

Kids Stealing from Parents: What You Need to Know

By [Carole Banks, LCSW](#)



Has your child been caught stealing from you or someone else? Have you found them using your credit card for online gaming, taking money from your wallet without asking, or even taking big-ticket items from your house?

The anger, disappointment, and lack of trust you feel can be destructive to your relationship. Empowering Parents coach Carole Banks has some advice.

Stealing is not about you and your parenting—it's about your child and the inappropriate ways they're choosing to solve their problems at the moment.

If your child has been caught stealing, you might have wondered, “Why would my child do this after everything we’ve taught them?” Many parents question their own abilities and wonder where they’ve gone wrong with their child when theft is involved.

And while it’s disappointing and frustrating for parents when their child steals, I firmly believe that in most cases, it’s a behaviour that can be changed.

Younger Kids: Take it Easy

There is a big difference between children under the age of 6 taking something compared to older kids who steal. Really young kids don’t have a sense of right and wrong about this issue yet. Their brains haven’t developed enough to think outside of themselves and about others.

If your younger child has been taking things, focus on teaching them the skills of sharing. Teach them to ask for what they would like to have. And teach them to take turns.

When your child gets to be a little older, you need to coach them to say, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have taken that without asking.” But you don’t want to make them feel like they’re a bad person. And don’t label it as stealing. Instead, make it clear that taking something without asking is wrong.

Older Kids: Make Sure Crime Doesn’t Pay

If your child is nine or older and they’re taking things from you or others, you should treat the problem more seriously. As James Lehman says, “Understand that your child is using faulty thinking as a way to solve their problem.”

The “problem” might be that your ten-year-old wants a new video game but doesn’t have any money. They “solve” it by taking money from your wallet without asking. They’re probably thinking, “I need this money. Mom’s not even going to notice.”

When you catch your child using this faulty thinking, you can say:

“Just because you want something doesn’t mean it’s okay to take it without asking.”

And then ask:

“What should you do next time?”

It’s important that you don’t allow your child to keep what they took. They should *never* benefit in any way from taking something from someone else. You don’t ever want stealing to pay off.

Make Amends

Many parents will call parent coaching when their kids have taken something from a store. They’re worried their child will be prosecuted if they take the shoplifted item back. They decide to give the child a consequence, such as no T.V., but they allow the child to keep the stolen item.

It’s best to require your child to take the item back to the store. I understand this can be a complicated decision, depending on the age of your child and where you live. This has to be a choice you make after weighing all possible outcomes.

If you decide against having your child take it back, make sure they don’t get off scot-free. Give them consequences at home—and do not let them keep the item. You ultimately want your child to learn that when you harm someone, even if it’s the owner of a store, you should make amends directly to that person. That is why the best lesson is for your child to take the item back.

Related content: [Why is My Child Stealing and What Can I Do? Advice for Parents on Kids, Stealing and Shoplifting](#)

When Your Child Uses Your Credit Card

I’ve talked with many parents whose kids have used their credit card to buy something online. Often, they’ve used it for gaming. Even if the money is gone and cannot be retrieved, don’t let your child off the hook. They can make amends by doing something extra around the house to work it off. For example, they can clean out the basement, the garage, or do yard work.

The bottom line is that you want to try to teach your child to make amends to the person they’ve wronged. In this case, that person is you. I also recommend that you log on to your credit card account frequently—daily if necessary—to monitor your card’s activity.

When Your Child Takes Big-Ticket Items: Are Drugs Involved?

If your child is taking large amounts of money or big-ticket items from your home, I think you need to question why. If you think drugs might be involved, there are probably other signs that are telling you that your child has a problem, like changes in mood or personality. You should definitely look into the possibility that they’re taking drugs and rule it out.

If you know your child has a problem, but you haven’t been able to get them off drugs or into treatment, then consider reporting their thefts to the police to get them into the juvenile justice system. Many states have drug courts, where kids do not have to serve sentences in a juvenile detention center as long as

they're in treatment and clean. If you suspect drugs, reporting repetitive theft to the police can be a good course of action.

Here's the truth: a child who is never made to be accountable will never learn from their mistakes. In your own home, have your kids make amends as directly to you or the injured party. This drives home the meaning of what they've actually done. It lets them know that their actions have caused harm to someone.

When Stealing Continues

If your child can't stop stealing, you need to help level the playing field for them by finding out what's causing this to happen over and over. You also might want to secure items in your home and keep your wallet in a safe place at all times until your child can learn how to solve their problems more appropriately.

I want to stress that even if you're worried about your child's character, don't let them think that you feel they're a bad, horrible person. Rather, you need to convey the opposite. They need to make amends and do the right thing because that is what good people do. You want to say things like:

"I know it's hard, but I believe you can do it."

When you change your opinion of your child as a person and start thinking that they're "bad" or that there's something wrong with their character, there is great potential to harm the relationship. Your child will sense that you have a poor opinion of them and could start to lose hope in their ability to ever change.

If your child continues to take things from you, you will need to firmly address their faulty thinking. There may be an emotional need or impulsivity that drives their behavior.

There are also many people who call the Support Line with adopted kids who steal from their families. Not all adopted kids steal, of course, but sometimes kids with traumatic backgrounds may have trouble trusting other people to meet their needs, so they take food and other items and hoard them.

When Your Child Denies the Theft

I often tell parents that if you know for sure that your child has stolen something, act with that knowledge. Just say:

"I think that you used my credit card because you wanted to download some songs from iTunes. And I'm going to ask you to make amends for that."

If you don't know for certain and your child denies the theft, then I don't think you can give them a consequence. You don't want to accuse your child of something that they haven't done because it can end up really backfiring on you. They may act out just because you believe they're capable of it. Basically, unless you catch your child red-handed, I wouldn't punish them.

I understand that parents feel hurt and betrayed after their child has stolen something. But try not to take the fact that they stole personally. Stealing is not about you and your parenting. Rather, it's about your child and the inappropriate ways they're choosing to solve their problems at the moment.

About [Carole Banks, LCSW](#)

Carole Banks, LCSW holds a Masters Degree in Clinical Social Work from the University of New England. Carole has worked as a family and individual therapist for over 16 years, and is a former [online parent coach](#) for Empowering Parents. She is also the mother of three grown children and grandmother of six.