

[“Anything We Can’t Find, He Stole!” The “Why” and “What to Do” about Stealing Part 1 \(of 4\)](#)

The title of this blog is actually a statement made by a typical child. His complete comment was, “Anything we can’t find he stole! Why are you asking me where your ring is? He stole it! Go ask him!” This resident child lives in a family comprised of four birth children, ages 12-18, and an adopted son. The adopted young man arrived in the family, at age 11, with a history of abuse and neglect as well as multiple-foster care placements. However, it isn’t uncommon to adopt a very young child—international or domestic—only to have the child grow into stealing—a behavior that can continue long-term.

Stealing wreaks havoc in adoptive families! Parents notice money missing, food wrappers stuffed under a couch, pantry items in a state of disarray or cell phones gone from the charger! Pens, pencils, string, paper and so on vanish! The teacher calls about books missing from a book fair, disappearing classroom supplies, or snacks being taken from classmates’ lunches! The typical siblings, once again, can’t find their iPods, DS, DS games, jewelry, makeup, favorite sweater, etc. The entire family is negatively affected by stealing as well as the adoptee’s future is jeopardized.

Parents are informed by friends, family members, and professionals that, “all kids steal.” While there is truth to this statement, most children learn that stealing is wrong—thievery usually ceases after a few thefts coupled with appropriate consequences. Yet, in the case of the adoptee that has experienced trauma, pilfering continues—day after day, month after month and year after year!

The purpose of this blog is to answer two questions:

- *Why do traumatized children steal?* — today and Thursday’s post

I am making the “why” a two-part blog as stealing has an array of roots. I want you to have time to really think about “why” your child may be stealing. Recognizing the reasons that robbing occurs, lends to selecting the best solutions to solve the theft problem.

- *What can be done to help a child stop stealing?* — Tuesday, November 23 and Thursday (Thanksgiving Day)

Again, a two-part post is in order because I want to offer you sufficient solutions to restore honesty and trust to your household. If the first strategy you select doesn’t work, you’ll have many more to select from.

Why Do Traumatized Children Steal?

There are a number of root causes that lead a child with a history of neglect, abuse and abandonment to steal:

- “I communicate through behavior.”
- “Trauma interrupted my development.”
- “I want what my siblings and peers have.”
- “I think things make me feel better.”
- “I think things make me feel better.”
- “Stealing kept me alive.”

- “My birth parents stole.”
- “I want other kids to like me”
- “I am having drug or alcohol problems.”

Let’s examine the first three bullet points— underlying causes of thieving—today and the remainder on Thursday.

“I communicate through behavior.” We must come to understand that traumatized children communicate their emotions via their negative behaviors. There are many reasons for this. For example, the child who has been beaten, raped, abandoned, institutionalized, separated from siblings and/or moved from foster home to foster home has internalized intense feelings as a result of these traumas. Inside, she feels rage, sorrow, hopelessness, helplessness, profound sadness, frustration, loneliness and lost. Who wouldn’t? Yet, he has little opportunity to talk about these experiences and resolve the emotions. As adults, we prefer to wait for the child to tell us what happened to him. Or, we are waiting until she is “old” enough to process the trauma. Or, we expect that children will simply “get over it.” Somehow, on their own, they will process being physically abused or neglected, or why their birth parents’ chose substance abuse as a way of life. We seriously need to re-think all of these adult misperceptions. In reality, many traumas occur when children are young. They have very little or no language development. So, they don’t have the words to express what has happened to them. Instead they attempt to show us with their behaviors. Their hope is that we will recognize their messages and provide the example—role-model—to talk about feelings and profoundly overwhelming experiences.

Applying the above to stealing, the stealing is a way to communicate, “I feel stolen.” If we stop and think about this a moment, this makes some sense. Many children are going about their daily routine in an orphanage when, a family arrives—total strangers. In very short order, the child leaves the institutional setting, boards a plane and lands in a new country! Who wouldn’t feel stolen? American children are abruptly removed from their birth parents in a similar manner. Social workers pull in and gather the children. A few hours later, the children are dropped off at a foster home. Little explanation is provided about such moves in either domestic or international adoption.

“Trauma interrupted my development.” All human development occurs by a series of stages. A baby learns to roll over, sit up, crawl, pull to a stand, walk, run, jump and skip in an order.

Moral development is also a series of stages. In the first year of life, sequencing is absorbed by the brain. Sequencing is followed by the development of cause-and-effect thinking a about 18-months of age. Then, conscience development is initiated. This is a process which involves acquiring and assimilating the rules about what people should do in their interactions with other people. This process consists of three stages. In *pre-conventional reasoning*, the stage of pre-schoolers, moral thinking is based on rewards and self-interest. Children obey when they want to and when they think it is in their best interest to obey. What is right is what feels good and what is rewarding. *Conventional reasoning*, the moral development of grade school age children, sees children adopting their parents’ moral standards, seeking to be thought of by their parents as a “good girl or boy.” *Post-conventional reasoning* is the highest stage at which the person recognizes alternative moral courses, explores the options and then decides on a personal moral code (Santrock, 1995).

It is common when children enter foster care or arrive home from a foreign orphanage that parents must obtain physical and/or occupational therapy to enhance the child’s ability to get

walking or hold a fork, knife or spoon. We all seem to accept these types of delays which result from the neglect of the child's pre-adoptive environment.

Yet, when it comes to moral development, we again believe this will all fall into place with a "good home" and "enough love." These are misperceptions that must be shed as well. Actually, adoptive parents may find that the adopted child displays pre-conventional reasoning well into adolescence or beyond. Helping cause-and-effect thinking fall into place and facilitating a healthy respect for rules and authority can take years!

In the meantime, the child who is chronologically one age, and morally a much "younger" child steals. She does not possess the development to move to conventional reasoning in which she values parental trust, or being viewed as a "good" girl by parents, teachers, coaches, the Girl Scout leader, etc.

"I want what my siblings and peers have." Certainly, we all remember wanting to have the possessions and clothing that all the kids—especially the "cool" kids—had when we were in junior high and high school. Well, troubled kids are no different in this respect. But, because of their behaviors and developmental delays, they haven't "earned" trust, or exhibited the maturity to handle the privileges associated with their age. Angry about being denied amenities or desperate to "fit in", they take the cell phone or latest CD. They sneak out of the house to go to the mall or movie. As stated above, their lack of cause-and-effect thinking renders them unable to understand that such actions only serve to compound their inability to obtain desired freedoms and possessions.