

## “Anything We Can’t Find, He Stole!”: The “Why” and “What” to do about Stealing – Part 3 (of 4)

Last week, we looked at a number of the reasons that cause children with a history of abuse, neglect, institutionalization and abandonment to steal.

We also discussed that these children don’t simply “grow out” of this behavior. Stealing can go on for years! This behavior generates conflicts among all members of the adoptive family. The emotional climate of a once happy and peaceful family, changes to an environment of anger and suspicion. Angst sets in as parents ask, “What will happen to our daughter if she doesn’t stop stealing?” “How we can instill morals and values in our other children?” The typical children wonder, “Why can’t my parents make him stop stealing?” and they comment with resentment, “I would never get away with that!”

### A Menu of Solutions

Today and Thursday we’ll look at solutions to rid your home of such thievery. I’ll offer a menu of ideas to move your troubled child toward honesty and to restore a sense of calm and organization to your home. Regarding solutions, we must always keep in mind that making behavioral changes takes time. If you think about trying to diet or add regular exercise to your daily routine this point becomes obvious. Changing stealing will be a similar process for both parents and the adopted child—there will be steps forward, then regression and then eventually permanent changes.

#### *The Menu of Solutions...*

Our menu selections correspond with the underlying factors causing stealing as identified in Part 1 and Part 2 of this blog.

*“I communicate through behavior”* was one factor described in part 1 as perpetuating stealing. In fact, I have worked with many children who think they were stolen. Let’s use Alice as an example:

*Alice is age 9. She was adopted when age 4. One evening, at age 1½, social workers arrived at her birth home and removed her. Her birthmother did not participate in reunification efforts and so she never saw her birthmother again. Her perception of her removal is that she was “stolen.” This is certainly understandable. What else would a toddler think when women come into your home, take you, and then give you to another family? Alice has stolen on a regular basis since coming to reside with her adoptive family. Jewelry, video games, pens and pencils disappear routinely despite consequences much to Alice’s dissatisfaction. The only way Alice feels able to demonstrate her confusion, anger and sadness for the loss of her birthmother is to reenact the event of stealing.*

In order to assist Alice, we first created a narrative, a “story”, to help her correct her irrational perceptions. *The narrative is truthful and factual.* Alice’s “story” contains statements like,

*“You lived with your birth mother, Tara, in an apartment building. A neighbor heard you crying for a long time. The neighbor also realized that she hadn’t seen Tara for several days. Concerned, she called the police. They came and found you alone. Your clothes were dirty and you were hungry. The police called the social workers. They came and took you to Mom and Dad’s house. First, Mom and Dad were your “foster parents.” Foster parents take care of you*

*until you return to your birth family or until you get adopted. In your case, Tara, decided she couldn't be a Mom. So, Mom and Dad became your adoptive family—they will be your family until you are all grown up! You will live with them when you are 10, 11, 12 and so on. Even when you are an adult with a family of your own, Mom and Dad will still be your parents.”*

This narrative is part of Alice's life book. She made drawings to go along with her story. After many repetitions/reviews of the lifebook, Alice's stealing ceased. She finally realized that she wasn't stolen. She was able to learn to verbalize her feelings of anger and sadness for Tara's actions. She no longer needed to use a behavior to let her Mom and Dad know what she thought and how she felt. She learned that Mom and Dad did not keep her from Tara. There was no reason to be angry with Mom and Dad.

The narrative can also be utilized to cease *“My birth parents stole”* as well. The “story” can have as its goal a *past-present connection* to negative behavior. Betty, age 12, stole chronically. She was adopted at age 2 after both birth parents were incarcerated for robbing and then selling the stolen goods. Throughout the process of making her narrative, it was calmly presented, “You have the choice to act like Mom and Dad or your birth parents. Which choice seems better?” Again, with repetition, Betty began to take on the morals and values of her family. She recognized that Mom and dad had the better life.

The narrative, especially as part of a life book, is a powerful tool in healing the traumatized child. If you would like to help your child understand his past, *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child* by Beth O'Malley is a wonderful resource. In my book, *Brothers and Sisters in Adoption*, I describe the narrative in detail and offer two sample narratives—see chapter 9.

Some may be uncomfortable sharing painful information with a traumatized child. It can be difficult. So, you may want to seek professional help. A therapist that is both adoption-competent and trauma-informed is often needed to do this work appropriately—with understanding of the unique needs of adopted families. [The Association for Treatment & Training in the Attachment of Children \(ATTACH\)](#) offers a state by state listing of just such mental health professionals. Even if this means a drive, the end result will be worth the distance.

*“I am having drug and alcohol problems.”* It is heartbreaking to think that your child may be experimenting with or addicted to drugs. Unfortunately, as Part 1 pointed out, children that have experienced abuse are 5 times more likely to go down this path. As parents, early education is one key. Starting young, ages 4 and 5 or the day your older adoptee is placed with you, leave articles and pamphlets in plain sight. Talk to your all of your kids! Seek out community or church related deterrent programs. Monitor their Internet activities and block whatever is necessary. Invite their friends over regularly. In essence, know “who is” and “what is going on” in your child's life to the best of your ability.

Also, educate yourself to the [signs and symptoms of drug and alcohol use and abuse](#). Early detection means early intervention! Seek professional help quickly.

Again, the narrative with its ability to connect the past and the present is another way to help your child think about whether or not he wants to go down the same road as his birth parents.

*“Trauma interrupted my development”* can again be gleaned using Alice as an example. Alice lacks basic cause and effect thinking. She repeats the same behavior over and over. She does not learn from her mistakes or from consequences. Adoptive parents will often find that

traditional parenting techniques are rendered ineffective by the child like Alice. Time-out, removal of privileges, grounding, reward systems, etc. require that the child have cause-and-effect thinking in order to be effective. As explained in Part 1, cause-and-effect thinking is necessary for children to achieve moral development. Thus, parents need tools that facilitate development. That is, parenting strategies must build cause-and-effect thinking and lead to internalization of the moral system of the family.

Natural and logical consequences will solve many behavioral problems while simultaneously moving arrested development forward. Parents want to read [Parenting with Love and Logic](#) by Cline and Faye (also available as DVD or CD). Once acquiring the knack of implementing natural and logical consequences, parents will find that parenting becomes more enjoyable again! Here are some natural and logical consequences for stealing:

- The thief may pay for the item stolen. Payment can be money or chores. If chores are problematic, the next time you are in the store you can be sad for the child as you say, "Well, I'd like to buy you that shirt. However, I'm putting that money toward the CD player you took from your sister." Once home, hand the child who has stolen the CD player the money and have him give it to his sister. He needs to "see" the exchange of money.
- The next time you are out to dinner, order the child with a stealing problem a less expensive menu item or a water instead of a pop. Calmly state, we will be putting that \$1.50 in a "missing" fund. That way, when something is missing, we'll have the money to replace it." Once home, write a \$1.50 on a slip of paper and place it in a jar (paper likely won't disappear from the jar as would actual money!). Traumatized children need to "see" and "hear" information.
- The child with "sticky fingers" needs to return the stolen item—to the family member, store, teacher, etc. This includes making an apology which has two parts. The "I am sorry" and then, "How can I make this up to you?" Keep the latter part simple for your own sake. Yet, do carry it out. This is "restitution" and it is a critical component of achieving moral development. The stealing child must learn to repair relationships when he has violated another or hurt their feelings.
- The car may not need to move. A parent who has invested time in locating their cell phone may just be too tired to drive to the mall or soccer practice. If you feel guilty about the impact on teammates, think again. Stealing can lead to court intervention in the adolescent years.

Once you have carried out the natural and logical consequence, move on! Don't say, "See, how do you like it?" "How does that feel?" This is anger talking and anger renders the natural and logical consequence ineffective.

Also, keep in mind, it takes nature about 18 months to create cause-and-effect thinking in a human being. Likely, you will need to implement natural and logical consequences at least this long to accomplish the same. Learning and utilizing this parenting tool will be for the long-term.

Lastly, under this topic of "trauma interrupted my development", please know that grief delays development. So, combining the narrative *and* natural and logical consequences is the Batman and Robin or the "dynamic duo" in healing your traumatized adopted child.

The narrative provides the rationale to correct faulty thinking, and to facilitate grief. Once the grief flows, the skills instilled with the Love and Logic will take hold and the child will sail ahead with gains in cognitive, social and emotional development!