

Teen Shoplifting: Causes and Consequences

Teens steal more often than you might think. And the punishment is far harsher and longer-lasting than you can imagine. Experts break down what to do if you catch your child shoplifting—plus how to prevent it from happening again.

By **Sarah Mahoney**

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Shortly after 17-year-old Terry (who asked that her real name not be used) moved to Colorado Springs, her new friends urged her to skip choir practice and come to the mall. "We started trying on clothes at this one store, and someone suggested we take them," she says, "so I shoved a \$10 belt in my bag." As she walked toward the exit, her cell phone rang. "It was my mom, asking if I wanted to go out to dinner," says

Terry. At that moment, store security surrounded the teens. "I have to go," Terry told her mom. "I think I'm being arrested."

The hours that followed were a nightmare. "They escorted us into the security room to wait for the police," says Terry. "I was officially charged with taking \$75 worth of stuff, the amount all of us stole, even though my item was only \$10. The worst was when my mom arrived. She kept saying I'd never do such a thing. And they were like, 'Listen, lady, we have it on tape.' I finally had to say, 'No, Mom, it's true. I did it.'"

Why Do Teens Shoplift?

Parents always want to understand why kids steal, says Patricia Ruffini, executive director of [Colorado Springs Teen Court](#) (a nonprofit alternative sentencing program), which eventually handled Terry's case. "But most adolescents can't explain themselves," she says. "In rare cases, genuine need is the issue. Some are troubled and looking for attention, or lashing out at authority. And many, like Terry, do it to fit in with peers."

If an explanation for the bad behavior is hard to nail down, what happens in a teen's head—or doesn't—is simpler to decode. "Seventy-two percent of teens say they didn't plan to take anything," says Barbara Staib of the [National Association for Shoplifting Prevention \(NASP\)](#). "Most often these crimes aren't premeditated." Instead, impulse, combined with teens' general lack of judgment, takes over. And when summer comes, with less structure and supervision, there's an even greater chance of this knee-jerk stealing. "The courts and the police tell me that when kids have a lot of free time," says Staib, "it increases the likelihood they'll get in trouble." (Speaking of getting into trouble, find out if it's [ever okay to cheat](#).)

What Happens Once a Teen Shoplifts?

Concerned retailers are countering the trend with more prosecutions—regardless of how old the thief is or how much he's stolen. One major chain lowered the age for pressing charges from 18 to 16, and decreased the time stores give parents to get there before police are called, from 90 minutes to an hour. And the cops don't come just for show when a minor is caught shoplifting. Two years ago, store detectives caught 16-year-old Ryan (not his real name) stuffing polo shirts under his coat at the Mall of America in suburban Minneapolis. "I was arrested, handcuffed, loaded into

the back of the cruiser, fingerprinted and put in a cell until my parents came," Ryan says. "It was humiliating." There's a simple motive for these measures—prosecution, along with educational programs, is the number one deterrent to future thefts.

Once a tween or teen is in the legal system, he faces tougher treatment than in the past. "Juvenile courts have become much more punitive," says [Sandra Simkins](#), a professor of law at Rutgers University in Camden, New Jersey and the author of [When Kids Get Arrested](#). Almost every state has revised its code so that records aren't wiped clean at 18, as they once were, and Internet databases mean even minor convictions may stick. This can lead to difficulty getting into college, earning scholarships and [finding work](#).

[The rise in kids' tech usage](#) has added a new dimension to shoplifting. "Teens are going on trading sites like Craigslist or eBay, as well as Facebook, Twitter and their cell phones to sell what they grab from brick-and-mortar stores," says Staib. "They tend to feel the rules don't apply in cyberspace." And assuming that nobody knows who they are, kids conclude they're safe. But they're not. These sites have investigators who work directly with retailers to connect goods a store is missing with the UPCs or other codes from items people are selling online. Getting caught is tough enough for teens and their families, but what's also at stake is a moral standard. (Here's [how to raise a more honest child](#), by the way.)

There's alarming evidence that adolescents' values are already slipping. [According a survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics](#), which tracks adolescent thoughts and attitudes, one in five kids say they've stolen from a store. Yet 92 percent of teens overall say they're satisfied with their ethics—meaning there's a large group of teens who steal but don't see anything wrong with it. Selling stolen goods online, especially if you aren't discovered, feels so easy it can reinforce the notion that what matters is not whether you're doing what's right, but whether you're getting away with it.

Which Teens are More Likely to Shoplift?

Minors are shoplifting more than ever, driven up by high teen unemployment and tighter [family budgets](#). Shoplifting is an equal-opportunity crime: Boys and girls steal in the same numbers, and every economic and social group is affected. "There are angry teens, often in poverty, who steal out of rage," says Neil Bernstein, PhD,

author of *How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble and What to Do If You Can't*. "And there are affluent ones, with credit cards in their wallets, who do it for sport." (Terry had enough money on her to buy the belt she swiped.) While teens with a history of behavioral problems sometimes steal, it's actually kids who seem to have the fewest problems who are most likely to shoplift.

"The most popular kids at middle school are between two and three times more likely to shoplift than other children," says Joseph P. Allen, PhD, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and the coauthor of *Escaping the Endless Adolescence*. "It's not that their motives are sinister. They do it to participate in whatever they see their peers doing." Whoever's involved, it's easier to predict what teens will take. "They're most likely to grab hot products, like iPads and video games, as well as any items that are small, high in value and can easily be concealed," says Casey Chroust, executive vice president of the Retail Industry Leaders Association. Restricted products, such as cigarettes and condoms, also have special appeal. (Girls are generally more likely to steal makeup, jewelry and clothing, while boys grab electronics and clothes.)

Regardless of gender, "kids who engage in minor forms of delinquency are at increased risk for other, worse criminal behavior," says Allen. "There's also a connection to alcohol and substance abuse, and unprotected sex."

Ask your pediatrician for a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist if your teen:

- Steals from family or peers
- Continues taking things even after being caught
- Starts at 13 or under
- Is already in other trouble, for fighting, truancy or poor school performance

How to Prevent Teen Shoplifting

Teen shoplifting is common, but it's not a rite of passage. Like other bad behavior, it can be headed off, and education is the way to hold kids to high standards.

- **Teach on the spot.** When you're in a store with your child, occasionally point out the many ways—cameras, magnetic tags, security guards—that the facility keeps an eye on everyone. Mention that stealing is not only wrong, but people who take

things can be arrested, banned from stores and malls, have their picture displayed in public, and be sent to court and sometimes even to jail.

- **Focus on the victims.** Kids often think, "What's the big deal? A superstore can spare a few pairs of jeans..." Explain how retailers have to charge more to compensate for theft, and that many little shops go out of business because losses cut so deeply into their income. Point out the social consequences too: Since sales tax isn't collected for stolen items, schools and fire departments are shorted, says Joseph LaRocca, a security expert for the National Retail Federation. You might think teens would roll their eyes at these appeals to fairness, but, in fact, most respond positively. For that reason, juvenile courts often require adolescents to face the ones they've harmed. "We had one kid whose mom, a single parent, had recently lost her job," says Ruffini. "He had to listen to an unemployed woman, also a single mom, explain how she was laid off, in part because of theft. They both wound up in tears."
- **Monitor their stuff.** Keep up with day-to-day changes in what children are wearing, and periodically scan the house for new clothes, video games, electronics and jewelry, suggests Allen. "When kids know you'll say, 'Where did you get that?' they're less likely to take something," he says. If you suspect your child may have stolen, ask follow-up questions in a matter-of-fact tone. "You don't want to make your child feel you don't trust her or that you expect her to take things because other kids do," says George M. Kapalka, PhD, a psychology professor at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey and the author of *Parenting Your Out of Control Child*. "Adolescents naturally distance themselves from parents, and you run the risk of pushing them further away." You also don't want them to end up thinking, "They don't trust me anyway, so I might as well do whatever I feel like."
- **Talk about values.** Just as you periodically remind kids about your rules on drugs and alcohol, offer a few words about shoplifting from time to time. It might come up in the news, or they could bring it up in conversation—according to NASP, 89 percent of teens know kids who've stolen. Certainly, advises Bernstein, when your teen is off to the mall without you, say something like, "I'm giving you more freedom. That also means more responsibility. I'm counting on you to do the right thing and to behave in a way that is honest and doesn't hurt other people."

How to Deal With a Teenager That Steals

If you find out that your teen shoplifted, should you turn her in to the store? Barbara Staib of NASP suggests calling the loss-prevention department to make sure it won't go to one of two extremes—pressing charges or brushing it off by saying, "Oh, don't worry about it." Once you've established the situation will be handled appropriately, accompany your child to the store and have her either return the items or pay for them. Social worker [Jen Gustafson](#) also suggests that you have your child write a short letter of apology and read it out loud to the manager. "That's a very humbling, powerful experience," she says. Staib advises against bringing in the police. "Education is the ideal response," she says. "You can't force kids not to steal. But if you make them understand why it's a bad idea, most will arrive at the correct conclusion on their own."

- **Related:** [How to Improve Communication With Your Teenager](#)

Regardless of whether you or someone else discovering that your child shoplifted, a careful response is required. Here's your five-step strategy to make this a learning experience:

1. **Ask what happens next.** Find out if your child will be charged and whether he needs to appear in court. Even without the legal system involved, expect that he'll be banned from that store or chain and that his name will be entered into a database shared by the retail industry. You probably will also have to pay a fine. "Stores usually expect reimbursement for their trouble as well as for the stolen merchandise," says LaRocca. The additional sum is usually a few hundred dollars. (Court fees tend to be about the same.)
2. **Hold off on reacting.** Avoid any important conversation until you've cooled off. "Yelling in front of strangers won't accomplish much," says Gustafson, who counsels Minneapolis teens. "And you'll probably say things you don't mean, or issue punishments you can't enforce. Stating, 'I'm so upset I can't talk to you right now' will buy you time to plan out appropriate consequences."
3. **Discuss trust.** When you're ready to talk, clearly let your teen know that she has lost your trust. "Kids need to hear how angry and disappointed you are," Gustafson says. And they also need to know they can earn back your confidence by responsibly making the amends the courts (if the case went that far) and you have laid out. You might ban shopping trips for a set period, give extra chores and schedule additional volunteer work. Also set up a plan for your child to repay you for any expenses.

4. **Make sure your teen understands the law.** If the store presses charges, author Sandra Simkins suggests hiring a lawyer. But tell your child this doesn't mean he's getting off. "Explain that once he's been arrested," says Kapalka, "he has crossed an important line where you can't shelter him."
5. **Maintain perspective.** "Children need to know that even though shoplifting isn't life or death, it's a big deal," says Staib, "and their job is to learn from their mistakes." The good news is that for most families the episode passes quickly—in fact, only 1.6 percent of kids who attend court-ordered programs shoplift again.