

Stealing

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Young children stealing from either the home or while in care is basically involving taking an item which belongs to another person or persons. Children at a young age of up to 4 years do not necessarily understand the concept of ownership as learning about possessions is not an easy task. Children are often told that they can't have or use an item because it belongs to Mum or the shopkeeper but at the same time are told to share and "let the other child have the item".

All humans, and that includes young children, have items and possessions that are important and precious. Some of these items are of no monetary value but have personal value which would be impossible to replace.

Sometimes adults allow children to take brochures, leaflets from shops but get cross if a child takes other items such as books or cards. The development of ownership, respect for others' property and understanding right and wrong is a difficult concept for children.

The adult's reaction to a child's behaviour when stealing occurs will play an important role in how a child develops the awareness and understanding of honesty. If an adult reacts negatively the child may begin to hide their actions of stealing.

Reasons why a child steals is a complex issue and continued stealing may indicate that it is a sign of emotional distress. A child losing their home, special valuable objects packed away, or a change of where the child lives can create emotional distress. Not only has the child lost their home but is now living in a different environment and there appears to be nothing around to provide the emotional support that their special possessions provided. Thus they search for something that will allow it all to go back to the way it was before. Taking pretty items belonging to adults or the centre is one way of trying to create a safe environment. Undoubtedly, with a family suffering emotional distress through a traumatic period only increases this uncertainty for the child.

Working with the parent to be consistent in reactions and guiding the child's behaviour, utilising resources of children's books that assist in creating the awareness and developing consistent approaches in how to react will assist the child during this time.

In approaching behavioural issues, it is important to take each child and their behaviours in context and respond according to your knowledge of the child and situation. It is important to be creative in your approach and open to learning from the child and yourself. The ultimate goal is to support the child to learn to be thoughtful and considerate in relation to both themselves and others.

Suggested Strategies

- Establish simple rules in relation to stealing e.g. do not take a toy/item from another person without asking.
- Aim to remain calm when the incident occurs. Use the incident to reinforce teaching about possessions and what the child has taken does not belong to them.
- Provide an opportunity for the child to access their own possessions to take with them when away from the home. For example, take the child to the storage place where the things are and help the child to choose a couple of items that can be taken to the grandparent's house. At the same time show the child that the precious possessions are safe and secure. Depending on the length of time they are in storage the child can change them over on a two weekly or monthly basis.
- Plan activities in which the child can practice co-operating, sharing and helping.
- Lead the child through discussions of feelings and being honest through use of pictures, stories or puppets.
- Provide the child with responsibility of items both at home and in childcare (e.g. being responsible for making sure that each family member has put their personal items away in a safe place at the end of the day or while in care, making sure that all the buckets for the sandpit are packed away together at the end of the day so they are ready for use the next day).
- When reading stories or discussing ownership, honesty, stealing etc ensure that this is done with the whole family/group of children so as not to single out the child. Other children becoming aware of a child who is stealing can easily be ostracised.

References:

- Porter Louise *"Children are people too"* A Parent's guide to young children's Behaviour. Small Poppies SA. 2001
- Sanders M *"Every parent"* A positive approach to children's Behaviour. Addison- Wesley 1992
- Mukherji P. *"Understanding children's Challenging Behaviour"* Nelson Thornes 2001

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