When the child steals, ask yourself these questions:

- Is the child scared?
- Is the child angry?
- Is the child excited/happy?
- What is the child’s immediate reason for stealing?
- What other motivation might exist for the child to steal?
- What situations, if any, predictably lead to this behavior?
- How do I feel when this happens?
- Do my feelings/reactions provide a clue to why the child feels or behaves this way?
- Do I need to gather more information about the situation before taking action?

Methods for Responding to Stealing:

- Focus on your relationship with the child/youth:
  - Remind the child/youth that you care about him/her.
  - Ask the child/youth if he/she feels cared for by you.
  - Ask the child/youth for positive examples of how you care for him/her.
  - Ask the child/youth what he or she thinks your responsibilities are as a parent with respect to the child’s well-being. Make sure it includes care, safety, good relationships with others, satisfied needs, and skill development.
  - Invite the child/youth to evaluate your relationship: Is it good? Supportive? Unfulfilling? Other?
Focus on the behavior

- Send a clear I-message describing the specific behavior. Saying, “I get angry/concerned when you take money from my purse without asking,” is much more specific than, “I don’t like it when you steal,” or “Why did you steal from me?”

- Insist on restitution for stealing and avoid humiliating the child. This can be done by having the child replace any money or tangible object that has been stolen. Another form of restitution is to have the child “work off” the debt if he/she is unable to replace the stolen item. Explore alternatives with the child to determine other methods of restitution. Having the child apologize to the person from whom he or she stole is an important part of restitution.

Share your honest feelings of embarrassment, anger, or disappointment when the child steals. Be sure the child knows that your feelings are about his or her behavior and not about the child. Do not make the child feel unduly ashamed or guilty.

- Explain the legal consequences of stealing. Court probation or detention in a juvenile institution are possible consequences if the youngster is caught by someone who wants to press charges.

- Explore with the child his or her reasons for stealing. Demonstrate your understanding by using reflective listening.

Preventing/Reducing Stealing:

- Establish property rights for everyone in the household. Be sure the child knows what property is communal (can be taken without asking) and what things are the property of others.

- Teach the child about the necessity of obtaining permission to use others’ belongings and returning them when finished.

- Provide access to a source of income, for example, an allowance, so the child/youth has the resources to purchase, or to save toward the purchase of, desired objects.

- Remove temptation in the environment. For example, keep personal items of value or money out of sight or in a safe place, if you suspect the child is tempted to steal.
• Establish clear, specific rules about stealing. Make sure the rules are enforceable, that they are understood by the child, and that they carry specific consequences that will immediately follow the behavior.

• Make sure the child is getting a lot of affection, especially from the adults in the family.

Note: Children or youth who steal compulsively and do not respond to actions described in this activity may require professional help. If any stealing especially worries you, discuss the situation with a caseworker at the agency from which you brought the child into your home. Stealing by teens may be harder to stop than stealing by a younger child.