

Triple P Tip Sheet

Primary Schoolers

Stealing

Many parents are faced with the problem of money and other items going missing at home. They may also find their child has brought home things that do not belong to them. Many children will experiment with stealing at some time, however most do not develop a persistent pattern of stealing. When children continue to steal it is difficult for their parents to trust them. Stealing can also lead to problems at school and in the community. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your child to be honest and trustworthy and to ask before they take things.

Young children do not always understand what stealing is, or the difference between borrowing something and taking it without permission. By the time children are in primary school they are capable of understanding the idea of ownership and that it is wrong to take something that does not belong to them.

WHY DO CHILDREN STEAL?

Some children steal because they see something they want and cannot wait. They are immediately rewarded with the stolen object as well as feelings of excitement for getting away with stealing. Children may start to steal because their friends steal. They may be encouraged to steal as a dare or to fit in with the group. Stealing may also occur if it is a good way of getting attention from others, especially from friends.

Children are more likely to steal money if it is left around the house. They are also more likely to steal if they spend a lot of time unsupervised and parents do not know what their children are doing.

As stealing is often hard to detect, there are times when children steal and do not get caught. Many children who steal do not admit to stealing. When asked, they may say they borrowed or found the things they have brought home. Parents may not take action to deal with stealing unless they feel they can prove their child has stolen. Even when children are caught, the consequences often happen a long time after the rewards of stealing. If there are no consequences or they are delayed, stealing is likely to continue.

Sometimes children who steal have other problems such as aggression, lying or disobedience. They may not get on well with other children and may have low self-esteem. They may have learning

difficulties and problems coping with school. If you are concerned that your child has difficulties like these, seek professional help.

HOW TO HELP PREVENT STEALING

▼ Know Where Your Child Is

Cut down the amount of time your child spends unsupervised either at home or away from home. Discourage your child from playing with children who seem to be a bad influence. This is not easy, particularly if they go to the same school. Help your child get involved in activities that none of these children do. Encourage your child to bring friends home to play so you can supervise them.

▼ Set a Time for Your Child To Be Home

Tell your child when you expect them to be home from school. Have someone at home to greet your child. Primary school

children should not be left unsupervised. If necessary, arrange after school care.

▼ Keep Track of Your Money

Make sure you know exactly how much money is in the house. It is a good idea to keep your money in a safe place.

▼ Start a Pocket Money System

Let your child earn pocket money by doing chores. Your child can then buy some of the things they want with money they have earned.

▼ Involve Your Child in Other Activities

Encourage your child to develop an interest or hobby. Some children who steal have little to do in their spare time other than watch television. Encourage activities that have adult supervision. This might involve learning a new sport or musical instrument or joining a group such as Guides or Scouts.

HOW TO DISCOURAGE STEALING

▼ Discuss the Problem With Your Child

At a time when everyone is calm, explain to your child that stealing is wrong and against the law. This talk should not happen immediately after your child has stolen something. Be sure your child understands that stealing means taking something that does not belong to them, without asking permission. Tell them you want it to stop at once.

Stealing usually leads to a loss of trust between parents and their children. Briefly and calmly say how stealing affects you and why you think it is a problem — *Kurt, I feel angry and disappointed when you steal. It makes it hard for me to trust you. I feel I have to*



keep checking where everything you have comes from.

▼ Ask Your Child's Opinion

Ask your child why they felt they needed to steal. Many children will not have much to say. Others will make excuses or try to blame someone else. Avoid getting into a *Yes, but...* argument with your child. Simply tell your child that you want them to stop stealing from now on.

▼ Talk About Consequences

Decide ahead of time exactly what to do if you suspect your child has stolen something. The first consequence is to have your child give back what was taken, if they still have it. They may need to return an item to a shop owner or school friend in the company of a parent. When it is not possible to return the stolen item, your child should pay for it if they receive pocket money or do chores to pay it off. If your child returns what was taken, thank them.

Decide on another consequence for stealing. Suitable consequences involve the loss of an activity or privilege, such as an outing with friends, watching television or special games or activities. Tell your child what consequences will apply if you suspect that they have stolen something.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO BE HONEST AND TRUSTWORTHY

▼ Explain the Rules

Make it your child's responsibility to show they are being honest, rather than their responsibility to prove your child has stolen. Establish a short term rule that your child is only allowed to bring home things that belong to them. This means no borrowing or looking after things for friends. If your child is only allowed to bring home their own things, you can assume that a strange item has been stolen and take action. This rule should be followed until there has been no stealing for at least 3 months. Make sure your child understands that they will need to prove they can be trusted.

▼ Give Your Child Opportunities To Be Honest and Trustworthy

Help your child learn to resist the temptation to steal by giving them even

more opportunities to show they are honest and trustworthy. For example, let your child go in to the local shop to buy groceries. Give them more money than the groceries will cost.

Another way to help your child learn to resist the temptation to steal is to use honesty tests. Tell your child that you are going to set some honesty tests but do not tell them when or where they will be placed. Help them plan what they will do if they are tempted to steal. Try leaving a small amount of money where you know your child will see it.

▼ Praise Your Child for Being Honest and Trustworthy

If your child returns correct change to you, or does not take money left around the house, praise them for being honest and trustworthy. You may also like to reward your child with a treat such as choosing a video or having a friend over to play.

HOW TO MANAGE STEALING

▼ Act on Your Suspicions

If you discover money or other items missing or something in your child's possession that cannot be accounted for, act immediately. Do not wait for proof. You may not always be able to prove that your child has stolen.

▼ Tell Your Child the Problem and the Consequence

Tell your child the facts — *I had \$5 in my purse and now it is gone. We are the only ones at home and I haven't been near my purse.* Do not ask for a confession as your child may then lie. See the *Lying* tip sheet in this series, if you suspect your child is telling lies.

Tell your child to give back what was taken, if they still have it. Regardless of whether your child returns the stolen item, tell them the problem — *Alison, you know you shouldn't take money without asking, that is stealing* — and the consequence — *You cannot play computer games today.* Ignore protests and claims of innocence. Do not debate or argue the point with your child. Simply carry out the consequence. This may seem harsh, but it is more of a problem if your child is allowed to get away with stealing. Say something like — *I don't know for sure whether you did it,*

but I strongly suspect that you did. If I'm wrong I'm sorry, but what I've said goes.

Keep to the agreement and where appropriate return the activity or privilege at the agreed time. You may need to use consequences a number of times before your child learns to be honest and trustworthy.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

If stealing has become a persistent problem or is occurring outside of home, be prepared to discuss the problem, and the way you plan to deal with it, with all adults affected by your child's stealing. This may include relatives, teachers and even the local shop owner. These adults can then watch your child more closely. It can take time for children to learn to resist the temptation to steal. You can help by setting up a contract with your child (see example). Seek professional help if stealing continues to be a problem.

KEY STEPS

- Supervise your child and involve them in activities that have adult supervision.
- Let your child earn pocket money for doing chores and encourage them to save.
- Discuss with your child what stealing is and why it is a problem.
- Tell your child they must stop stealing.
- Talk about consequences for stealing.
- Give your child opportunities to show they can be trusted.
- Praise your child for being honest and trustworthy.
- Act immediately if you suspect your child of stealing.
- Tell your child to return what was stolen and apply a consequence for stealing.

IF PROBLEMS PERSIST

Here is another strategy you can use if your child continues to steal.

- Explain to your child that they can earn points by being honest and trustworthy.
- Tell your child that the points can be exchanged for a daily reward or a larger reward at the end of the week.

Contract for Honesty and Trust

I agree to the following conditions for a period of 4 weeks commencing June 3:

1. I will return home each day from school by 4.00pm.
2. I will come directly home from school and not go near the shopping centre on school days.
3. I will not take anything that does not belong to me (steal) from my parents or anyone else. This includes money and other items.

We agree to the following:

1. That one of us should be home each school day by 4.00 pm to greet Brad.
2. We will be available each school day to help Brad with his homework should he want help.
3. We will provide Brad with the rewards should he keep to the terms of this contract.

Rewards

For each day Brad keeps to these conditions, he will be able to earn \$1.00 extra pocket money.

Consequences/Penalties

If Brad breaks conditions 1 or 2 of this agreement, he will be fined 50 cents for each condition broken. If he breaks condition 3, he will be fined the entire amount saved up to that point and will be grounded for three days.

Signatures

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

Parent's name: _____ Date: _____

Parent's name: _____ Date: _____

Decide how long your child must be honest to earn a point, how many points your child must earn to get the reward, and what the reward will be. Tell your child what they can earn if they reach the goal.

- Decide what you will do if you suspect your child has stolen something. The first consequence is that your child must return the stolen item if they still have it. Additional consequences may involve the loss of an activity or privilege as described earlier, or if your child receives pocket money, a consequence may be a fine each time they steal. For children under 10 years of age, you may choose to use time-out as an immediate consequence for stealing (see *Positive Parenting* booklet). Tell

your child what consequences will apply if they steal.

- Set up a written contract (as shown) that you and your child sign. The contract is an agreement that says what your child is

FOR FURTHER HELP See the *Positive Parenting* booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

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expected to do and the rewards and consequences that will follow.

- Make a chart to keep a record of points earned. Stick the chart where it is easy for you and your child to see, such as on the refrigerator.
- Each day your child does not steal, put the points on their chart. Praise your child for being honest and trustworthy.
- If you suspect your child has stolen something, do not give them any points for that time period. Tell your child the problem and the consequence — *Brad, I don't think you paid for this comic. That's stealing. We'll go back to the shop now, so you can return it, and you cannot go to the movies with Henry this weekend.* Carry out the consequence as described earlier.
- At the end of the agreed time, add up the number of points your child has earned. If they have reached the goal, give them the reward.
- If your child does not reach the goal, do not give them the reward. However, do not criticise them or take away points they have earned.
- Check your child's room once or twice a week when they are out. Look for money or things that you have not paid for and your child has not been given the money to buy. This may seem intrusive, but you need to know if your child is being honest.
- When your child is reaching the goal easily, start to phase out the rewards by making them harder to achieve. Gradually increase the number of points your child must earn to get the reward. Then gradually increase the time your child must not steal before earning a point, until you can take down the contract and chart.
- Continue to keep track and use consequences consistently if you suspect your child of stealing.
- Continue to praise your child for being honest and trustworthy.
- To be sure that your child has shown they are honest and trustworthy, there needs to be at least 3 months in which no stealing occurs. You may like to have a special family dinner or day out to celebrate your child's achievement when this goal is achieved.