

Juvenile Firesetters

Intervention Necessary

Fire has a powerfully emotional impact on most people. Any force so destructive can easily be misunderstood and, therefore, misused.

By far, one of the most devastating experiences a firefighter can have is finding a child who has been killed in a residential fire.



Too often the child is a victim of a fire he or she has started.

A fire set by a curious child can cause the same disastrous results as a fire set by a severely disturbed adolescent.

Curiosity about fire is normal in children two to seven years of age, who often display an interest by lighting small fires or playing with matches, lighters, or candles. They tend to regard fire as something warm, bright, and exciting, and do not realize the painful and destructive consequences of fire play. Curious fire setting can usually be handled by educating the children about the dangers of playing with fire, through educational intervention by fire service personnel or by the children's parents.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP?

It is very important that parents recognize the fact that a child's

interest and curiosity about fire must be met with information and education as early as the child exhibits this

acting before thinking, showing off, stealing, running away, being cruel to animals or smaller

It is very important that parents recognize the fact that a child's interest and curiosity about fire must be met with information and education as early as the child exhibits this need.



need. Punishment, discipline, and *scare tactics* will not necessarily satisfy a child's need to know about fire, its usefulness, and destructiveness. Parents need to seek assistance from their local fire department in obtaining information and approaches in teaching young children about fire.

In contrast to the curious firesetter, some children light fires due to emotional or mental disturbances. This is sometimes related to a major crisis or trauma in a child's life, such as moving to a new neighborhood, a death, or a divorce. Disrupted family relationships seem to be a common trait of the problem firesetter. If a child sets a fire and has a problem background, that child needs to be evaluated to determine motivation and appropriate intervention to meet the child's and the family's needs.

A common behavioral trait is a poor relationship with other children, often manifested by frequent jealousy, fighting, or breaking of toys. Such children may also be impulsive—

children, being impatient, and exhibiting extreme mood changes from happy to angry.

The ultimate goal is not only to stop the fire setting, but also to determine the underlying problem of such behavior. Early identification and treatment of disturbed children is essential if they are to lead a normal, happy life.

FIRE DEPARTMENTS OFFER PROGRAMS

Many fire departments have programs and educational intervention available for juvenile firesetters. Your local fire department is most willing to assist any family in evaluating their child's fire setting to determine if educational intervention or professional counseling will help to eliminate further fire setting incidents.

