

STEALING

My child is stealing money from me, how can I handle the situation?

Children start to develop autonomy and a sense of identity from age eight and throughout their teenage years. During these years they start to push and test boundaries in their homes. This, in some instances, might also include stealing money.

Make sure it's a teachable moment

Parents can either use it as a teachable moment in the child's life or they can handle it in such a way that the child develops more behavioural problems. This could lead to the child stealing from other pupils at school, or even from people in the local community.

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How NOT to handle the child's stealing:

Parents panic, they start locking their bedrooms and putting their bank cards under lock and key. They sometimes beat their children and label them as thieves. They develop resentment and mistrust towards their children.

However, this is counter-productive because when a child feels labelled as a thief or useless, they start behaving like a thief. They steal more and more. They start getting into trouble with authorities in school, and with the community.

They become recognised as a thief and trouble maker and they enjoy the power and status that this brings. Their peers idolise and fear them because of their reputation. The children get attention and recognition from their parents, community and school for this behaviour. Therefore they are rewarded for it by the very adults who are trying to discourage it.

How to appropriately handle this behaviour:

First parents need to try and identify the **reason** for this behaviour - like any other behavioural problem it will have an underlying cause. The child might start stealing because they aren't being recognised in the home, or because of peer pressure - needing to buy things and keep up with their friends.

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Parents need to talk to their children about this and make them aware that taking something that does not belong to them is not acceptable. They also have to communicate trust in their children.

This can be a **teachable time** for parents and children to learn about money, its value, savings, expenses in the home etc.

Be open and honest about your financial situation

During therapy, some children tell me that if they ask for money, their parents always say there's no money, whereas they can see money in the house. So children feel that either their parents are lying to them, or their needs or wants are not that important.

Involve the kids in the family finances

Parents can involve their children more in household money issue, however be sensitive and age-appropriate. Involve children in drawing up grocery lists, adding household expenses, let everyone in the house know that the money in the house is for monthly expenses such as everyday bread and milk, or for taking to school for lunch.

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Put small amounts of money out in the open in the house - where everyone knows it's designated for a certain purpose. Don't use it as bait, or a trap for the child because it shows that you mistrust the child. It will be a learning curve for both you and the child to learn about trust.

Teach the child the value of what they stole

If the child steals it, then sit down with them and calculate the amount of money they stole. Deduct this amount from any money they would usually get.

For example, if the child stole R5 out of the family petty cash which goes towards their lunch money, then tell them that they have already had their lunch money portion, and so they will not be getting any for school the next day.

Consistency is the key

It is important to follow up with this and be consistent. If you are not consistent, the child will not suffer the consequences of his/her behaviour and they will not learn anything.

If the child has been stealing from the community or school, make sure that the same method of deducting from him or her to pay back applies. If the child steals, and you pay back money on their behalf, the behaviour is maintained and the child does not learn any consequences from his or her behaviour.

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Make sure the consequences of certain behaviours are very clear from the start

Children must know that the consequences for certain behaviours will be the same all the time, and the punishment will be consistent from both parents.

Couples need to sit down and discuss consequences for behaviour and apply them equally. Parents should try and avoid arguing about consequences in front of the children.

If the child sees that the parents aren't on the same page, the child may try to manipulate the situation for their benefit.