

Respecting the Property of Others

My granddaughter, Lacey, and I began to work on the story called *Finders Keepers* when we had some issues around stealing (or as Lacey called it at the time, “borrowing”). My class was also having issues with the same thing. They had been working for weeks, preparing oral reports about endangered animals. For extra credit, Marla, a third grader, had designed a game the class was going to play. She planned to give each student a little candy bar whenever someone came up with the correct answer to questions she would pose. When it came time to play the game, Marla went back to gather her materials and found the bag of candy bars was missing. A huge commotion ensued as students voiced their accusations and upset over the missing treat. As I watched different student responses around the room, I found myself focusing in on Shayna who was avoiding meeting anyone’s eyes. When the class headed down to PE, I asked Shayna to stay behind. I asked her what she thought about not getting to play Marla's game. Again she looked down, refusing to meet my eyes and mumbled something about not feeling very good about it. I asked her if something was bothering her and she confessed that she had taken the candy. She went to her backpack and pulled out the half-eaten bag of candy bars. Shayna admitted that she came into the classroom while I was at lunch and the class was at recess to help herself to the candy bars.

I knew Shayna’s single mom really struggled to make ends meet. Shayna struggled in school and rarely returned homework or class projects on time. On occasions when I had phoned her home, I found Shayna home alone except for her 6th grade brother. Mom worked long hours, usually not arriving home until after 7:00 p.m. I decided rather than overburden a Mom who already seemed completely overwhelmed, I would try to handle this incident on my own.

I asked Shayna if she wanted to hear a story about a time when I was a little girl and had a problem stealing something that belonged to a classmate. She agreed, so I told her an oral version of the *Finder's Keepers* story recorded below. I showed her my Dad's magnifying glass that I always keep in my desk at school. Shayna agreed that she needed to do something to make things right with Marla and the rest of the class. Over the next few days, Shayna gave up her recesses to stay in with me while we worked on writing and illustrating a copy of *Finders Keepers*. I also arranged for her to work with me after school to do jobs in the classroom in exchange for buying another bag of candy to repay Marla. When we were ready, Shayna and I presented her book to the class. In private, she quietly handed over the bag of candy and apologized to Marla for taking it.

Whenever I tell this story to a class, I always show students my Dad's magnifying glass. I allow them to use it in our Science Discovery Center as long as they remember how special it is to me and treat it with respect. Students know that if they are really tempted to take something, they can come to me and we'll talk about it. We'll come up with a way they can do work to earn the object of their desire or something similar.

Finders Keepers

One day in March, Lilly, Lacey, and Zoë were playing upstairs while Nana was downstairs cooking dinner. She was making one of her granddaughters' favorite meals of mashed potatoes, corn, and "chicken-on-the-bone" (kid language for drumsticks) for dinner. She heard a huge commotion upstairs and then saw Zoë and Lacey coming down the stairs. As they descended, Zoë was trying to pull something out of Lacey's hands. "Give it to me, Lacey," she demanded.

Lacey exclaimed, "Zoë, stop pulling on me. You'll knock me down the stairs!"
The girls were pushing and pulling each other as they continued down.

"Girls, girls what's going on? Be more careful. Someone could get hurt if you continue to push like that on the stairs," Nana warned.

As the girls reached the landing, Nana asked, "What are you two arguing about anyway?"

Zoë yelled, "Lacey stole Lilly's chapstick."

"I did not. I just borrowed it." Lacey replied.

Just then Lilly came running down the stairs. "Hey, Lacey, give me that. You stole my chapstick and I've been looking everywhere for it."

"No, I just **borrowed** it," Lacey replied.

"Liar, you stole it. You always take my stuff and use it and you never ask my permission," Lilly screamed.

Nana coaxed her granddaughters, "Girls enough of that yelling. We need to calm down so we can talk this over. Why don't we go into the living room and sit down. I'll tell a Sister Story. Then, when we are all settled down, we can try to solve this problem peacefully."

Lacey said, "I do want to hear a Sister Story, but I'm still mad at you Lilly." She went into the living room and flung herself down on the couch."

"Humph. You big stealer," Lilly crossed her arms and grumpily went to sit in the rocker.

"Can I sit by you, Nana?" Zoë asked.

Nana patted the seat next to her and said, “Sure Zoë. Sit right here and I’ll start our story.”

One day when I was in first grade I walked into my classroom. I went back to the coat closet to hang my things on my hook. As I was leaving the coat closet, I stepped on something. I bent down to look and saw that I had stepped on a magnifying glass. It was about 6 inches long and had a black metal handle. “Wow. This is really cool. I’ve always wanted a magnifying glass. I could use it to look at the bugs and rocks and leaves in my secret hiding place. Lucky for me, “Finders are keepers and losers are weepers,” I thought to myself as I put the magnifying glass in my book bag.

After the bell rang to start the day, we read a cute story about this girl named Jane and her friend Dick and how they played with their cat named Puff. Then, we did some math. I loved math. Then, after recess it was time for Show and Tell. A boy in my class named Jim went back to the coat area to get his Show and Tell out of his bookbag. He rummaged all through the bag, and then checked his pockets. He searched all around on the floor by his coat. He came back to the gathering spot on the carpet where all the class was gathered in a Sharing Circle. “I can’t find my Show and Tell. It was a really cool magnifying glass. It was about this big and had a black handle. I must have left it at home. Can I bring it tomorrow for Show and Tell?” Jim asked.

“Sure, Jim, that would be fine,” our teacher answered.

The rest of the school day was awful. We had sausage with sauerkraut and lima beans for lunch. “Yuck!”

I turned to the girls and explained, “When I went to school, you didn’t get to choose what you wanted to eat. You were given whatever was served and it was expected that you had to eat every bite before you could go out to recess.”

“Boy, I’m sure glad I didn’t go to school in the olden days,” Lacey exclaimed.

Nana smiled at Lacey and continued on with the story.

In the afternoon we had a spelling test. Usually I got 100% on all my spelling words, but that afternoon I missed more words than I got right. After school my friend Judy said she couldn’t walk home with me. Her mom was picking her up because they had to go to the dentist. I was sad because I had hoped we could play together after school. When I got home, I got in a fight with my brother Pete and had to go stand in the corner. I wasn’t very hungry at dinnertime. Mom saw me picking at my food and thought that I was getting sick, so she sent me to bed early.

That night I tossed and turned and had a hard time settling down. When I finally did get to sleep, I dreamed about a monster chasing me. The weird thing was the monster was shaped like a giant magnifying glass with legs. It kept shooting beams of light at me to try to catch me on fire. I woke up when I fell out of bed. I was all tangled in my sheets and covered in sweat. Just then the alarm went off. It was time for me to get up and get ready for school.

When I got to school, I saw Jim in the coat closet. I hurried over and handed him the magnifying glass. He said, “Hey, where did you find my magnifying glass? I’ve been looking all over for it.”

“Well, er, um...” I cleared my throat and said, “I picked it up off the floor yesterday. I didn’t know it was yours. I figured, “Finders are Keepers” so I stuck it in my

bag. When I heard you telling the teacher about it, I knew it belonged to you, but I was too embarrassed to say anything. Besides, I really wanted a magnifying glass like that. Then I had a terrible day yesterday and last night I couldn't get to sleep. That's why I brought it back to school to give to you." As I handed the magnifying glass to Jim I said, "Sorry."

"Thanks for bringing it back. That must have been really hard for you to do. No one would have ever known. When I told my Mom that the magnifying glass was missing, she thought I had probably dropped it on my way to school yesterday."

"Nana, I'm glad you gave that boy back his magnifying glass. He was probably really sad," Lilly said.

"Here, Lilly. This is yours," Lacey admitted while handing over the tube of chapstick.

"Thanks, Lacey. It's OK if you use it sometimes. I just wanted you to ask me first," Lilly replied.

"Sorry, Lilly." Lacey apologized.

Zoë said, "Nana, I wish I had a magnifying glass."

"Would you like to see the magnifying glass I have now?" Nana questioned. "It's very special to me because it was my Dad's. It's one of the few things of his I still have."

"Oh, wow! Can I use it? I could take it outside and look at bugs and things?" Zoë asked.

"Sure, as long as you take good care of it. You can go outside now until it's time for dinner."

“Yippee. C’mon Sisters. We can take turns.” Zoë called as she ran out the back door and out onto the deck.

There are many reasons why a child might steal something that doesn't belong to him or her. These reasons differ from child to child, or a child might steal for more than one reasons. Some common reasons are:

- The child may want a toy, and take it. The action might be impulsive, but he or she knows it isn't right if the object is hidden.
- Many teens are caught shoplifting as a result of peer pressure. To make themselves look better in the eyes of their peers, some students may steal an item and then brag and show it off to their friends.
- Low self-esteem coupled with personal, home or school difficulties sometimes causes children to steal. After all, negative attention is better than no attention, and these children are desperately in need of someone to pay attention to them.
- Parents may knowingly or unknowingly reinforce stealing behavior. Parents who do not question their children when they show up with things that do not belong to them may be reinforcing the behavior.
- Children learn by watching what is modeled. Parents who take things that do not belong to them, for example, parents who take supplies from the office for use at

home, may be teaching their children that in some instances stealing is all right.

- Some children live in poverty. They have little or no money of their own to buy what they want. Children who don't have their own money to spend may steal what they want.
- Sometimes children steal as a symptom of some underlying behavioral or emotional problem.

Discussion Starters:

- Have you ever had problems taking or being tempted to take something that you knew belonged to someone else?
- Has anyone ever taken something that belonged to you? What happened? How did you feel? What did you do about it?

