

Stealing

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

It wasn't until she returned home from the supermarket that Mary's mother became aware of her daughter's crime. And, like so many perpetrators, three-year-old Mary had a hand in her own undoing. Unable to get the candy bar out of the package, she asked her mother for help.

Mary's mother hadn't bought her the candy bar. Mary had procured it herself from the supermarket shelf.

Mom firmly took the reins of parenthood. "We do not take things that don't belong to us," she said. Being an honest woman, she returned to the supermarket and paid for the candy.

There isn't anything criminal about Mary. Like most young children, she hasn't fully grasped the principles of property and commerce. Young children often take things that don't belong to them. Their motive is simple. They want the things they take. Mom and dad take all kinds of things off the shelf. Why can't they?

In cases like this, parents need to do some gentle teaching. Explain that some things belong to them and some things belong to others – the store, the daycare center, their friends – and we don't take things that belong to others.

Teach this early, at home. For example, explain that cookies are yours, and if your child wants one, he or she must politely ask you for one. Reward with a cookie when it's done.

But, also explain that you don't even ask to take a toy from the daycare center or a friend's house. The toy car belongs to them, it stays there.

Stores present special problems. Young children want most of what they see and don't understand that when we take things at a store we pay for them. At the checkout counter, explain what and why you pay the cashier. Say, for example, "When we pay for something at a store, then it is ours. When it is ours, then we can take it home."

Then practice this lesson. Allow your child to select something to buy, give your child the money, and let your child pay for it. Explain that paying is required at stores and only then is it OK to take something. But we don't pay or take anything at the daycare center or at Mary's house – only at stores.

Your children will catch on quickly. Soon they'll be coming to you for money, which is another problem altogether.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.