

ADD and Firesetting: The Connection

by

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When children play with fire the results can be devastating, impacting their families and their communities as well as the children themselves. According to United States Fire Administration statistics, playing with fire is the leading cause of death for preschoolers and the second leading cause of accidental death for 5- to 14-year-old children in the United States.

In order to more effectively address this deadly problem, fire departments across the country have established juvenile firesetter intervention programs. Of the juveniles referred to these programs, higher percentages have ADD and other learning disabilities than are seen in the general population. Agencies in San Diego County, California are documenting that 20-40% of the juveniles who participate in their programs have been diagnosed with ADD or exceed the criteria described in DSM IV. Many interventionists suspect that the numbers are even higher. Why so many?

It appears that specific character traits common among kids with ADD and other learning disabilities can contribute to a child's interest in fire, including:

Impulsivity-- Children who are highly impulsive tend to be unable to consider the consequences of their actions as quickly as they are able to act. They discover the matches or lighter and start a fire without realizing what the outcome may be.

Risk taking-- Children who take risks crave that "adrenaline rush" and actively seek out activities and situations that can bring it on. Fire can offer the "ultimate" risk.

Hyperactivity-- Children who are excessively active are so driven to physically move that they have their hands on matches or lighters and are using them, almost in a single action. The drive to move overwhelms the opportunity to think.

High intelligence-- Children who are usually very bright and tremendously interested in the world around them often play with fire. Fire is fascinating and offers intellectual stimulation through experimentation.

Learning styles-- Children who "learn by doing" are curious about fire. Merely hearing that fire is dangerous does not mean as much to them as handling it and seeing what it can do in their own hands.

Difficulty retaining information-- Children who can be easily distracted and are very involved with multiple thoughts can forget previous experiences or lessons more easily. Memory problems can be inconsistent, depending on the situation and interest level.

Weak social skills-- Children who have trouble making and keeping friends often use poor judgement. Their impulsivity means saying hurtful things without thinking first. Difficulty focusing means that they miss important social clues. As a result, they desperately try to make friends, often with children who can be negative influences and they can be especially vulnerable to peer pressure in order to be accepted. Setting a fire may be another child's idea, but the child who is eager to please may agree to set a fire without considering the consequences to his own life.

Depression and other associated problems: Being misunderstood by family, school teachers, and others; while not knowing, themselves, why they do what they do, can lead to depression and anger in children. Learning disabilities and/or ADHD left undiagnosed can put success in the classroom even further out of reach. Low self-esteem and other emotional difficulties can be inevitable. Unable to express their feelings, the depression and anger can lead to self- and property-destructive behaviors. Also, the control they feel they have over fire seems to compensate for the lack of control they feel in their life.

What can a parent do for a child with ADD who plays with fire?

Acknowledge the problem-- While firesetting is serious; in fact, deadly serious, we often need to look at it as a symptom of other problems. Discovering that a child is playing with fire is no time to look the other way. It can be the opportunity to assess what is happening or not happening in the child's life.

If the parent has not done so already, **the local fire department should be contacted** and asked if they have a program for children who play with fire, staffed by persons who understand ADD and other learning disabilities. If not, a qualified mental health professional should be located.

Medical professionals should be consulted to rule out other health problems and for treatment options; making sure that the professional knows about the firesetting behavior.

All matches and lighters must be locked up. Smoke detectors should be installed in each bedroom and tested to make sure that they are working. Children with an interest in fire need constant, close supervision; necessary arrangements should be made to assure that it's available.

If he or she is mentally and physically capable, **the child can be allowed to use matches/lighters in appropriate situations**, like lighting candles or campfires, but only under close adult supervision. More importantly, the child's help should be enlisted to hunt for fire hazards around the home and act as a home "fire marshal" to heighten fire safety interest.

Children with ADD should be involved in other activities that they can enjoy to stay busy and fulfill the need for physical activity and risk taking. Sports, skateboarding, bicycle motocross racing, and karate are just a few options.

Keep in mind that the best approach to ADD is often three-fold-- Behavior modification, counseling, and medication.

- **Behavior modification:** Behavior modification requires a thorough understanding of how ADD works and what works most effectively for a specific child. It takes patience, consistency, and structure in a loving atmosphere.
- **Counseling:** In addition to being depressed and angry, a child with ADD and/or other learning disabilities can have low self-esteem and difficulty expressing feelings. Allowing him or her an opportunity to meet regularly with a mental health professional who understands can help a child cope with those feelings. Parents involved in the counseling process can be given the tools needed to better assist their children.
- **Medication:** Medication often has a bad reputation among those who do not understand how it works, and yet it is the most consistently effective way to help most children whose lives are impacted by their ADD. Dosage, unfortunately, may need to be adjusted several times to achieve the best possible effect. Ritalin is the most commonly prescribed medication and one of the safest drugs around, but if it proves unsuccessful, one of a variety of other medications is likely to work in its place. It's important to resolve that when impulsivity and other ADD characteristics are driving out-of-control fireplay and firesetting, medication should be seriously considered in order to protect the firesetter and his family.

If a child is not succeeding in school, testing should be requested in writing and, if indicated, an individualized education plan (IEP) initiated to determine what assistance can be provided. An effective IEP can be vital for assuring the school success that leads to improved self esteem. Within the scope of an IEP, a behavior intervention plan or mental health intervention as well as support for the family should be provided by the school if indicated.

Discipline as needed:

ADD and learning disabilities are not an excuse; even a child with special needs is still responsible for his actions and should be disciplined to discourage further fireplay. But discipline should be:

Immediate-- Waiting until Dad gets home or until there is time to take action means that the child is less likely to associate his misbehaving with the consequences. If too upset with the behavior and likely to overreact, however; time should be taken to withdraw and calm down or have someone else handle the situation.

Short term-- A child with learning disabilities or ADHD can forget the reason he's being punished if the consequences go on too long. Being put on restriction for several hours or

for the weekend can be effective, but for a month or more is non-productive and can fuel an already frustrated child's anger.

Appropriate-- Being different because of learning disabilities and impulsivity problems causes enough shame for many children. Degrading the child further is not productive. Discipline should not be demeaning or humiliating, but educational and administered only in love.

Reward positive behavior:

- Parents and teachers should look for the positive things a child does, including any efforts toward changing a problem behavior.
- A child should be praised when he or she immediately hands matches/lighters to an adult or pursues other, non-fire related interests.
- Carefully limited opportunities should be provided to show responsibility and earn further praise

Unfortunately, there is no way to guarantee that any approach will end a child's firesetting behavior, but, it is too important to give up on or ignore. A child who continues to play with fire needs the continuing support of his family, his school, and the community in order to re-direct his life.

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