



## Iceberg Model trauma-informed guide

# Understanding and responding to stealing

## Introduction

For children and young people who have experienced trauma, stealing can be a learnt survival behaviour. Generally stealing is an attempt by children and young people to connect, feel safe, gain some control over their lives and gain access to the things they believe that they need. It is important to know that stealing is not personal. It does not mean that the child or young person does not respect someone. It is simply one of many ways the child or young person is trying to make their way in the world using the limited skills and abilities they have available.

## Tip of the iceberg (what we can see)

Some children and young people who have experienced trauma repeatedly take things that do not belong to them at home, school or from shops. This can include small items like pens or socks or valuable items like money or jewellery. Children and young people might only take a specific type of item or different things. They may keep just one item, hoard many of them or they might throw the items away soon after taking them.

## What is happening underneath the surface?

### Developmental vulnerability

Some children and young people are too young or do not have developmental skills to understand the concept of ownership and belongings. Others may have poor impulse control and, when stressed or excited, they are less able to think logically about their actions and consider the possible consequences. They might think of stealing as something that 'just happened' without their having made a conscious decision to do it.

### Stealing as a learnt behaviour

Children and young people who have experienced harm sometimes steal because they believe that no one will provide for them, so they have to get things for themselves. They might also feel a strong need to collect things, even when they are not needed just in case the time comes when they are on their own and fending for themselves again.

### Driven by unmet emotional needs

Some children or young people steal because it helps them with their emotions. They might feel shut down and empty most of the time and the excitement and danger that goes along with rule breaking (such as stealing) might help them feel more awake and alive for a short period. Some children and young people feel constantly stressed and overwhelmed by life and the sense of power and control that comes with stealing might help them to feel calm for a short time.

Some children and young people will steal from people that they want to connect with. This is often seen among children and young people in residential care settings, where it is harder to feel as though you belong because there is often limited connection to the placement. In family-based settings, children, and young people they might steal objects that are valuable to their caregivers or other people in the placement as a way of seeking connection with them, when they do not know other healthy ways of seeking connection.

### **Believing that stealing is acceptable**

Some children and young people may have been exposed to adults who steal, and this teaches children and young people that this is an acceptable and normal way to acquire things. Sometimes harmful adults may teach or directly instruct children and young people to steal. Children and young people may also have experienced others (such as adults or siblings) taking their things without any consequences.

## **Strategies to promote healing**

### **Offer compassionate understanding**

Stealing may be satisfying or exciting in the moment, but it often creates anxiety and stress for the child or young person in the long-term. It is helpful to defuse stress or blame around the child or young person's stealing behaviours and tell the child or young person that stopping stealing is something they and their caregiver can work together on as a team.

### **Set the child or young person up for success**

If you notice that the child or young person steals more often in certain situations (for example, at school, or after family contact), increase your efforts to help the child or young person feel safe and calm at those times. Increase supervision, spend more time together and remind the child or young person of alternatives to stealing. Caregivers can also help set up an 'escape plan' they can use when they have an urge to steal. For example, *"When you feel nervous and want to steal something to make it better, you can come tell me and I will help you"* or *"When you see something you want and you feel like you're going to steal, take a photo of it instead. If you decide you really want it, come and see me and we can talk about other ways to get it."*

### **Stay calm and matter of fact**

When talking about stealing, keep your voice neutral and calm. For example, say *"I believe that you took that toy from that shop without paying. We will need to return it."* But initially, take a matter-of-fact stance and do not argue with the child or young person about what happened.

### **Set consequences for behaviour not morals**

If the child or young person's engagement in stealing hurts or disadvantages another person, set up consequences that focus on the behaviour rather than judgements of the child or young person's character. Because stealing is a survival behaviour, setting consequences or punishments that are based in shame or blame are unlikely to be useful. Rather, it will make the child or young person feel worse and likely escalate the behaviour rather than reducing it. Instead, set a consequence for what was done and keep commentary about being a good/bad person or a "naughty" child out of the conversation. For example, say *"I believe that you took X's lolly bag as well as eating your own. That's not okay and we need to find a way to make it right. I am going to use some of your pocket*

*money to buy them a new lolly bag to make up for it.”* It is important to follow this sort of consequence with some relationship repair and reassure the child or young person that they are still cared for despite what has happened.

### **Keep important discussions about stealing for calm moments**

When children and young people steal, they are often in a state of fear, excitement or anxiety. At this time, they are unable to think rationally or learn from what you are saying. If caregivers want to have a conversation with the child or young person about stealing (beyond responding to their behaviour in the moment), wait for a calm time when you both have something relaxing to do. Try to keep the conversation short and light. If it gets too intense, the child or young person will become stressed and the thinking parts of their brain will ‘switch off’, meaning they will again be unable to learn from the discussion. It might be helpful to have these conversations about third parties. For example, commenting on the actions of characters in television show, rather than directly in relation to the child or young person.

### **Help the child or young person make sense of their behaviour**

Use the knowledge that you have about the child or young person to understand what could be happening beneath the surface to drive this behaviour. Let go of blame or thoughts about being bad or naughty and allow yourself to get curious about what they are really trying to say. Narrating the child or young person’s behaviour in a compassionate, non-judgmental way can help them understand their own actions and make sense of why they do things. For example, if the child or young person is found to have taken money that does not belong to them, say *“Hmm I can see five dollars here that was in my purse earlier today. I wonder if you took it because it makes you feel safer having some emergency money in your room?”* or *“Ah, I see you have one of your sister’s toys under your pillow. I wonder if you put it there because you were feeling mad at her. I can help you find a different way to help with that anger.”*

### **Offer alternative strategies (with no expectations)**

It is difficult for children and young people who have not experienced a safe and responsive caregiving relationship to learn how to lean on their caregivers for support. You can encourage them to come to you for help with finding other ways to feel safe and calm, but it is important to do this without any expectation that they will accept or that this will change their behaviours in the short term. Expectations often invite feelings of fear and shame in children and young people who have experienced trauma because they fear letting their caregivers down and being rejected, which is likely to escalate behaviour rather than reduce it. Once you understand what the iceberg for the child or young person is underneath, alternative strategies can be offered to meet their needs. For example, if the child or young person uses stealing to help themselves feel more awake and alert, caregivers could offer to do big body movements together such as jumps, shouts or active play instead. You can explore lots of options with the child or young person (such as going for a walk, reading a book, listening to music or playing video games) so they can rely on their caregiver (instead of the stealing) to help manage their feelings.

### **(Gently) praise changes in behaviour**

Praise the child or young person when they don't take something that they usually would. For example, *"Thanks for leaving my earrings on the dressing table today"* or *"Thanks for sticking to your party bag and leaving the others today."* Be sure to praise any disclosures about things that have been stolen or attempts to seek help to avoid stealing as well. For example, say *"Thank you for telling me you were feeling that way. I'm so glad I can be here to help you"*. Keep praise brief and matter of fact so the child or young person can absorb what is being said and to avoid anxiety or false expectations that they must continue to do this in the future.

### **Additional considerations when providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.**

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people need to be understood within the context of historical, political and systematic disadvantages and the ongoing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. When caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, caregivers should ensure that they have received appropriate training and support from their caregiver support agency or the relevant departmental staff. When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are cared for by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caregivers, children are likely to experience culture shock which impacts on their ability to form and maintain relationships. Therefore, caregivers should develop an understanding of the child or young person's cultural background to strive to create a culturally safe and inclusive environment to strengthen their relationship with the child or young person and to continue to offer repair opportunities, including when a rupture occurs.

When caring for and thinking about the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, additional factors that may contribute to their needs and behaviour need to be considered. These include cultural and intergenerational trauma caused by harmful practices associated with colonisation such as forced dispossession of land and Country, forced suppression of culture, the Stolen Generations, assimilation policies, and systemic racism and oppression. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families may also hold broader notions of wellbeing that include spirituality, community, and interconnectedness with land that must be recognised and supported.

Historical injustices have shaped socioeconomic conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. This influences opportunities, access to resources, and perceptions of property and ownership. Socioeconomic disadvantages lead to reliance on survival strategies, which may include stealing. Like all children and young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people may engage in stealing to meet basic needs or obtain items they perceive as unattainable through legitimate means. In culture ways, there are diverse perspectives on property, ownership, and sharing. Traditional cultural values emphasise communal ownership of resources and reciprocity. The introduction of Western concepts of property and ownership conflicts this way of doing. A behaviour which overtly appears malicious may exhibit an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant, child or young person who is caught between these different world views.

## Additional considerations when providing care for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background may also engage in stealing as a survival strategy. Therefore, it is important for caregivers to receive additional information, training and support from their caregiver support agency or relevant departmental staff when caring for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Caregivers can connect with local CALD organisations to continue to enhance their understanding of the child or young person's cultural background and the impact of it on their worldview.

### Iceberg model in action

#### Leo in family based care

7-year-old Leo often takes his caregivers hair ties and jewellery and hides them under his pillow. Leo's caregiver knows that he experienced severe neglect and spent long periods of time shut into his room alone. Leo was regularly prevented from being close to his parents (when in their care). When Leo found things that belonged to his parents, he would keep these as treasures and hold them during the night because they helped him feel less alone.

Leo's caregiver listens to the messages underneath his behaviour – *"You are important to me. I would like to feel close to you. I am still learning other ways to do this but for now I know that this works."*

Leo's caregiver responds by letting him choose a safe item to keep under his pillow for as long as he likes. His caregiver also sets up other ways for Leo to feel close like putting photos of them with Leo where he can see them, drawing pictures on post-its and sticking them around his bed, and letting Leo wear one of their old t-shirts to sleep in.

#### Ashley in residential care

15-year-old Ashley often steals small, inexpensive items from others around her. Recently she was also caught taking small items from the local shop. Ashley's residential care workers know that she grew up in a chaotic environment with adults who rarely noticed her or what she was doing. Ashley is often quiet, shut down and withdrawn. It's hard to talk with her about the stealing but she did once say it helped her feel *"more alive."*

Ashley's residential care workers listen to the messages underneath her behaviour – *"I feel so far away from things – I need to do something to help me wake up! Nobody notices me anyway. Nobody cares what I do."*

Ashley's residential care workers respond to the underlying needs by offering more one-on-one time to Ashley (even though she rarely accepts), making an effort to notice and comment on small things in Ashley's day, increasing supervision when they are at the shops together and encouraging Ashley to speak to a therapist who can help her work on other ways to get what she needs. Ashley's residential care workers also talk with her about other things that make her feel *"more alive"* and organises some good quality headphone so that Ashley can listen to loud, stimulating music when she is going into the shops.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact your case worker for further support.