

## Rite of Passage or Cry for Help?

Teen shoplifting is rarely habitual, but children should know there are consequences to their actions.

*By Carla Cantor*

*Reviewed By Michael Smith, MD*

*WebMD Feature*

Your daughter is wearing bracelets and earrings you don't recognize or buying expensive gifts for friends. Your son's CD collection has suddenly grown. Or worse, you pick up the phone one day to hear a police voice: Your teenager has been picked up for shoplifting.

Parental nightmare? Yes. But does this mean your child is on the road to juvenile delinquency? Maybe, but unlikely.

"An awful lot of kids, boys and girls, ages 12, 13, or 14, even younger, get involved with shoplifting," says Anthony E. Wolf, PhD, author of *Get Out of My Life: But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* "As a clinical psychologist, when I hear about a teenager shoplifting, I don't think, 'Oh my God, this is a pathological situation' -- although it may be."

### Consider:

- About 23 million people in the U.S. steal from retail stores -- one in 11 Americans.
- Although teenagers 13-17 make up just 7% of the U.S. population, they account for 25% of all shoplifters arrested.
- 89% of kids say they know other kids who shoplift.
- 20% of adults who shoplift say they started stealing in their teens.

### Why Teens Shoplift

Most juveniles caught shoplifting, when asked why they did it, will say, "I don't know," says Sharon Jones of Shoplifters Alternative, a nonprofit organization based in Jericho, N.Y., that conducts education programs for juvenile offenders. As for adults, the reasons kids shoplift vary. But often they do it because they want nice things, feel pressured by friends, or simply do it for the thrill, Jones says. Typically, the items teens steal are things they can't afford or are not allowed to have, like CDs and tapes, cosmetics, stylish clothes, cigarettes, or consumer electronics.

Another contributor is the combination of poor impulse control and adolescent vulnerability that characterizes the preteen years. "Teenagers new to a sense of their own autonomy want to show to themselves that they can do bad and naughty things. It gives them a sense of power and excitement," Wolf says. They also may be showing off

to friends or they may steal merchandise on a dare. "The effect of the group is powerful in this age group. They'll goad each other into it."

Obviously, kids are driven to shoplift for more serious reasons, too. Teens may be acting out because of stress at home or because they feel unworthy, unattractive, or not accepted. They may be depressed, confused, or mad at the world. "Most teens know the difference between right and wrong, but if problems mount, they become vulnerable to temptation," Jones says.

There is also a big difference between the young adolescent who steals and an adolescent who is 15 and older, Wolf says. As teens grow older, they mature and think more about consequences. The temptation may still be there but the potential downside outweighs the benefits. "It would be a similar issue to a 3-year-old who is biting. I'm concerned. I don't like it," Wolf says. "But if a 12-year-old bites it's another story."

If a child is still shoplifting at 15 or older, it may be a sign of a conduct disorder or impulse control disorder known as kleptomania.

### What to Do?

Shoplifting may be common, but that doesn't mean it should be treated lightly. If you suspect that your child is stealing, it is time for a serious talk. Children need to know that stealing can lead to consequences far worse than being grounded, including juvenile detention centers or prison and a permanent mark on their record. If you're certain the merchandise is stolen, encourage them to take it back. If it's a first-time offense, most businesses will accept a teen's apology and won't press charges.

Nancy Gannon, executive deputy director of the Coalition for Juvenile Justice, says that in most states, kids can be criminally prosecuted and retailers can demand and collect financial damages in civil court. But cases involving first offenders are often remanded to juvenile conference committees or teen courts in which teen volunteers decide real cases involving teen defendants. (There are some 500 teen courts in 45 states.)

"One major principle of juvenile courts is to give children who've made a mistake a second chance," Gannon says. At the same time, the courts want kids to understand the consequences of wrongdoing and to make amends. In the case of shoplifting, a teenager might be asked to meet with the storeowner. He might be fined or be assigned community service work. (Crimes that involve serious offenses, such as weapons possession, are remanded to adult courts.)

Repeat offenders are arrested and may be confined for a period of time. If shoplifting keeps happening, the court would order a psychological assessment and further explore the child's life. "Is he stealing because he's hungry or is this an impulse control problem? Is the child on drugs?" Gannon says.

For most teenagers, simply getting caught acts as a deterrent. The best thing a parent can do is to convey to the child the risks of wrongdoing. Wolf says the message goes something like this: "You are now dealing with something outside of the safe and protective confines of family. We cannot protect you and you are putting yourself at risk. That's the main message you want to get across, and with the majority of kids it will work."

If the problem continues or if it's accompanied by other destructive behaviors -- a sullen or violent manner, falling grades, suspected substance abuse -- you may need to consider seeking professional help.

Originally published May 7, 2001.