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Your Cheating Heart

Kids aren't always honest. What should a parent do about it?
Anne Georg

Karen McWilliams* was washing lettuce at the sink while her three-year-old son, Jackson, and his four-year-old friend, Caitlin, explored the spare-change jar in her kitchen. McWilliams noticed a furtive Caitlin heading to her boots by the front door with heavy pockets to dump some coins she had taken. "I asked her if she wanted to take a few coins home." But when Caitlin emptied her pockets, \$40 in loonies and toonies tumbled out. "I tried to make light of it," McWilliams continues. "I said, 'Oh thanks for finding all those. I'll need to keep most of them.'" She gave Caitlin a zip-top bag and left her with a small handful of coins.

"It was clear that Caitlin knew exactly what she was doing and tried to get away with as much as possible," says the Calgary mother. "I didn't want to shame her, but I wasn't ready to part with \$40." McWilliams was concerned enough to wonder if she should report the attempted theft to Caitlin's mom, her next-door neighbour. In the end she decided not to.

What do you do when you catch a child stealing or cheating? The shock can be like a splash of cold water in a parent's face. Do you confront the behaviour or let it go? And if you play it down, as McWilliams did, are you encouraging a budding criminal?

According to Kathy Levene, associate director of EarlsCourt-Creche Child Development Institute in Toronto, stealing is normal in the preschool years, when impulse rules and kids are testing the boundaries of right and wrong. Levene says both boys and girls fall into undesirable behaviours equally as often; it's the timelines that differ. "By the time girls are three or four years old, they'll have grown out of a lot of impulsive and aggressive behaviours," Levene says. For boys, it may be closer to age five or six.

That doesn't mean you should ignore it when your three-year-old pockets a dinosaur puppet from the local drop-in centre. Family therapist Bob Finlay of Port Coquitlam, BC, says your best response is calm curiosity to get her talking about why — and who might be hurt by her actions. And, he cautions, hold the loaded language. "When you talk to her about it, don't accuse her of stealing."

Older and Wiser

By six to eight years of age, most kids know stealing is wrong, says Rosalind Kindler, president of the Canadian Association of Psychoanalytic Child Therapists. That's why parents need to pay more attention if it happens then.

Leanna Marshall of Montreal recalls the time her seven-year-old daughter, Lara, swiped her friend Molly's bag of special toys she'd collected from McDonald's. Molly's mother phoned, with Molly weeping in the background. Had Lara brought the bag home? Marshall searched and found it among her daughter's toys. Dismayed, she confronted Lara, who claimed she'd bought the toys. After her mom pressed, however, Lara confessed. "I told her that I wasn't angry, just disappointed," Marshall remembers. When she asked why, Lara tearfully complained that her friend was bossy, always getting her own way. "I told her stealing wasn't the way to solve her problem. I suggested that she solve it by coming home or telling Molly's mom," Marshall says. She then insisted that Lara return the bag and apologize. She thought the case was closed.

Several months later Molly's mom phoned again to find out if Lara had Molly's prized stick-on tattoo. She did. "I was shocked, disappointed and embarrassed," Marshall recounts. Again, she made Lara go to her friend's house, return the loot and apologize.

Marshall had to bottle her own shame and sense of failure — which can be the hardest part for parents, especially when dealing with a repeat offender. "Parents need to get over that," says Kindler, adding that a temperate tone is key. "Making Lara return the stuff and say sorry are both good lessons. But they don't address why she stole."

Getting to Why

Kindler says Marshall and her husband need to have a tender and honest conversation with their daughter, putting themselves squarely on her side. "Say something like, 'You need to help us understand. We all feel terrible. Let's solve this problem together.'"

Kids may steal out of revenge, anger, desire for power or just for more stuff; they might be craving attention — either from you or from their peers. "It's important to look at the child's behaviour to see if it's connected to family, school or friendship dynamics," says Kindler. "Then address the issues." Lara was playing with a domineering friend. Her petty theft was likely a way to "steal" some of her friend's power.

Finlay cautions that a pattern of stealing small things could escalate to more serious thefts like shoplifting that may have profound consequences. Kindler agrees and says that in Lara's case, it may be time for the parents to seek outside help. "The child is sending a huge signal to her parents. She's saying 'help me.' And she'll keep on stealing until something happens or someone steps in to help."

When Winning Is Everything

Cheating is another behaviour that can throw a law-abiding parent into panicked self-questioning. And again, age matters. Kindler says a five-year-old will cheat without understanding it's wrong: Why shouldn't she help herself to a handful of those pretty \$100 bills in a Monopoly game? An older child who cheats, though, may be expressing feelings of powerlessness or he may feel that cheating is the only way to "win" his parents' approval.

Six-year-old Alice is a bright student. After a family holiday and a bout of flu kept her out of school for two weeks, she faced a spelling test the day after returning to class. "She usually studies and is well prepared for her tests, but we didn't have the time to study for this one," says her mom, Vanya Michalski of Vancouver. So Michalski wrote down the list of words that would be used on the test and told her daughter to review it just before the exam.

When Alice came home and told her mom that she'd received 100 percent, Michalski was impressed. Then Alice said that she had looked at the list during the test. Michalski believes Alice didn't fully understand it was a no-no, but the episode got her thinking about the pressure her daughter feels to excel. "I told her that getting good marks isn't what school is about," Michalski remembers. "What's important is that she learns."

Finlay likes Michalski's response. "Talking to her about the value of learning above achieving high marks is a good message to deliver," he says. Kindler wonders if Alice is troubled by letting her parents down with a low mark. "They might want to use this experience to examine if they're pushing their daughter too hard."

More Than a Game

Cheating at a board game is hardly in the same category as plagiarizing an English essay, but if the behaviour becomes a pattern it can signal trouble.

"Sam's a highly competitive boy," sighs his mother, Wanda Miller of Toronto. "He hates to lose." As a five-year-old playing Go Fish, Sam regularly tried to win by lying about the cards in his hand. "Every time we played, we argued about the rules. I'd give him a time out and send him to his room to think about it," recounts Miller. But the cheating continued. "He wouldn't play if he couldn't win. He'd play with friends who didn't know the rules, so he could make them up to suit himself."

Sam is showing more discipline now that he's 11 and playing organized hockey; Miller credits the team approach and a strict coach for harnessing her son's drive to win. Now the family can get through a card game without an argument. "I tell him that I don't want him to accomplish something because he cheated," Miller says. "His reward is in hard work and achievement."

By age seven or so, a child who cheats knows that what he's doing is wrong. Again, parents need to look for underlying reasons. Cheating in sports, games or at school can be a sign of anxiety stemming from high expectations at home or school. The older child may be signalling that he feels overwhelmed or unable to succeed. "Are you sending your child a message that winning is a way to get your approval?" Kindler asks.

As with the child who steals, Kindler suggests talking simply and honestly. "Let him know that you understand how important winning is to him, but that it's OK not to win." In Sam's case, Kindler commends Miller's decision to sign her son up for hockey. "It's a good solution because the game is strictly monitored by referees and coaches, and playing on a team will teach him about sportsmanship." (Miller will probably want to keep her son away from a professional career in the National Hockey League, but that's another story.)

As our kids explore the boundaries of right and wrong, most of us can expect to find the odd five dollar bill gone missing, or lose a game of Crazy Eights despite a great hand. As with most discipline dilemmas, understanding and honest communication are more effective than lecturing and punishment. And sometimes, says Kindler, a hug will make a huge difference. "A lot can be communicated without words."

Repeat Offender

While cheating and stealing are normal behaviours in your child's development, when they become a pattern, there's cause for concern. "It could be a sign of childhood depression or anxiety," cautions family therapist Bob Finlay of Port Coquitlam, BC. He advises parents to look for other signs of distress, like changing sleep patterns, appetite loss, alienation at school and any departures from normal behaviour. "Parents are good at picking up if other things are going on. Pay attention and trust your instincts." He counsels parents to seek outside help if their child's behaviour becomes troublesome.

**All families' names changed by request.*

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