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WHEN GOOD, RELIABLE, honest Peter was eight years old, his proud parents had an unhappy surprise. He began helping himself to pencils at the neighborhood dime store without the formality of paying for them.

The manager was a friend of the family. So instead of banishing Peter from his store, he reported the matter to Peter's mother so that she could deal with the cause of the crime wave as well as with the misdeed itself.

At first Peter's parents were incredulous. There must be some mistake. He was entirely trustworthy at home. He had an adequate allowance. Besides, there were plenty of pencils available to him for the asking. Why would he steal them?

"Peter, I can't believe the dreadful thing I've heard about you. Is it true that you have been stealing things at the store?" his mother asked. She was doubly shocked when Peter compounded his felony by lying.

"No. I didn't take any pencils," he asserted, giving himself away by his specific answer, and by a guilty glance at the drawer where he had secreted his loot.

Greatly concerned, his mother gave him a severe scolding. "When the police catch a thief they put him in jail," she told him. She made him take the pencils back to the manager. Then she gave him a sample of the restrictions of prison life by taking away his television rights for a month.

"He adores TV—so that was a punishment he'll never forget," she said, sure that she had chosen the most effective way to drive the lesson home.

This situation is worth examining in detail because it is an example of confused handling of two misdemeanors that often go hand in hand.

In the process of growing up, all children tell some untruths and take some things that do not belong to them. In the past, many people believed that all children were born wicked, and that it was the duty of parents to combat this "original sin" by means of severe punishment, no matter what the age of the child or the circumstances that tempted him.

Modern studies of many kinds of children from infancy through adolescence make us believe that children are born neither good nor bad, though with a capacity for both. So today we concentrate more on guiding a child past his mistakes and toward responsible behavior rather than "giving him a punishment he'll never forget."

JUST WHAT is the best way to deal with pilfering and the fibbing that often accompanies it? First of all, we must remember that children are influenced, especially in their early years, far more by desire to be approved and admired by their parents than by any real understanding of right and wrong. Their strongest reason for resisting temptation is to keep their parents' affectionate regard.

When a child does wrong, we must let him know that we are distressed by his action. But we must put him on the right track in some way that shows we have firm faith in his ability to do better the next time he is tempted.

Be careful not to accuse your child falsely, but be even more careful not to invite him to escape by grasping at a lie, especially if there is any faint hope of his getting away with it.

The way in which Peter's mother questioned him, to make sure that the manager's accusation was true, trapped him into an instinctive and protective fib. In this case, it was the manager's report, against Peter's denial, that he had stolen pencils.

If the boy had not betrayed himself by his answer, or if his mother had not found the pilfered booty, his spontaneous reach for escape through a falsehood might have been successful. And Peter might well have concluded that, while stealing is risky, lying does pay.

Be sure of your facts. Then take a direct approach such as: "I hear that you have some pencils that belong to the dime store. Now I want you to tell me how you happened to take them."

This opens the way to calm discussion, and lets you help your child deal with one error—not two. Certainly, stolen property must be returned, but this is a difficult errand on which to send a small child alone. Go with him, so that he knows you are on his side, right or wrong. If any additional penalty seems called for, make it fit the situation. Take away his own pencils for a day or so rather than something totally unrelated that he values highly.

Above all, keep punishment short. A month is an endless time to an eight-year-old. It is too long a sentence for any child to endure with benefit. Such extended punishment only makes him feel hopeless about his chances for ever being "good" again.

Avoid using words such as "thief" and "liar" in your discussion of his wrongdoing. They may make your child feel that he is forever hardened into a pattern rather than guilty of one misstep. Proper guidance is based on condemning deeds, not the child.

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