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Parenting Q&A: Stealing and Lying
Jeanette Kasper © 2002

Dear Jeanette:

I am the Principal of a private school. What would you recommend my approach be to situations of stealing and lying to cover it up, and no real show of remorse? This is not an epidemic, however I have a situation where this is the case. I have a parent seeking my advice on this matter.

The student is in Gr. 7, she is 12 yrs. old. This student has struggled with lying in the past but the stealing has been as recent as a year or so. According to the Dad's account, while they were on a family holiday visiting relatives, Joni, went to her aunt's candy store and took a full bag of candy without paying for it. Here at the school, we have just completed a fundraiser selling chocolate bars. Mr. Smith spoke with me last week saying that their chocolate bars had been sold however the money had gone missing. When he returned home from work the next day Mrs. Smith had found the money in Joni's possession and she confessed to having taken it. These are two quick incidents.

Sincerely,
Rev. Jason C.

Dear Rev. Jason:

Joni, herself, has to return the money, if it hasn't already been returned. She has to apologize to the people she stole it from--the administration at the school. AND (a really big part) Joni has to make reparation. So, the people in charge of the fundraiser have to decide how Joni can work off her 'dishonesty'. (There is a tremendous amount of research out there that shows that criminals who have had to face their victims are the ones who make an effort at rehabilitation.)

Working off her crime has to be big enough that it affects her; gets in the way of her social life, etc. Years ago when a six-year-old stole our son's bike, his mom was in agreement that he needed to work off the theft. It was autumn, and he spent two of his Saturdays raking our leaves. He didn't do a very good job, but that wasn't the point! He missed Saturday morning cartoons, his hockey games, and had to face his victim a few times.

At home, we would support the school by disciplining Joni, to teach that dishonesty is punished, big time! My children each have their 5 favorite things listed as their punishments. They would lose the maximum, all five of those, for the entire week. (For our oldest that would be: TV, reading, computer, friends, allowance.)

In our house, we have discussions about breaking of trust. Once trust is broken, it is very difficult to rebuild. Our oldest (why is it always him...) once tricked his dad into letting him stay home sick, and even taking him to the hospital, because his temperature was 105 degrees F. If he'd held the thermometer over the heat register for a little longer, I'm sure he could have made it even higher!!

That was three or four years ago. He was sick with the stomach flu a couple of weeks ago, and I still felt compelled to question him about whether he had any assignments due or tests that day. (Now that I look at this in writing, I'm thinking four years is a bit long. It's probably time to for us to let it go!)

The kids have to understand the consequences of their actions on their future and on their relationships with others. Our kids know that if they break trust, it takes a long time to rebuild it. Our oldest is now quite vocal--especially to his brother and sister--about how being honest, even if you did something wrong, is just a lot easier in the long run.

That's the lesson Joni needs to learn. So, the administration at the school needs to make the opportunity over the next two months or so, to show Joni that she is not trusted. The same in her family. Set a time limit, and her parents should do the same. Now look for opportunities over this period of time to show Joni that she is not trusted. For example, if I send Joni to the corner store to buy something, when she gets home I make a point of looking at the receipt and counting the change where she can see me. I hope she DOES get in a huff and protests. It means that she's understanding the point, emotionally.

Three or six months later, or whatever reasonable time limit you've decided upon, make a point of again sending her to the store, and simply asking her to put the change in my purse--showing that you now trust her. If you think of it, you could even say to her, "I trust you to be honest. So, thanks!"

During this time period, look for opportunities to having discussions about trust, honesty, and how it works. Those opportunities are often presented in the news, what with our politicians, CFOs who are being caught for the fraud of billions of dollars, etc.

If she lies or steals again within that time frame, the consequences are bigger, her reparation must be bigger, and the obvious show of lack of trust is longer--with a lot more discussions and lectures!

Never do an instant 'forgive and forget'. If we do that, the kids feel they have gotten away with it, and they continue to push the boundary (which in this case means lying more and stealing more) to find out where the boundary is.

We aren't going to address any of the incidents from the past. They're over and done with. But any lying or stealing that happens from this point on, we are going to be very clear and very immediate with our punishments.

In six months (if that's your time limit) if Joni has shown that she's making a real effort to be honest in everything she says or does, have a sit down discussion with her about how proud you are of her that she was able to make that change in her behavior. Have a small celebration, as well, like going swimming as a family, or out for dinner together--something that you know your child values. The school should also have that discussion with her, and maybe even a small reward for the extreme effort Joni made to change. Changing behavior is the hardest thing we can do (as all adults who have ever tried to quit smoking or lose weight know!) It's no easier for our children.

So, Joni has to return the money, apologize to her victims, and make reparation. The adults, both at school and at home, are going to support her change in behavior by punishing the bad behavior and, over time, rewarding the good behavior.

If anyone has done or heard of anything else that works, please do let me know.

Here's a Thought: Nothing ruins the truth...like stttrrrrretching it.

Warmest regards,

Jeanette Kasper, CSO

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As a best-selling author, international professional speaker, and syndicated columnist, Jeanette is always willing to answer your questions, give interviews, and do a training

session with your company, association, or parenting group. Jeanette concentrates on helping others create harmonious relationships at work, home, and play.