



THE MEANING OF A CHILD'S STEALING AND OTHER ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR
PATRICK TOMLINSON (2014, Revised 2026)

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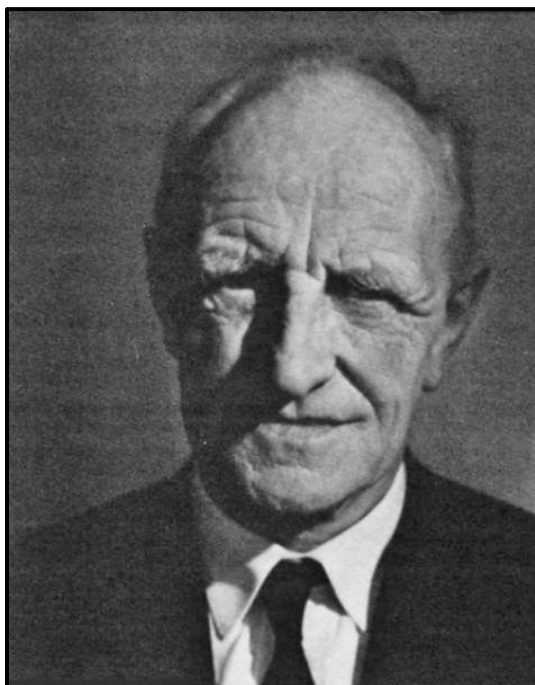
Of course, this is a complex subject, and there is a risk of making simplistic generalizations. So, the aim is just to give some food for thought that may broaden our perspective. The circumstances for each child and young person are unique, as is the potential meaning of their behaviour. That is an important starting point – all behaviour has meaning, however bizarre and bewildering it may seem.

What prompted me to write a blog on this subject was a comment by a psychologist, who said to me,

While culture has a significant influence on behaviour, stealing seems to be a universal theme across cultures, for children who are in care.

She wondered why.

Early on in my work as a care worker in a therapeutic community for boys who were severely traumatized by abuse and neglect, I was introduced to Donald Winnicott's (1984) concepts of the 'Antisocial Tendency' and ['Delinquency as a Sign of Hope'](#). These concepts were especially helpful then, and they still are now.



The children's behaviour in the therapeutic community could be extremely antisocial. The concepts provided a framework within which understanding could be made from what often seemed incomprehensible. Initially, a few simple points helped. Children who have been abused, hurt, rejected, and who do not trust adults will relentlessly test the patience, stability, and reliability of anyone who tries to care for them. This can be perceived as a necessary survival mechanism the child uses to hopefully arrive at the point where someone does survive him and becomes trustworthy in his eyes.

Unfortunately, many adults do not 'survive', and either they or the child leaves, so the pattern of rejection continues. Each time this happens, the problem is made worse for the child. So, the adult's survival is essential! This is the case not only for an individual working with the child but also for the team. The child will also test the family group's ability to survive together. Within the context of this difficult and often unpleasant work, it can be seen that there is a seed of hope. It would be more worrying if the child gave up and became

completely withdrawn. Usually, if a prolonged period of testing and challenging behaviour is survived, the child settles and begins to accept the care he so desperately needs and wants.

Before beginning work in a therapeutic community, I had seen little extremely unusual behaviour in children. Plenty of 'children being children', but nothing out of the ordinary. In the therapeutic community home, I began in, much of the behaviour was extremely unusual to me. One young person would eat the stuffing out of his bed cushions, and he was obsessed with the sewerage system. Another used to get out of his bed and sleep in his cupboard. Another ran off one night, found some old tins of paint in a shed, and emptied them into a decorative pond. I am not sure we ever figured out the meaning of all this behaviour, but we did try to think about it. Winnicott (1967) urges caution in expecting such a child to explain his behaviour,

The aggression is liable to be senseless and quite divorced from logic, and it is no good asking a child who is aggressive in this way why he has broken the window any more than it is useful to ask a child who has stolen why he took money.

With the boy, the paint, and the pond, maybe it was just a series of random opportunities and impulses. However, the pond was in the centre of the community, so the fact that the water had turned a whitish colour could not be missed in the morning. Ward (2011, p.5) gives a general explanation,

In the first place, this search for boundaries may be shown in the family, and in the form of stealing, disrupting, or doing other things which will draw attention to himself, giving him some sense (however negative) of agency in the world.

The young boy had certainly gained everyone's attention, and maybe that was what he needed. However, an incident like this can easily go wrong, especially if the pond had fish in it, which it did! The consequences of the action can become a bigger nuisance than the child intended. And instead of helping him to be understood, which may have been his unconscious hope, causes a harsh reaction without understanding. Winnicott (1956, p.309) explains the nature of the difficulty and the hope,

The antisocial tendency implies hope. Lack of hope is the basic feature of the deprived child who, of course, is not all the time being antisocial. In the period of hope, the child manifests an antisocial tendency. The understanding that the antisocial tendency is an expression of hope is vital in the treatment of children who show the antisocial tendency. Over and over again one sees the moment wasted, or withered, because of mismanagement or intolerance. This is another way of saying that the treatment of the antisocial tendency is not psychoanalysis but management, a going to meet and match the moment of hope.

As Winnicott explained, it can seem ironic that just at the point when things begin to feel hopeful, the child's behaviour can appear to get worse. On this occasion, we did manage to tolerate the boy's behaviour and work well with him. Often, thinking about why a child did

something would offer some useful insight. This kind of thinking about meaning is central to the psychodynamic approach. Comparing this with a cognitive approach and a focus on developing strategies to manage behaviour, Schmidt Neven (1997, p.4) says,

However, in using a psychodynamic approach, one would view the problem in a different way. First of all, one would postulate that the destructive behaviour is in itself *an important communication*. It might, in the context of the family, be the only way in which the child is able to communicate something about what he or she feels. So we would ask the question ‘What lies behind the destructive behaviour?’ The other question we would ask is ‘Why does this behaviour emerge *at this particular point in time*?’ So the questions ‘*What does it mean?*’ and ‘*Why now?*’ are all-important.

Adrian Ward (2011, p.4) wrote about these concepts and considered them concerning the riots that took place in England in 2011. Referring to Winnicott, he states,

The first thing to be clear about is that he sees the antisocial tendency as being universal: in a refreshingly ‘normal’ way, he acknowledges that every child has, in effect, both social and antisocial tendencies. At this point, I must ask those readers whose own childhood was without blemish to ‘look away now’ – those who never deliberately swore, broke anything, shouted at their dear mother or pushed their sibling off his or her perch from time to time.

Interesting that Winnicott, as with the psychologist I mentioned, also referred to the antisocial tendency as universal. One of the tasks of being a parent or carer, as Ward and Winnicott point out, is providing the child with clear and appropriate boundaries. At the same time, it is important to recognize and have empathy for the fact that healthy development requires the child to push against these boundaries. Sometimes the child might need to go over the boundaries to experience what it is like on the other side. The child psychotherapist Adam Phillips (2009), in his paper ‘In praise of difficult children’, explains the paradox this creates,

The upshot of all this is that adults who look after adolescents have both to want them to behave badly, and to try and stop them.

Antisocial behaviour becomes a more worrisome problem when it is not responded to and contained within the family or caretaking setting. The child in this instance is then likely to seek boundaries outside of the family home. Still, there may be an underlying hope within the child that his behaviour will alert his primary caregivers.

Ward (p.5) explains,

It is as if, in Jan Abrams’s words, ‘the individual is searching for an environment that will say *no* – not in a punitive way, but in a way that will create a sense of security’ (Abrams 1996, p.54). This is largely an unconscious search, of course, in which the child is repeatedly driven to seek out something which is instinctively felt to be missing.

Many parents will have received the occasional cautionary letter from the school principal or even the police, and this has been enough to alert the parents to their child's needs, whatever they may be. However, when this type of scenario is not responded to well, the child's behaviour may worsen. Over time, he may become hardened to living in a world where he feels his needs cannot be understood and met. He may then begin to seek ways of gratifying his own needs. Antisocial behaviour may take on a secondary gain, such as feeling excitement, power, and delinquent status. Dealing with this problem is far more difficult and highlights the importance of noticing and responding to signs of antisocial behaviour early on.

This brings me back to the issue of stealing and why it is often one of the first acts of the antisocial tendency across cultures. One universal fact regarding child development is that a child cannot grow and develop without something good and nurturing from adult carers. The child has an instinct for this and behaves in such a way as to elicit the positive response of a carer to his needs, normally the mother to begin with. This has been called 'attachment seeking' behaviour. When a child loses something that felt good, however short or fleeting it was, he is deprived and wishes to return to the positive state that has been lost.

Adam Phillips (1988, p.17), in his book on Winnicott, explains that when a child in this situation steals, he is not specifically interested in the 'thing' he steals. He is stealing, in symbolic form only, what once belonged to him by right, and which has been lost. He is also 'alerting the environment to this fact' and testing the environment's tolerance towards the nuisance value of such behaviour (Barton, Gonzalez, and Tomlinson, 2012, p.95). This type of stealing can be understood as an unconscious impulse. It is such a primitive instinct that it can be expected to be a universal phenomenon of childhood deprivation. Maybe even the word stealing is not appropriate, as it is so easily misunderstood in a negative judgmental way.

Often, the most helpful way to respond is to consider that the child may be looking for his needs to be met within the context of a nurturing relationship. In my experience, once this happens, the 'antisocial tendency' is likely to disappear at least to what is within the realm of ordinary child development. Ward (p.7) concludes that the concept of the 'Antisocial Tendency' and 'Delinquency as a Sign of Hope',

... was and still remains one of Winnicott's most remarkable and profound insights.

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Winnicott's "Good-Enough Mother" – online article (2013). It does strike me how much some of his concepts still resonate so powerfully. The concept of being good-enough has often been a salvation! <http://panathinaeos.com/2013/05/12/winnicotts-good-enough-mother/>

Comments made in response to this article.

"For there is such a devoted mother or someone dear behind many successful children and adults, too. How to raise understanding of this parenting, how to empower parents - of own or foster or caregivers to treat their children using this attitude and approaches - this is an issue."
Gulchekhra Nigmadjanova, Advocacy Advisor at SOS Children's Villages, Uzbekistan

"I agree with you that stealing is almost always universal among children who have been abused, traumatized, hurt, or rejected. Loved how you referenced Donald Winnicott's (1984) 'Antisocial Tendency' and 'Delinquency as Sign of Hope,' which was especially interesting, and his concepts appear to hold 30 years later: Abused, hurt, rejected children tend not to trust adults and will test the patience, stability, and reliability of anyone who tries to care for them. When a child steals an item, the item represents something of loss - it is a subconscious impulse.

Another vital concept by Winnicott: A child tests the family group's ability to survive together. Searching for boundaries in the family, a form of stealing, disrupting, or doing other things that will draw attention to himself, giving them a sense of control. The child may or may not know why he is doing such behaviours, only that it is self-soothing in ways that most people cannot understand. Over the years, I have concluded that children of trauma, abuse, neglect, abandonment, and rejection are only comfortable in chaotic environments - if there is no

chaos, they will create it, even though it was what they hated when in an actual, unsafe, chaotic environment. It seems that breaking this pattern is most difficult. My favorite concept Winnicott illustrates is,

'.... the treatment of the antisocial tendency is not psychoanalysis but management....' This supports Jan Abram's words when she wrote about Winnicott's work: '...the individual searches for an environment that will say NO - not in a punitive way, but in a way that will create a sense of security....' Which comes back around to your concept: '... One universal fact regarding child development is that a child cannot grow and develop without something good and nurturing from adult caregivers...'

The flow of all insights, Winnicott, Abrams, and yours, highlights very important concepts that all caregivers should be aware of. Families need access to such information/training when dealing with an antisocial behaving child - it is a vital part of the child's success as he learns to trust society. I reiterate; I speak from personal experience, having dealt with these issues for the last eight years - we were completely blindsided by all these behaviours and many more."

Bonnie Murphy, Consultant, Autism / Child Abuse Advocate, USA

"About the universal nature of anti-social behaviour!

I would there were no age between sixteen and twenty-three or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting. (Shakespeare, A Winter's Tale, 1623)"



Patrick Tomlinson Brief Bio: The primary goal of Patrick's work is the development of people and organizations. Throughout his career, he has identified development as the driving force related to positive outcomes for everyone, service users, professionals, and organizations.

Patrick's experience spans from 1985 in the field of trauma and attachment-informed services. He began as a residential care worker and has since been a team leader, senior manager, Director, CEO, consultant, and mentor. He is the author/co-author/editor of numerous papers and books. He is a qualified clinician, strategic leader, and manager. Working in many countries, he has helped develop therapeutic models that have gained national and international recognition.

In 2008, he created Patrick Tomlinson Associates to provide services focused on development for people and organizations. The following services are provided,

- ✓ Therapeutic Model Development
- ✓ Developmental Mentoring, Consultancy, and Clinical Supervision
- ✓ Character Assessment & Selection Tool (CAST) for Staff Selection and Development

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