

When Stealing is Not a Crime

A 16-year-old is arrested for shoplifting candy bars from the local convenience store. An 18-year-old is arrested for stealing food from the neighbor's freezer. A 40-year-old is arrested when he eats a large meal at a restaurant but has no money to pay for it. A 12-year-old steals cake from the neighbor's outdoor family gathering.

What do these individuals have in common? They all have Prader-Willi syndrome (PWS). PWS is the most common genetic cause of life-threatening obesity that has been identified.

Due to a genetic abnormality, individuals with PWS constantly feel as though they are starving. Sneaking and stealing food is common. The brain does not receive the message that the stomach is full; thus, individuals always feel hunger. This constant hunger, coupled with a lack of impulse control, can create legal problems for individuals with PWS and their caregivers.

We live in a society where food is everywhere, and it is impossible to avoid situations where an individual with PWS might try to steal food. Currently, there is no medication that is effective in controlling the drive for food experienced by individuals with PWS. Further, individuals with PWS cannot be taught to control or manage their constant drive for food.

Does this mean someone with PWS should be allowed to steal food or items in exchange for food? No. Individuals with PWS are not criminals. They have an internal drive to gain access to food. It is crucial to stress the importance of obeying the law and not stealing and providing preventative measure to discourage such behavior. When an individual lacks internal control, we must help provide external measures to help with control.

What can we do to prevent food theft or stealing to get access to food?

- Provide constant supervision when in settings that an individual may be tempted to steal.
- Ensure the individual has support when in the community to help prevent theft.
- Establish concrete guidelines and expectations related to food and theft.
- Remind the individual of appropriate behavior when in stores or other areas that are tempting to take food or items.

- Educate neighbors and local law enforcement about PWS and the health and safety concerns related to unsecured food. For example, if a neighbor has a freezer in their garage ask that they keep it locked or the garage door closed.
- If there is a pattern of theft or behaviors related to attempts to get food or other items in stores, avoid taking the individual to the store for a predetermined period.
- Some individuals can't handle going into certain types of stores. If going grocery shopping or toy store always results in theft or a behavioral issue related to wanting something, don't put the individual with PWS in those situations.

Remember, individuals with PWS want to please others but many lack impulse control when they see something they want. As parents or caregivers, it is our job to provide them with support and supervision when there are temptations. It is also important to remember to provide praise for resisting temptations and to acknowledge positive behaviors.

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