

# The Child Who Steals: The Pediatrician as Parent Counsellor

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**E**VERY pediatrician will recognize the scene of an emotional mother complaining that her son is stealing and turning to the doctor with the plea, "Do something." Since stealing is usually a symptom of a significant emotional conflict between the child and his parents, the pediatrician can best help the parents and child by first understanding something of the emotional interaction of the family members. Once its dynamic and emotional basis is understood, the appropriate intervention is usually quite clear.

The child is generally responding to what he interprets as rejection from his parents, ranging from his sensing of the hostility beneath overprotection up to quasi-open rejection. The child responds by attempting to "hurt" or embarrass his parents or by trying to prove to himself he is adequate and worthy of friendship. Occasionally, one encounters other dynamics such as the parents' subtle inciting of the stealing for their own neurotic gratification.

An adequate evaluation can usually be made in 15 to 20 minutes of interviewing if the pediatrician directs his attention to five major areas: The emotional response by the parents to the stealing, what the child does with the stolen items, what prompted the theft at the particular time it occurred, what the parents have done about the stealing, and the characteristic modes family members use in expressing either hostility or affection. As the parent spontaneously relates the history, much of the basic background will emerge.

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As stealing is more common among boys than girls and mothers most often bring their children to the pediatrician's office, these sex roles will be assumed in the discussion.

## Emotional Response of Parents

The emotion or feeling the mother demonstrates while talking about the child and his stealing and her discovery of it should be carefully noted, since this is the same emotion her son is aware of and responding to. The mother's emotional responses are best demonstrated by encouraging her to give a full description of the stealing. While the normal emotional reaction would be one of concern and disappointment, the mother may seem amused or perhaps even excited by her son's stealing. She may show this reaction by such statements as, "He took it right from under their noses!" The boy will detect this emotion when the mother confronts him with a statement such as, "You know you shouldn't steal. Did you really take it right out from under their noses?" This emotion indicates some degree of vicarious enjoyment on the part of the mother.

She may seem hurt, helpless and resigned. Statements such as, "I (or we) have tried everything, nothing works with him," or "There's nothing I can do," are frequent. This reaction indicates a conflict as to whether the boy or his mother will psychologically dominate the other, and that by stealing the boy has won. This reaction may alternate with hostility, indicating that the mother is still fighting over the issue of dominance.

The emotion of hostility, whether by itself or mixed with resignation, can be taken as

one the child wishes (consciously or unconsciously) to produce, even though he may be yelled at, beaten, deprived of privileges or otherwise punished. One will hope that the mother's conversation will also reveal feelings of affection towards him. If not, one may ask, "Mrs. Jones, what is there about your son that you like?" The absence of a response of pride or affection in both content and emotional tone is ominous.

At times rejection is blatantly open, "He is no good. He should be in prison. Maybe that will straighten him out." This is frequently mixed with anger or resignation. Commonly, the rejection precedes the stealing and the stealing only tends to confirm and justify the mother's attitude towards the boy. Frequently in such instances the mother will say that he is "just like . . ." and mention another male who had difficulty with the law, perhaps her husband or another relative. One may find that the child is named for that individual, that there is a physical resemblance or some other reason for the identification. Emotionally the mother is responding to her son as though he were the other person. Frequently in such circumstances she will end her history either by attempts to extricate herself from blame or guilt. She may mention how she has tried to instill a conscience in him, etc. Her emotional tone is often self-righteous.

After the mother has described the situation and her emotional reactions have been noted, the missing pertinent detailed information should be sought.

#### The Child's Emotional Gain from Stealing

What does he do with what he steals? He may give it away. If he is involved in a gang and one activity of the gang is stealing, his status with his group would be quite important to him and he would have difficulty in stopping the stealing because of the rejection he feels he would get from the "gang." The goods in this case are distributed among the participants or at times among the group which he is trying to join. Frequently a child will steal as an individual and either divide the spoils directly among a number of acquaintances or take the money and buy candy or pop for them. This effort to "buy friends" is always indicative that he is lonely and is

having difficulty in making and keeping friends.

Occasionally a child will steal at the behest of another person, usually an adult. The latter may be the mother herself. The mother usually entices her son to do this by telling him that the property that she is asking him to take without the other's awareness is really her own. It is interesting to note that in such cases the children usually have a fairly well-developed concept of property rights.

A child may appropriate for his own use or consume the objects that he has stolen. Almost invariably these are items which he cannot obtain otherwise. With younger children this may be due to parental denial of the specific object or money of his own to buy such things as candy, a knife, etc. A child has difficulty understanding or accepting such parental prohibitions which do not apply to his peers. The mother's prohibition is often based on overprotection.

A younger child may also appropriate an item with which he is fascinated, an item he considers (correctly or not) to be unique, *i.e.*, an arrowhead, a rare stamp, a souvenir.

An older child may steal items he cannot legitimately purchase, such as cigarettes or alcohol. The motivation here is usually to be big and grown-up. Though some of this is normal, repeated thefts of a number of different items in this category would indicate an underlying feeling on the part of the child of being inferior and inadequate.

A boy's theft of feminine clothing is derived from sexual motivations or conflicts. A boy may use the clothing to masturbate with or may dress in them. With the latter especially, one should be concerned about his sexual identification. The mother's own excitement in relating such episodes indicates covert sexual stimulation on her part. Other areas of similar covert sexual stimulation may be found in family habits of modesty and privacy while in the bathroom, dressing, etc.

A child may steal an item and "cherish" and keep it without attempting to utilize it. He hides it and at various times sneaks to the hiding place, takes it out, looks at it, fondles it, and replaces it. This type of stealing is based on the same dynamics as that of a kleptomaniac; namely, the child treats the

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item as though it were a present or gift, and thus because he has it, someone likes him, he is lovable and worthy of a present. These are usually items of minimal value. Here one should look closely at the means of expressing affection within the family and the child's sense of self-worth.

Finally, with the child's theft there may be his own arrangement to be caught. He may leave his loot where the parents will find it and recognize that he should not have it. Or he may arrange to get caught in other ways, for example, by leaving his "calling card" at the scene of the theft. The motivation for being caught is the expression of hostility towards the parent. This fits in well with his mother's rejection of him and because his mother rejects him, he expresses his hostility towards her by stealing and getting caught, which further intensifies her rejection. It is a way for the child to "get to her." At times a child may have two or more of these motivations and the physician should pay attention to each, though concentrate on the predominant one. For example, a boy stole a valuable necklace and gave it to his girl to wear to school, where it was recognized by a teacher by its inappropriateness. While there were undoubtedly other motivations in the boy's relationship with the girl, it clearly pointed to an arrangement to be discovered.

The next area of the physician's investigation is the circumstance which precipitates the stealing episode. Usually scrutiny of the immediate preceding six hours is adequate, but in some cases the scrutiny needs to be concerned with 24 hours. What the physician is essentially asking himself is, "Why did the child steal at that particular time? Why not two days previously or two days subsequently?" One should not minimize the aspect of opportunity to steal, especially if the child is stealing from his parents, as they may be setting up the invitations. However, in spite of the opportunity, most episodes of stealing are precipitated by an incident in which the child feels rejected. The rejection is most commonly by a parent, but may be a teacher or girl-friend. His emotional reaction may be to feel lonely and lead to stealing "a present" or to buying friends. His reaction may be anger and hostility—"getting even"

by stealing. He may respond with feelings of being little and small and inadequate, and respond by trying to act big.

The questioning along the above lines should be done with the mother and the child. It is surprising how willing children are to talk about the circumstances that lead to the stealing if they are aware that the physician is mainly interested in trying to understand rather than judge and punish.

### The Pediatrician's Role

By this point in the evaluation, which may have consumed no more than five minutes and seldom more than ten, the physician usually has a relatively clear idea whether the child steals in response to feelings of loneliness and inadequacy or whether he is stealing out of anger and resentment. He is ready to intervene therapeutically and should emphasize one of the two alternative lines, that is, the family's expression of affection or of anger.

At this point the pediatrician must decide how best to involve the absent parent. Usually it is best to proceed with the one parent and expect to see the other later, alone or with this one. At times it may be advantageous to wait and see both together.

In helping the family to look at their ways of expressing affection, one might ask both the child and his mother what the boy does for fun or enjoyment. If there is no fun described with any members of the family, then the physician may ask, "Are there any ways in which you have fun with your folks?" One proceeds further by asking the boy how he knows his mother loves him, how she shows it, and asking the mother how she shows it to the boy. The same set of questions may be asked concerning the relationship between the father and son, and between each parent and any siblings. This line of questioning can be quite revealing and at times insightfully sobering to the parents. This in itself may be corrective.

The same line of questioning is used to discover and evaluate any expression of hostility within the family. When talking to the child it is usually best to ask first how each parent expresses anger to the other and then to him, before one asks him how he expresses it to

each parent. One may proceed by asking him how he feels his parents would like him to express his feelings of resentment and anger. Further, how he might express such feelings to them and get away with it; that is, how could he get to them, get their goats, get under their skins, and get away with it, relatively speaking. It is surprising how many boys who steal respond to the latter question in terms of getting caught stealing.

Interestingly, at least in my own observations, the most common pattern found in families whose child steals is that the parents themselves express anger openly and quickly, but do not permit similar expression in their children. This can often be elicited by asking the parents to describe their own preferences for their children's ways of showing angry feelings, to which they frequently respond by describing adult-like, calm discussions.

#### Management of the Stealing

At this point the parent(s) have gained some insight and are ready for suggestions. The pediatricians can continue by asking what attempts they have made previously to stop the stealing. He should be alert to indications in their descriptions of subtle encouragements to steal. If these are noted they should be pointed out to the parents in a non-critical but matter-of-fact way.

Perhaps the most common subtlety is the conspiracy of secrecy. Quite frequently one finds the mother and son "not telling dad," with any number of rationalizations. Secretiveness between mother and son frequently has a quasi-sexual overtone. Such secretiveness also implies that dad either doesn't care, would not understand, or perhaps would be too harsh. Another tacit stimulus to repeat a theft is the parental attempt to cover up for the son in the community. Financial restitution may be made anonymously. This form of secretiveness also implies that the son doesn't have to take responsibility for his actions and that the parents are quite embarrassed by their son's stealing.

At times the parents encourage their son to steal by allowing him to keep the item he has stolen. This is especially common in instances of stealing from family members. It

may also occur in situations where the boy realistically can't make financial restitution, but the parents having done so, subsequently do not arrange that he repay them.

Another pathogenic aspect of handling an episode of stealing is for the parent to do nothing unless the child admits that he has stolen, even though the evidence may be overwhelming and there is no doubt in the parents' minds that he actually did the stealing. This, of course, is a way of encouraging the child to lie, especially since the child knows that the adults know he did it. Here the subtle message is, "It is OK to steal as long as no one can really prove you did it."

When the child's stealing comes to light, restitution should be made as soon as possible *in person*. Usually it is helpful for a parent to accompany the child for moral support. In such a circumstance shopkeepers or other individuals can be expected to handle their roles quite well (and to be sympathetic and understanding toward the child). Any money advanced by the parents for restitution should be repaid according to a strictly adhered-to schedule agreed upon between parent and child. There should be no secrets from those involved. In group stealing, this includes other parents and their children. At the same time there should not be any attempt to ridicule the child by the parent, such as informing the child's peers and others who were not involved.

Most children will steal once or twice while growing up, but this seldom becomes a problem. When it does, the roots lie in the emotional interaction between parents and child. This dynamic emotional interaction is usually out of the conscious awareness of the participants. The pediatrician can play a key role in helping the parents and child to understand their emotional interactions and to develop more appropriate ways of handling them. If this is done properly the parental emotional response to the stealing will become one of concern, mild surprise, disappointment in the child, and willingness to stand by the child and help him shoulder the responsibility for his actions. This pattern of appropriate response will put an end to the child's need to steal.