

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

Welcome to Part 4—our final post on “why” traumatized children steal and “what you can do” to help move your adopted child to honesty.

As part 3 pointed out, solutions aren’t always immediate. That is, ceasing stealing is more like carrying out a New Year’s resolution. You get off to a good start. You wane. You start over. After waning and starting over numerous times, you finally carry out the vow to eat right, exercise, visit friends more regularly, keep your [facebook](#) up to date, etc.!

So, expect that implementing new parenting tools will take time—time for you to learn and implement, and time to see the end result!

*“I want what my siblings and peers have.”* I think this is one of the most difficult areas in adoptive parenting. Privileges are typically doled out in accordance with the child’s age. However, as we discussed in Part 1 and 3, adopted children with a history of trauma, are immature. So, often, they don’t have the level of responsibility for the privileges they see others their age getting and using.

Many battles center around, iPods, cell phones, going to school dances—especially formal events—and so on. Let’s provide an example.

*Brady, is now 14. He was adopted 5 years ago. Over time, he has stolen from every member of the family! Most recently, he has taken to stealing his Mom’s and his sister’s, Pam (age 14) cell phone. It disappears from their purses and the chargers. He feels, as the older brother, that he is entitled to a phone. Mom, Dad and Brady have had frequent, heated battles over the phone. They prefer Brady “earn” his phone. While this is reasonable parental thinking, it is unlikely this will happen. Brady has never worked for rewards. It is improbable he will ever actually earn a phone.*

This family must make a decision. They could continue the conflicts or they can solve the problem in a manner that is not as palatable, yet in a way that would restore peace to the home. Frequently, parents need to weigh issues in this manner—is the phone worth the battle?

In this case (and in many others I have worked), parents opted to purchase an inexpensive, pre-paid phone. With the capacity to review the call history and monitor how much “talking” time can be utilized, this often solves the problem. Actually, Brady, like many other adoptees, I have worked with, just wanted a phone so he could “look like” all the other kids. He had few friends and so, had few calls to make. But, having a phone made him feel more “normal.”

Yes, I am suggesting that when safety issues don’t dominate, you can “give in” in order to “win.” You “win” peace to your home. *I am not suggesting we accommodate the every wish of any child. But, I am suggesting that, at times, the battle over an electronic device just isn’t worth the price to the entire family!*

Speaking of price, eBay makes it easy to purchase iPods, Gameboys and just about anything else for much less than the cost of new. Nicely gift wrapped, the item is accepted. Purchasing for less can be the solution for the child who “loses” or “breaks” everything she is given. Refer back to Part 3, “I communicate through my behavior.” I, too, would feel lost if I was abruptly moved to America from a foreign country, or moved through a series of foster homes. I, too,

would feel broken if my body was beaten or used for sexual purposes. To repeat—behavior is a way that children who have experienced trauma let us know the past issues that remain painful and confusing.

Compromising is also a way to avoid the “battle.” When Katie, age 16, wanted to go to the prom, her parents were concerned. Katie, adopted at age 3, was very much like an 8-year-old. Her Mom and Dad worried that Katie could get involved with drugs or be sexual in such a situation. Their “compromise” was to allow Katie the privilege *and* to be there as chaperons. In this manner, Katie could safely experience this “normal” 16-year-old event.

Notice, I use the word “normal” quite a bit. Traumatized children can’t learn to “act their age” unless they see “their age in action.” Overall, I believe parents are the primary source of development for any child. However, all children also need to have enough “normal” peer interaction to “see” what it is they should be striving to attain.

*“I have no boundaries.”*

“Mom, he’s been in my bedroom again!” “Dad, he’s in the bathroom with the door open!” Understanding the right to personal privacy of self and others is a long time coming for the child used to the group living of the orphanage or the child who resided in an abusive birth family.

While I am certainly not a strong proponent of families living with locks, there are homes in which lock boxes solve many issues when one or more children have “sticky fingers.”

*Donna and Bob parent 9 adopted children. Two pilfer on a regular basis. The arguments over where a favorite necklace, sweater, book, pair of shoes and so on were daily—this situation was time consuming and overwhelming! Each child was provided a lock box and given appropriate instructions—place anything truly valuable to you in your lock box. From that point on, Donna and Bob could simply reply, “Oh, it must not have been in your lock box.” Soon, the fights diminished significantly! The children learned that Mom and Dad were no longer going to engage in this problem. Mom and Dad had put the problem on the children to handle.*

*Shifting the responsibility for the problem onto those with the problem is a wonderful parenting tool. As parents, you don’t have to take on every battle. Let the kids learn to generate their own solutions or use the tools you have already given them.*

*Matt and Margo handled the stealing among their 6 children differently. The 4 children who were not thieves were given a list of the missing items. Next to each item was a dollar amount. This was the amount paid to the child who found the item. This made the stealing problem into a fun “scavenger hunt.”*

*We must realize that emotional distance is safe. That is, parental and sibling anger feel safe to the child who has had one failed relationship after another. Really, does anyone like to be “dumped” by a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife? The child with a history of [complex trauma](#) has been dumped time and time again. Anger, to this son or daughter, creates distance in familial relationships. Anger inhibits attachment. Thus, the traumatized child thinks, “If I don’t get to close, it won’t hurt so much when you dump me.” Stealing almost always guarantees an argument. So, stealing is a sure fire way to protect an already broken heart. The scavenger hunt was a change in the emotional response of the parents, brothers and sisters to the pilfering children. Rather than a conflict, the family played a game! A calm or fun response increases the*

level of parent-child attachment. And, attachment, in turn, is the context in which all development occurs. Enhanced attachment facilitates the developmental growth necessary for the child to pass from the robbing phase to the honesty stage!

Go ahead, have some fun with difficult behaviors and see what happens!

*“Stealing kept me alive.”*

Stealing, under this category, often involves food. Oh my, the food issues abound in adoption! Undereating, overeating, eating slow, bingeing, being picky and hoarding! Hoarding is usually a sign of food deprivation early in life. These kids are just not going to be without food again! Many kids are up in the middle of the night raiding the refrigerator. Others' bedrooms are littered with wrappers, empty pop cans, empty containers, half-eaten sandwiches and more! I have worked cases where the odor of rotting food permeates the home! What is a parent to do?

I find the most effective intervention is again to “join in” and have some fun with this behavior.

*Chris and Tara adopted Danny at age 18-months. He arrived from a foreign orphanage in which he received less than he needed to eat. He continues to hoard food today at age 9! Tara and Danny have tired everything to cease this behavior! Finally, they tried “joining in.” They filled 50 or so baggies with snacks—five M & M’s in one bag, five goldfish crackers in another, five cheerios in a bag, etc. The bags would be placed in a basket and Chris could help himself to snacks anytime he feels he needs a snack (Keck & Kupecky, 2002). Chris “sees” a lot of food, but each bag actually holds little, and many of the bags have been filled with nutritious items. Yes, Chris may eat many bags over the first few weeks—perhaps as long as 10 to 12 weeks—as will the other children in the home. However, a few weeks later all the kids, including Chris, will taper off. Chris will realize there is always food in the home. The other kids will have learned their parents were right—too many snacks ruin dinner!*

As another and different example,

*Lisa, age 11, was adopted from the foster care system age 3. She was removed from her birthparents as a result of severe neglect. She has always “collected” household items. As a pre-schooler, this included shoe boxes, little pieces of fabric and bottle caps. Once she entered kindergarten, pencils became her object of choice. She would arrive home with 5, 6 or more pencils. Fellow students were always looking for their pencils! This has continued through each grade. Her fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Baily, a wise woman, purchased an array of pencils after a consultation with Lisa’s mom. Each day, she gave Lisa several pencils throughout the day. The pencils were different colors, some were fat, some were skinny, some had animal shaped erasers and some had writing on them like, “great job.” Lisa loved these pencils! She looked forward to getting to school to see what pencils she would receive from Mrs. Baily. This very economical solution ceased the disappearance of class mates’ pencils. After several months, Lisa, on her own, said, “No thanks, Mrs. Baily. I think I have enough pencils now.”*

You can “join in” with lots of behaviors! Doesn’t this seem more fun than arguing and doling out consequences? The whole family benefits when the home climate is saturated with giggles and fun!