



# INDIANA FIRE CHIEFS ASSOCIATION

**Public Education Division  
Indiana Safety Educators**



## **JUVENILE FIRESETTER AWARENESS AND INTERVENTION**

By Captain Dave Meadows  
Fort Wayne Fire Department, Safety Education Division

Fire-setting by children is a serious matter and should be treated as such. Too often, these behaviors are dismissed as a “phase” or “curiosity.” Children that set fires are not simply “playing.” There are serious ramifications of fire-setting, including death, injury, destruction of property, and legal involvement. For the past eleven years juveniles 18 years old and younger have accounted for over 50% of nationwide arson arrests. According to the FBI, arson has the highest rate of juvenile involvement of any crime they track.

Oftentimes, the child will not be forthcoming about their fire-setting behaviors. However, there are some warning signs to be aware of that may include:

- An intense interest or preoccupation with fires
- Evidence of damaged or burnt property (e.g. holes in carpet, frayed fabric, burnt papers, etc.)
- Matches and lighters out of place or missing
- Fire propellants (e.g. gas, kerosene) misplaced or a decreased amount of these propellants
- Burn marks on the child, child’s clothing, or child’s belongings

Although the characteristics of juvenile fire-setters can be quite varied, they may demonstrate some of the following qualities:

- Impulsivity
- Poor social skills
- Quick to anger, especially in stressful situations
- Limited awareness of self
- Acts in other antisocial ways

There are many reasons why a child may set a fire including:

- a reaction to something in their lives or environment (e.g. death, divorce, move)
- wanting to have a sense of control

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- a release of strong emotions
- a feeling of alienation due to learning disabilities, chronic failure, etc.

**There are four basic recognized types of firesetters.**

- 1) **Curious Firesetters:** These children initially set fires because of curiosity or by accident due to poor judgment. Often they don't understand the destructive nature of fire. They frequently have easy access to lighters, matches, etc. The child will generally set fires while he/she is unsupervised.
- 2) **Troubled Firesetters:** These children set fire due to mental or emotional issues. They set fires to act out emotions of anger, frustration, sadness, or feeling powerless. They will most likely continue to set fires until their needs are identified and met. These fire-setters are often considered to be "crying for help."
- 3) **Delinquent Firesetters:** These children usually have a history of starting fires. They often demonstrate other antisocial behaviors, such as lying, stealing, truancy, or drug use. They often set fires for excitement and as deliberate acts of vandalism.
- 4) **Severely Disturbed Firesetters:** These children usually have a chronic history of behavioral issues. Most of the time, these fire-setters will end up in correctional facilities or mental facilities.

When a parent/caregiver discovers a child is fire-setting, it is important they not over-react. The goal is to teach the child to respect fire, just as they would other dangerous things. Educate the child about how to use fire properly and safely. Inform the child about the dangers of fire-setting and why you are concerned. Parents need to take an active role in controlling the child's access to fire-related items, as well as setting good examples of safe ways to use fire. Remember, parents are usually the first people in a child's life to demonstrate how to work with fire. Parents are also the first line of defense in helping children learn the appropriate way to interact with fire.

These are some ways parents can help educate children about fire:

- Teach the child about the practical uses of fire
- Educate the child about the dangers of fire
- Don't allow anyone to use lighters or matches in an unsafe manner
- Inform child to let an adult know about any unattended matches or lighters they may find
- Don't leave children alone with an open flame
- Keep all matches and lighters out of reach of children

- Don't leave stoves or lighted candles unattended
- Install and maintain smoke alarms and fire extinguishers
- Plan and practice fire escape drills in your home
- If you suspect the child is using fire inappropriately, address the matter immediately and seek professional help

It must be understood that this behavior is not just “a phase kids go through” or “all boys do it” type of problem. This is serious, destructive, life-threatening behavior that needs to be controlled.

The fire service is normally the first resource the public turns to for help with juvenile firesetting issues and as such will need to be the “lead” organization in combating the problem. The purpose of a community juvenile firesetter intervention program is to help control this growing problem by assisting the entire family, not just the juvenile involved. Although an intervention program may not always stop that “first” fire it can help prevent a reoccurrence of the problem. The fire service cannot handle this problem alone, but with a network of like-minded individuals the problem can be positively affected.

For an intervention program to be most effective it needs input and cooperation of various community agencies beyond the fire department. These agencies should include at the very minimum mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, regional burn centers, police department, and the educational system. Other agencies that can be beneficial partners may include insurance companies, local media, pediatricians, civic groups, and local youth organizations.

The primary goals of a local firesetter intervention program are to identify the juvenile firesetter, to educate the firesetter and family, to evaluate the firesetter and family, and to refer the juvenile and/or family to the appropriate agency for further assistance. Secondary goals should include an ongoing juvenile fire safety education program in the schools and community awareness about the firesetting problem and assistance available.

The ideal model for a successful juvenile firesetter program should include:

- Primary prevention of first time firesetting through school curriculums and community safety education programs
- Early intervention by identifying children at risk, followed by a thorough evaluation, education, and referral process
- Core intervention with mental health evaluation and treatments to stop firesetting and/or prevention of anti-social and criminal behavior through the juvenile justice system

Remember, curiosity about fire is natural for children, but setting fire is not! The fire service can never ignore this growing problem and must always be prepared to assist these juveniles and their families.