

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Have you ever been tempted to steal? Most people have at one time or another. A child's notion of what belongs to him and what are another's possessions is an issue gradually learned.

Given several youngsters in the family, each learns at an early age which clothing, toys, books, even his place at the table, are his own.

Identical-looking items are instantly recognized by their rightful owners. A book may have a worn corner or torn page. A sock may have stretched at the ankle or faded in the wash. A belt or ribbon is worn, creased or frayed in a certain way, making it different from every other.

What toddler, playing with a neighbor's child, hasn't coveted some toy and wanted to take it home? The lesson of belongings, and the rights of other people to keep what is theirs, is one most children learn before they enter school.

As youngsters grow older, they find the world is full of things they'd like to own, but can't. They discover libraries are full of books they may borrow but must return, candy shelves in supermarkets are loaded with goodies that must be paid for, department stores display thousands of items to attract potential customers.

They must all be purchased, though, and children are as acquisitive as adults.

Sometimes children steal from stores the things they want. Sometimes adults do the same thing.

What do you do, as a security officer, when you catch a juvenile with a carton of cigarettes wrapped in a raincoat?

Some security officers will call the child's parents.

What do you do, as a parent, when you're told your son or daughter has been shoplifting?

Some fathers and mothers deny their child could be guilty. When asked to come into the store and pick up their youngster, their embarrassment is expressed an anger with

the security people; the youngster, then, feels vindicated and absolved of guilt. His folks are mad with the guard.

Will that response encourage the youngster to quit stealing? Or will it convince him he has a right to take things that don't belong to him? If his parents punish him, do they make it clear he's being punished for stealing, not because he got caught?

The first time a child is discovered by a parent to have helped himself to a candy bar, a toy or a trinket, he may have been allowed to keep it. The message this imparts is clearly, "It's only a little thing. Not important enough to make a fuss about."

He learns that stealing, sometimes, isn't punishable.

As he reaches his teens, helping himself without asking or paying is a simple extension of the earlier experience.

The first time an adult is tempted to take something without paying for it, he may rationalize the crime. He may be in a hurry, the salesperson busy, and he may impatiently assure himself his time is more valuable than the item he came to purchase.

"I've earned the value of this thing," he says to himself, "just standing around here waiting to buy it." And he walks out with it in his pocket.

Even people who've been brought up to believe it's wrong to take what doesn't belong to them sometimes convince themselves it's okay to take "little things" or "cheap things" or things easy to conceal.

There's another shoplifting group who see themselves as victims. They convince themselves they are justified "because the price of everything else is so high." They feel they are entitled to "get back at the store" in this way.

Once justification is achieved, the rest is easy. And the second heist is easier than the first one.

To some, the ever-present danger of being caught is a deterrent; to others, it's a challenge.

Security guards are trained to recognize the behavior of different types of shoplifters. The customer who is indecisive (waiting for the clerk to be distracted), or the juvenile who is flushed and watching other shoppers as well as salespersons (afraid someone is looking at him) give themselves away.

Even though they may not be aware of it and believe they're unobserved, security personnel are alert to their typical behavior.

What many unprofessional shoplifters don't know is that it's not necessary for a guard to wait until merchandise has been removed from the store. Taking it from department limits, or concealing merchandise for later pick-up, or hiding merchandise from view, are all evidence of intent to steal. Large stores prosecute anyone they believe is guilty.

The growing crime of shoplifting costs the honest consumer hard-earned dollars. The merchant cannot remain in business unless he recoups his losses, so he build into his prices an allowance for "shrinkage" to balance what's taken and not paid for.

In Massachusetts alone, annual losses of between \$10 and \$15 million are estimated to be attributable to shoplifters. While around half that amount is accounted for in the Boston area, there's hardly a merchant in the state who reports he's never had merchandise pilfered from his premises.

Adult women are less apt than adult men to be suspected of shoplifting because they move freely throughout most departments of all shops and stores. On the other hand, women make good store detectives, for the same reason.

Supermarkets are a favorite target of the female thief.

Statewide, \$5,000,000 in groceries are stolen every year.

Since most groceries are purchased by adult women, we must concede that most grocery thievery is women's work.

How do they operate? Sometimes jar caps are interchangeable, and if the price is marked on the lids, the caps can be switched. A stick of margarine can be replaced with a stick of butter. Price labels can be switched from one package to another.

Records show, however, there's no typical shoplifter: they come from all walks of life. Professional men, as well as their wives, have been caught and found guilty. Nurses, teachers, accountants, secretaries may shoplift. Store employees, even security guards, have attempted to relieve the economic pinch by stealing from their employers.

Yet security chiefs of large stores find that most people collared have more than enough money to pay for what they've lifted, and are neither underprivileged or needy.

Shoplifting is a social problem as well as a crime. Too many people look upon it as no more serious than a minor traffic violation - something that doesn't really matter much.

Minor traffic violations, however, aren't crimes. A conviction on larceny charges results in a criminal record. If the property stolen has a value in excess of \$100, the charge is a felony and can result in a jail sentence.

Family training together with educational programs in schools and community projects to inform children, and adults as well, about the seriousness of shoplifting and the possible penalties, have been successfully conducted in some communities in Massachusetts. In Wayland, for example, shoplifting crimes have almost been eliminated.

Little children must learn about ownership, borrowing and buying. Older children must learn self-discipline and ways to earn enough to buy things they want.

Adults need to teach their children right from wrong, and they need to exercise their own moral principles and acknowledge shoplifting as the crime it is.