

Reasons Children Steal

Acquire Desired Objects

Children may steal items, for example, clothing, candy, gum, or toys, which they want but cannot afford to buy.

Lack of Attachment

A child who has had very little love and affection and who has been abused and neglected will steal as a form of self-love, as a way to maintain emotional distance and safety, and as a way to perpetuate the belief that adults/parents are uncaring and unresponsive.

Excitement/Adventure/Challenge

Older children like to see if they can escape getting caught.

Developmental Lag

Children, especially young children, may not be able to understand the difference between communal and personal property or between items that must be paid for and those that are free for the taking. Even older children may experience this as a lag in their moral development; they may not truly understand right from wrong, because the line has been fuzzy in the home where they were born.

Peer Pressure

Children and teens may be challenged or “dared” by peers to steal. Accepting the dare or challenge may result in the young person’s acceptance by a particular peer group. The child’s need in this case is to belong to the group, not necessarily to acquire the objects he or she is stealing.

Support Another Need or Habit

Children may steal in order to get money or objects they can sell to meet another need or habit, for example, drugs or alcohol, or to keep friends. This is, of course, very serious and may require professional help.

Possess an Object Belonging to a Significant Person

Children may take things that belong to people with whom they have significant attachments. These personal belongings may signify their attachment to that person. A child may also take something in order to pretend that it was given by the person because the child is valued and important.

Feel Competent

Children who have been successful at stealing things in the past may continue that behavior because it is something that they do well and which they are proud of.

Learned Behavior

Children may have been taught to steal either directly or by the example of parents or other significant adults. They may continue this behavior because they think it pleases those for whom they are stealing or because they do not know any other way of meeting their own needs.

Nobody Objected

Children who steal often have or had parents who are “disengaged”—they don’t notice or respond to negative behavior(s) or support the child’s good social behaviors.