everyday life but don't lecture



It will take some time for your child to gain this new level of development, to drop old habits or to learn new ways of meeting their needs. Help, encouragement and praise will help this process.

In the meantime it may help you to think about their 'stealing' as their 'difficulties in distinguishing what belongs to them, what to someone else and what is communally owned' or 'just a phase they are growing through'.

You may need to encourage other important adults to see it like this too and to join you in the teaching and encouragement of these new skills!

