

**Case study: Stealing**  
**A “counterfeit” conduct disorder**

by  
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*Examples: Three examples where this young man will steal.*

*Stealing to gain acceptance:*

He will steal when unsupervised, and when “hanging out and going along” with inappropriate peer models. He wants to be accepted by them.

*Stealing to maintain a sense of belonging:*

He will opportunistically acquire any wallet he sees because this is where personal identification is kept. He collects these because he has been in so many foster homes that getting his hands on any form of “identification” of who a person is has become extremely important to him. He makes no attempt to hide these wallets or to “get away with it.”

For this person, he was given a wallet with copies of his bus pass, birth certificate, medical card, etc. that reinforce his own identity.

*Stealing as an expression of despair:*

He steals from persons who have played significant roles in his life. He steals from them during times that are of emotional significance to him such as during times of birthdays, and Christmas. He wants to be a part of them, but does not know how to communicate this in a more adequate manner.

These are the “cry for help” behaviors that indicate he is overwhelmed by emotional confusion and conflict.

*Analysis:*

This individual has little ability to deal with emotional conflict. His stealing which has been labeled as a conduct disorder is actually a display of extreme approach-avoidance conflict.

*Approaches:*

All his free time has to be presented to him as a set of pre-planned positive choices to keep him engaged and focused by a support person. Have him live life as someone’s “shadow,” always giving him a present model to follow.

A model for a “no fail” approach for motivating self-control.

It is hard to reward a person for “not” doing a behavior that they do with high frequency and that is usually met with negative consequences.

Traditional behavioral models expect a person to earn major benefits by so many days of self-control. The motivating aspect is “lost” to the person who is not capable of this. It is necessary to avoid a structure that has “burned bridges” built right into the structure.

Turn it around with the “goof proof” approach.

For example: For a desired wilderness hiking trip, there could be 10 essential items to take in his backpack. Every day that there is no episode of stealing the person would “earn” one item for the back pack. It would go into the pack and he could not lose this because of an episode of future stealing. It might take ten days, or it might take 30 or more days of “no stealing.” But each day of no stealing behavior would have special, positive emphasis with the placing of another essential object into the hiking backpack. Once the backpack is finally full, now it is time to set a date for the trip. The trip is to reward the ten days of complete self-control over stealing behavior.

The idea is that you never lose what you have earned for cooperation and appropriate self-control. Over time, the opportunity to experience success with such a “no fail” behavioral program does lead to self-interest and motivation to respond to such structured approaches.

This is how you teach the “reward game” to an individual with developmental brain dysfunction. Their continued exercise of self-control learned in this manner may remain dependent on these positive structures, but at least you will have created a structure that they are able to understand and in which they are willing to participate.

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