Understanding normal child development of moral reasoning can help us manage children who struggle with this. Moral reasoning is how we judge or reason whether an action is right or wrong. Psychologists believe that moral reasoning is closely involved with cognitive development (Smith & Cowie 1991). Knowledge of where the child is developmentally can mean that children are not punished for things they have no control over.

Human infants are pre-programmed to develop in a co-operative way; whether they do so or not depends to a high degree on how they are treated (Bowlby 1988).

Met need engenders love as a parent is seen as a source of comfort. Social learning theorists say children learn their parents’ moral code and act in accordance to their rules. Children develop a willingness to do what they are told because that bond of affection is important to them. A desire to please their parents facilitates the adoption of the parents point of view and their value system. Most parents are reasonable and this enables the child to learn pro-social values. In time this endears the child to the wider community.

As the child grows older they are better able to conceptualise right and wrong. Guilt or emotional discomfort follows transgressions and children learn to resist temptation even when not being watched. They gradually learn sets of rules taught by parents and teachers. This is helped by authority figures who behave rationally, who explain, who model and reinforce good behaviour.

Behaviour is heavily influenced by previous learning experiences in similar situations. Rules internalised and adopted by the child largely through the efforts of his parents. The child uses the rules as a guide even when parents are not there to enforce control, and there the skills of self control develop.

Young people then develop the ability to question rules, to think in a more abstract way, for example, a young child might think concretely about stealing a loaf of bread (it is wrong.) Older children may be able to discuss the possible reasons when it is ok to steal a loaf of bread. Ideas of justice, fairness, need come into play.
## Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development

### Level 1 - Pre-conventional Morality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>What is right is what others permit. What is wrong is what others punish. There is no conception of rules. The seriousness of the violation depends upon the magnitude of the consequences.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Rules are followed only when it is in the child’s immediate interest. Right is what gains rewards or equal exchange (you scratch my back I’ll scratch yours).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Level 2 - Conventional Morality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 3</th>
<th>‘Being good’ means living up to others’ expectations, having good intentions, and showing concern about others. Trust, loyalty, respect and gratitude are valued.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4</td>
<td>‘Right’ is a matter of fulfilling the actual duties to which you have agreed. Social rules and conventions are upheld except where they conflict with other social duties. Contributing to society is ‘good’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Level 3 - Post-conventional Morality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 5 Social contract or utility and individual rights</th>
<th>People hold a variety of values and opinions and while rules are relative to the group these should be upheld because they are part of the social contracts. Rules that are imposed are unjust and can be challenged – some values such as life and liberty, are non-relative and must be upheld regardless of majority opinion.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 6 Universal ethical principles</td>
<td>Self chosen ethical principles determine what is right. In a conflict between law and such principles it is right to follow one’s conscience. The principles are abstract moral guidelines organised into a coherent value system.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Lying – what could it be about?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Child</th>
<th>Carer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am a mistake</td>
<td>Maybe I’ve made a mistake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All the time they lied to me. So who cares?</td>
<td>I can never trust anything he says.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a secret, they’ll hurt me if I tell</td>
<td>Why can’t she tell me the truth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s so stupid she won’t know anyway</td>
<td>I’ve caught her red handed, does she think I’m stupid?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t remember</td>
<td>Nothing she does or says is real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s mad at me! What can I do to get out of this?</td>
<td>Am I going mad? I’m sure I left £10 in my purse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s not my real mother anyway</td>
<td>I really love her</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Archer 1999
# Stealing – what could be behind it?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Child</th>
<th>Carer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>She’s too mean to give me anything</td>
<td>If only she had asked me. I would have given it to her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She didn’t see me, she won’t know its me</td>
<td>I saw her!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who cares? They don’t love me anyway</td>
<td>I feel so upset when she takes things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I have lots of things I will be somebody</td>
<td>My personal stuff is going missing. This is my life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want it, need it, have to have it</td>
<td>She’s not bothered about the stuff she steals anyway its all rubbish!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She took me away from my real mum so why shouldn’t I take from her?</td>
<td>She really needs a cuddle but she won’t let me in.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Archer 1999
When normal development is affected by trauma

“The function of withholding of the truth is learned at a very early age. Young children may not have a concept of sin but they do understand the role of personal responsibility in judgements of inappropriate social behaviour and the consequences of such a transgression.” (Weiner, 1995)

Hurt children can have a distorted view of the world fuelled by their experiences. They are desperately trying to survive the world. So they may do anything they can to survive shame, to feel more powerful and less vulnerable. Stealing may alter a child’s arousal state. They may feel alive or “buzzing”. The child can believe what he is saying at that moment and look very convincing.

These children can learn to disconnect from their feelings to make their deceit a little easier to bare.

Children who have experienced trauma may suffer developmental delay (Cairns). They may have a weakly formed sense of conscience and cause and effect. Their thinking can be concrete. Their thinking will be of a child of a much younger age. If you had a child with a reading age of 7 would you give him a book meant for a 10 year old? So many children who lie/steal are punished as if they are in control of their actions. Often they are developmentally or emotionally arrested. What stage are they at? Find out and start your work at that stage.

Children who have been hurt may have lost their joy for life, their trust, their sense of self. So they may think “why shouldn’t I lie/steal?”

Neglect and hunger may have meant that a child had to forage for scraps of food. This can become a hardwired habit, kept in place by feelings of neediness. (Archer 1999)

Refined, carbohydrate rich, junk food can be a target for “stealing” (self medicating).

Children can make carers feel guilty. They can be adept at turning a situation round perhaps to lessen their shame.

Children Looked After may feel that because they told the truth about the abuse and were removed from their parents they are to blame. Therefore they can be wary of the truth and its affects.

Foster carers with good intentions can be economical with the truth believing they are sparing the child from pain. They paint a less damaging picture of the birth family BUT the child was there and experienced all the trauma. So he could be confused by these mixed messages. So is it ok to lie?
What works?

First of all – what doesn’t work?

• Harsh punishment will alienate the child further and encourage her to not get caught. It won’t encourage the development of morals but probably will demonstrate to the child the need to become devious.

• Long debates trying to prove the child did something is exhausting and probably unproductive.

• Protecting children from the consequences of lying and stealing may encourage them to think they are above the law, the rules of home, school, etc.

Try these strategies:

• The most useful type of discipline conducive to moral development involves pointing out the effects of the behaviour giving reasons and explanations.

• Withdrawal of approval may work to reduce the lying and stealing behaviour but will not contribute to the development of morals/conscience/guilt, etc. It may lead to the child becoming more devious about not getting caught.

• Get the right tone of voice. Shouting or anger will hook the child into fear or rage. Calm discussion, encourage use of the frontal lobe (part of brain that inhibits impulse).

• Use expressions such as “I feel really sad that you took that money. That was a poor choice.” Will emphasise to the child that he does have the ability to choose or can develop it.

• Develop strong ties of affection between you and the child.

• Be clear about the firm moral demands you make of the child.

• Be consistent with your sanctions.

• Use techniques of punishment that are psychological rather than physical e.g. withdrawal of approval rather than anger.

• An intensive use of reasoning and explanation. Start at their level (which is probably lower that you think). Use visual cues or stimuli.

• Give responsibility to the child and reward good performance.
• Help child to develop empathy, again use visual aids, pictures, dolls, puppets.

• Initiate discussion of moral issues “what should I do about …”, “what would you do if …”

• Reframe your description of the children. Refrain from the words liar or thief. Try “my child has a problem distinguishing fantasy from reality”.

• Model appropriate problem solving skills. “I believe in all probability you did it and I am asking you to make good the loss”. “If I am wrong I will apologise.”

• Keep a list of jobs the child can do to make recompense.

• Keep your word. Do what you say.

• Be prepared for the need to alert friends, etc., to your child’s problems. It won’t feel nice to do but it may prevent that behaviour taking place elsewhere and gives the child the message that you won’t tolerate lying or stealing.

• Choose sensible times and places to challenge children about their behaviour. Be calm as anger may trigger a stress response in the child. They will not be receptive to anything you say and will not be able to reason.

• Convey that you expect honesty and that you feel the child can achieve this and you will help.

• Use natural consequences, teach about cause and effect. Children normally learn this from babyhood during play and interaction. You may have to go right back to basics here depending on age and stage of children. E.g. what happens when you freeze water, knock tower down, go out in the rain, leave your drink on the floor, etc., etc.

• Trying to protect children from sanctions at school or police may encourage the children to feel above the law. Carefully think about your role here. It is natural and laudable to want to protect but what will be the long term effect of this?

• Consider how you will handle unfounded allegations against you before they happen. Use advice in safe caring to protect yourself.

Barbara Jones
Senior Practitioner,
CLASS (Emotional Wellbeing)
3rd January, 2008
References


