



First Steps

39

Stealing: If I Want It—It's Mine!

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

If I want it, it's mine.

If I give it to you and change my mind later, it's mine.

If I can take it away from you, it's mine.

If I had it a little while ago, it's mine.

If it's mine, it will never belong to anybody else, no matter what.

If we are building something together, all the pieces are mine.

If it looks just like mine, it is mine.



In their book *Parenting with Love and Logic*, Foster Cline, M.D. and Jim Fay say, “Of all the problems that surface with our kids, nothing affects our emotions quite as much as stealing....We want our kids to respect what is theirs, and keep their hands off what isn't. But children do steal things from time to time....Fortunately, as with lying, early stealing—that is, between the ages of four and six—is almost always simply a childhood phase. If handled matter-of-factly, without too much anger, most children quickly outgrow the stealing phase.”

What Do Parents Need to Understand About Stealing?

- Stealing is a common, normal behavior in pre-school-aged children.
- Before age 4, most children cannot understand the idea of things belonging to someone else.
- Before age 4 most children do not understand that they do not have rights to someone else's things.
- Toddlers do not plan to be naughty by taking another child's things.
- Pre-school aged children do not yet understand that taking what belongs to others is wrong.
- The pre-school years are good times for parents to begin teaching their children about ownership and the idea that stealing is wrong.
- By watching and quietly stepping in when necessary, parents can stop children from taking things that do not belong to them.

Why do some children steal?

- Under age 3, children simply do not understand the idea of owning things, and they think anything they want belongs to them. Even the idea of “sharing” is hard for them to grasp at this age. Even so, parents must explain that it is not OK to take things that belong to others, and then gently, but firmly see that the child returns the item.
- They may be looking for attention—in a child’s mind, even attention for misbehaving may be better than no attention at all, and children learn that they get mom’s or dad’s attention when they take their sister’s doll.
- Children between ages 3 – 7 begin to respect things that belong to others. However, this age group will trade things without regard to value if something else is wanted. (For example, a child who wants the piece of candy that his friend has may “trade” his toy truck for it.)
- They copy what their parents do. Parents who take things that do not belong to them (e.g., supplies from the office to use at home) may be teaching their children that in some cases, stealing is OK.
- If your child sees you pick up a free paper or flyer and put it in your purse at the grocery store, he may think it is OK for him to put something he wants at the store in his pocket. You may need to explain why it’s OK to take the free paper, but it’s not OK to take the candy bar or toy.



What can parents do to help children learn that stealing is wrong?

- Model correct behavior—always! Do not take things that do not belong to you—ever!
- Make it clear that stealing is not OK.
- Do not over-react. Remain calm and remember that this is a phase most children go through; they will outgrow it with loving guidance from their parents.
- Deal with the issue immediately. The longer this misbehavior goes on, the harder it will be to correct it later on.
- Children of 2-3 years of age can begin to learn that taking things from other children is not right, and that they will have to return the items.
- Label and correct the behavior. Don’t call stealing “borrowing”—it is not borrowing. Then have the child return the items, or pay for the items (if appropriate), and apologize for the misbehavior (if age-appropriate).
- Apply a suitable consequence. Parents must decide what the punishment will be for stealing, and apply it every time stealing occurs. With children under 4, that might mean explaining in a gentle, but firm way why the behavior was wrong and removing the child from the play area. With older children it may mean doing extra chores at home to earn money to pay for an item or the loss of some wanted activity for a set time (e.g., no TV for 2 nights).



For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.