

# Society's Influence On Youth Firesetting

By

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Children and fire, a dangerous and sometimes deadly mix. Why does this happen? What is it that brings the two together? Why is it happening with such alarming frequency? Could it be something as simple as a lack of knowledge or is it more complex in nature? Is a child's misuse of fire a cry for help, a reaction to some negative aspect of their life, or a means of control? Could the problem really stem from the caregivers lack of parenting skill and knowledge or could it even be the influence of our society and its views about fire?

Whatever the reason, the question remains "Why?" It is obvious that there are many influential pieces to consider when assembling this behavioral puzzle. This article attempts to examine some of these complex issues, answer some of the questions, and bring to the forefront information for those individuals who strive to better understand, and ultimately deal with, the juvenile firesetting problem in North America.

## **FIRE: FRIEND OR FOE?**

Which is greater, respect and reverence for fire or the fear of fire? To answer this is to solve one of the great mysteries that have faced the fire service in the United States since organized fire departments began fighting fires.

Ask any person you meet about their feelings toward fire and they will usually tell you of their fears. Deadly, dangerous, and uncontrollable are but a few of the adjectives that may be used to describe fire. This is understandable since fire causes millions of dollars worth of damage and thousands of deaths each year in the United States.

The interesting paradox to this issue is that some people will ritualize the use of fire and actually down play its seriousness when they experience it in their day-to-day lives. They may display little, if any, concern when the fire is small and in an easily managed quantity. Unfortunately, many of these same people have never heard the fire service axiom "big fires start small."

But have people always underestimated the power of fire? To understand the decline in respect for fire, one must first consider the evolution of fire use in our society.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF FIRE USE**

Throughout history, fire has been an essential part of human existence. Heating, cooking, warmth, and protection were some of the earliest uses. Later, it was harnessed to create

weapons and other materials to ultimately make life easier. But the presence of fire was always surrounded by a fine line between control and disaster.

No doubt early humans learned the hard way that fire is a powerful force. This probably accounts for the spiritual relationship of fire to many cultures throughout the world. Staying in the good graces of the gods that controlled fire was one of the surest ways to survive. Those cultures that most effectively harnessed the use of fire were able to develop the most effective weapons and tools. Developments such as these allowed the most fire sophisticated cultures to control and defeat their enemies.

In colonial times, as industrial processes evolved, fire began to bear a lesser resemblance to a dangerous and uncontrollable force. Attitudes also evolved. Fire was now relegated to more domestic tasks such as heating or illuminating homes and places of business. Devices had been created to contain fire in a relatively safe manner.

During these same times, fire departments and fire insurance, as we recognize them today, were not available. It was generally understood that an out of control fire could cause extensive damage to a home, neighborhood, or community. This realization was usually motive enough for respect.

In today's society, electricity has replaced most of the need for sizable amounts of fire. Light bulbs, heating elements, furnaces, and other like devices have replaced open flame while making day to day life more comfortable.

Today, particularly in the urban environment, open flame has very little practical application. Smoking, cooking, fireplaces, and candles are the primary uses (with fireplaces and candles usually being for aesthetics, not practical function). While these uses offer their own hazards, the fire is generally confined to a special device or used in such small quantities as to be easily controlled by an adult.

Fire has evolved from being a naturally occurring, little understood element into a very common device that is not recognized as a dangerous tool. What other factors have contributed to this decline in respect?

## **RITUALISTIC ISSUES**

Our society has many rituals that revolve around fire. Historically, fire has been seen as a symbol of life, power, strength and mystery. Humans have always tried to control what they idolize or do not fully comprehend. Fire certainly falls into this category.

Over the centuries, fire has wreaked havoc on the world and as a result, it was given god-like status. Today, fire is recognized as a chemical process that is, for all intents and purposes, a predictable process. This is quite a contradiction and may add to the misunderstanding of fire's status in today's society

Although not necessarily seen as rituals, birthdays are typically marked by the use of burning candles. Weddings often use a variety of candles including unity candles to symbolize the joining of two lives. The Olympic spirit is kept alive by the eternal Olympic flame that is shuttled from country to country. Even Hell is described as a place of eternal fire and damnation.

## **MEDIA ISSUES**

Fire can be visually spectacular. Nobody has made this more apparent than the movie industry. Almost every action film made will have some sort of fire/explosion scene within it. Movies such as Lethal Weapon and Rambo are but two of many examples. Usually, the hero escapes unscathed and evil may be obliterated. The fire is often portrayed in unrealistic terms. Fires burn without smoke and fire does not extend beyond the object that is burning.

Even comedies often show the bumbling goofball stumble into a fire situation that leaves him blackened and smoldering, but unharmed.

Television is not much different than the movie industry. A trend for the 1990's involves showcasing the real life stories of emergency responders. These shows are based on real incidents but sometimes place much of the focus on the spectacular aspects of fire and rescue with less emphasis on the realities. Because the emphasis is on heroism, tragic endings are rarely shown.

Music has long used fire to symbolize strength, love, and desire. Today's modern music, such as Garth Brooks' "Standing Outside The Fire", often reference fire in misleading ways. Music videos and concert presentations sometimes use elaborate pyrotechnics that build on this association leaving the listener/viewer with another misleading representation of fire as a spectacular, yet easily controlled force.

Advertisements, in any form, also use similar techniques. One example was a commercial for Taco Bell featuring Shaquille O'Neal. The commercial showed a flaming basketball being slam dunked by Shaq. Then, as he runs back up court, Shaquille himself is covered in fire. He turns to the camera and says "Is it hot in here or is it just me?" Although Taco Bell did respond to fire service concerns and modified the commercial, millions of people, particularly children, viewed this message that is contrary to the most basic of fire survival skills; stop, drop, and roll.

This continuous barrage of misinformation is slowly desensitizing the public's already limited respect for fire. Sad to say, a solution to this problem is not likely to be provided by any one person. Collectively, however, we do stand a chance to make a difference.

By working together and being vigilant about bringing inaccurate depictions of fire to the attention of the media and advertisers, change can occur. Use community resources, such as child advocate groups, to back-up your position. The Beavis and Butt-head controversy is a good example of a positive media change.

We, as fire and life safety educators, must maintain an on-going effort to gain the support of the media and convince them of the powerful influence they have over this important topic.

## **PARENTAL ISSUES**

The majority of our society is made up of adults. Many of these adults are parents. Children collect the majority of their knowledge from the modeled behavior of the adults in their family unit. When adult behavior models a lack of respect for fire, then children learn not to respect fire as well.

Cigarettes may offer the best example. Children, who watch an adult light-up thousands of times each year, are usually not being given a valuable lesson in fire safety with each light. In fact, just the opposite is often true. Adults are not only using items such as matches and lighters carelessly, but they are making these same dangerous tools more readily available to the child. While a great deal of data indicates that a high percentage of firesetters come from homes with parental smokers, there is no clear evidence to say that smoking adults will have children predisposed to firesetting behavior. However, access to matches and lighters does increase the probability of such behavior since the availability of matches and lighters closely correlates to firesetting behavior.

Human beings are primarily visual learners. When adults preach safety to children but turn around and engage in unsafe behavior, the visual message is given the highest priority by the child. The old parental saying "do as I say, not as I do" just does not work.

The alarming aspect of the visual messages provided by the family is their unintentional nature. Most often, adult unsafe or careless behavior is simply familiarity breeding contempt for fire related issues. This contempt reduces adult concern and understanding. As fire becomes less understood, the accompanying apathy is passed along to new generations, thus perpetuating the problem.

When family behavior does influence children in the direction of firesetting, some unique dynamics can be found. One common thread that seems to connect all aspects of the juvenile firesetting problem is a low level of parenting skill.

Parenting skill is a term with a wide range of meaning. It can range from the inadequate allotment of parental time with the child to a total lack of effective discipline. Typically, it falls somewhere in-between.

Some families are very effective at many levels yet deficient at, perhaps, one or two skills. This is a common problem since no one parent or person is good at everything. However, when families are ill-equipped to provide a safe environment or set a responsible example, dangerous problems can occur. This is often the case in families where children are involved with firesetting.

Much speculation has focused on the question of why families of firesetting children function at such an inadequate level. Poverty is often blamed. Actually, poverty may only be a symptom of the larger problem. Although many of the children involved in firesetting behaviors do come from families at or below poverty level, this does not seem to be the decisive factor.

The same lack of skill that prevents adults from raising their standard of living is probably keeping them from being skilled parents. Social skills necessary to interact as an adult are similar to those needed to effectively raise children. Communication skills, self-esteem, self-discipline, and a concept of personal safety are but a few.

Many families have certain pre-conceived ideas about children and fire that they have been told, or believe to be true for many of the same pervasive reasons outlined thus far. They may believe that fire interest is a normal phase that their child is experiencing and will soon out grow. Even if this were true, it would certainly be too dangerous a phase to let a child explore on their own.

Appropriate and realistic parental expectations are sometimes lacking. Parents seem to prefer to avoid an explanation of fire for their children rather than provide them with age appropriate information. The biggest problem herein is that the typical parent has no idea what the age appropriate information about fire should be. Enter community based fire and life safety education programs. Local fire agencies are usually the only community organizations equipped to provide community based fire and life safety education programs.

Another common myth is that burning a child's hand will cause the firesetting behavior to stop. While children may then recognize that fire is hot, they have not gained the knowledge necessary to avoid using fire incorrectly in the future. Positive attitudes and appropriate behaviors are best taught with patience and repetition, not with scare tactics.

The educational needs of caregivers, as they relate to fire safety and parenting skills, are often more immediate than the child firesetters' educational needs. In most cases, the solution to child firesetting is education. Caregivers should possess the power to make or break a child's firesetting behavior. Convincing a caregiver of their ability can be a difficult task. In fact, some caregivers may truly lack the ability to create a safe home environment. In these cases, parent training linked with mental health intervention and medical evaluation may best meet the needs of these at-risk families.

Most of the time, the solution to youth firesetting is education. But education must begin with the fire service and be directed toward the entire family, not just the child.

## **EDUCATION ISSUES**

When families, with their best intentions, fail to properly educate their children about fire safety, the fire service should be picking up the slack. But are they?

Fire safety messages fall into two broad categories: before-the-fire skills and fire survival skills. Each of these offer good information, but from different perspectives.

Before-the-fire skills address the true prevention of fire. Examples of these messages would include keeping matches/lighters in a safe place; matches/lighters are tools, not toys; and give matches/lighters to an adult. With this information, children are now equipped to make proper decisions when an opportunity or situation presents itself.

Fire survival skills are the traditional messages offered by the fire service. These typically involve things like stop, drop, and roll; crawl low under smoke; have a meeting place; feel the door; and many others. The commonality of these messages is that they all instruct the child on how to respond once a fire has occurred. These are certainly important messages and make excellent interactive instructional activities, but offer nothing to explain to children how to prevent fires from starting.

Families and educators often forget or avoid the before-the-fire skills because they do not want to give their children ideas about fire. Schools, unless prompted, probably do not see before-the-fire skills as their responsibility since matches and lighters are not available (in theory) in the schools. However, it would only seem appropriate that as schools strive to prepare children for life, they would include these valuable life safety skills. Even though fire continues to claim hundreds of children's lives each year, fire safety is still not mandatory in many classrooms throughout North America.

For now, the fire service must take the lead role in getting this information to all children, either directly or through the schools, or through the parents. Developing and maintaining partnerships with schools has always been one of the most effective ways to reach children. Guidance by fire and life safety educators remains essential to provide the technical expertise to keep school teachers motivated and their methods current.

Like it or not, the fire service must deal with the aftermath of a child's uninformed decision about fire. Youth firesetting intervention programs, while a necessary part of every fire agency, only react to a problem that has already threatened the community. The fire service should accept the inevitable and look for proactive strategies to prevent firesetting behavior rather than attempt to manage it after a fire has occurred.

## **MEDICAL/BEHAVIORAL ISSUES**

Much speculation has revolved around the relationship between juvenile firesetting and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Although studies have been done, most involve children already receiving mental health services for reasons other than firesetting. Little has been done with the mainstream youth firesetting population that would include "little concern" (curiosity) behaviors.

ADHD is defined by Russell A. Barkley, Ph.D., of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, as "a specific developmental disorder of both children and adults that is

comprised of deficits in sustained attention, impulse control, and the regulation of activity level over situational demands."

The Portland (Oregon) Fire Bureau's Youth Firesetting Intervention Program, as a part of its on-going data collection, has taken a detailed look at the firesetting/ADHD relationship. The results are quite interesting.

The Program asked parents, whose children were participating in the intervention process, if their child had been diagnosed by a physician or mental health practitioner as having ADHD. These were considered "confirmed" cases.

Children whose behavior (either through observation by the interventionist or as described by the parent) was characteristic of ADHD were considered "suspected" cases. In the case of the "suspected" children, it should be mentioned that observations must incorporate the routine settings that the child typically encounters. One-on-one interactions do not offer the most realistic example of the child's behavior since ADHD children can often maintain their behavior for short periods of time. Classroom or at-home behavior patterns may provide better insight.

The results were tracked from April 1st 1994 through March 31, 1999. During this time, 579 children were interviewed as a part of Portland's program. Of those children, 115 (19.9%) were confirmed cases and 28 (4.8%) were suspected cases. Since this time period offered no extenuating conditions that might influence our typical client base, we can conclude that the 143 of 579 children making up 24.7% of the study population may be very indicative of the firesetting youth population that present ADHD as an issue of concern. But how does this relate to other studies?

In a 1987 article by David J. Kolko and Alan E. Kazdin titled "Prevalence of Firesetting and Related Behaviors Among Child Psychiatric Patients," they found through a combined study of 297 inpatient and outpatient children between the ages of 5 and 13, that 48 (16.2%) were diagnosed with ADHD (other conditions were also present).

The 16.2% figure from Kolko and Kazdin is similar to the 22.4% figure found in Portland's program, particularly the confirmed cases (18.9%). While this is by no means a scientific study of ADHD, it does offer some interesting insight from a unique perspective. While the Kolko and Kazdin study relates to psychiatric patients, Portland's data involves children from the general population who may or may not be in need of mental health intervention (some are already receiving services as a part of their diagnosis).

Also of interest is the level of concern assigned to the child after intervention services have been provided. Through the use of a modified version of the U.S. Fire Administration's firesetter assessment instrument, 69.4% of the children were deemed "little concern" (curiosity) firesetters. Of the "little concern" firesetters, 18.6% were either confirmed or suspected of having ADHD.

Of the 26.8% deemed "definite concern" (reactionary or troubled) firesetters, 35.5% were either confirmed or suspected to have ADHD. And of the 3.8% identified as "extreme concern" (very troubled) firesetters, 40.9% were either confirmed or suspected of having ADHD.

It should also be noted that the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders" sites the prevalence of ADHD in the general population at 3.0%.

The larger questions that remain unanswered are "Does ADHD cause children to be set fires?" or "Do children who set fires tend to have ADHD?" There is probably no way to ever answer either question. Perhaps of greater significance is the question "How can the firesetting behavior of children with this affliction be reduced or eliminated?" Educating the ADHD child can be challenging, but not impossible. The educator should first try to recognize the barriers with which he/she is faced. ADHD can present itself with greatest emphasis on the attention deficit, hyperactivity, or a combination of both. Regardless of the predominant aspect, some common educational themes have been found to apply.

A determination as to whether the child is effectively medicated at the time of your meeting may be valuable. However, one of the best indicators of their ability to receive new information seems to be through observation. Can they sit still, are they able to focus on your presentation, and are they in a receptive state of mind. If so, the chances of effective education are good.

ADHD children can function very well in a one-on-one teaching environment because the stimulus for them is very high. These children will excel at things that can retain their total focus. Dr. Wendy M. Miller, a child psychologist in Portland, Oregon, who works with ADHD children, explains that these children do not live "for" the moment but, rather, "in" the moment. In other words, they do not typically consider past experiences or future considerations when engaging in an activity. This leaves them vulnerable to mistakes when a message is not well ingrained in their behavior and supported by repetition. These are key parental issues to consider when trying to educate ADHD children about appropriate fire behavior.

An interviewer should keep in mind that eye contact may not be a prerequisite for learning with these children. The best measure of learning may be to continually revisit the educational concepts being presented and asking the child to restate the concepts. This can measure their comprehension as well as provide needed repetition for learning.

When presenting information, remember that these children are often hindered by the disorder in two distinct ways. First, they have difficulty filtering out unnecessary or extraneous stimuli (noise, activity, etc.) and will become overwhelmed by sensory input. This creates difficulty with selecting and sustaining attention. Second, there is less activity in the frontal region of the brain (the part of the brain that regulates and organizes sensory input) so the ability to sort out and determine the cause and effect of their actions is hampered. (Network Behavioral Healthcare Inc.)

If the above issues are coupled with a child's inability to understand the abstract nature of fire, (the ability to understand abstract issues well does not occur until approximately age 11 or 12) one can begin to understand the difficulty that ADHD can cause. For these children, it may be more important to emphasize the rules surrounding the use, storage, and importance of matches and lighters rather than the abstract nature of fire behavior.

If information can be presented in a way that offers definite choices, it will be easier for the child to remember the concept. Matches and lighters as tools, not toys, is a good example that works well. Most household items can be placed in one of these two categories. If rules offer too many exceptions or ambiguities, the ability to correctly choose the proper behaviors may be compromised.

It will be almost impossible to successfully implement any of these concepts without the support of the child's parents, especially if the child is young. Educating a parent can often present a greater challenge than working with the child.

Adults often suffer from many of the same misconceptions about fire that children experience. After all, where did the children learn (or not learn) their current expectations of fire?

The old parental axiom "Do as I say, not as I do" seems to be particularly hazardous to ADHD children. Because the parental description of the dangers and consequences of fire are often in terms that the child cannot understand or are unrealistic and unbelievable, the verbal messages seem to go in one ear and out the other. This leaves parental modeling (visual learning) as the most significant influence on the child. Unfortunately, many adults are not exactly the ideal model for match and lighter safety procedures when they use these items.

Ask the typical adult, particularly a smoker, which of the following choices would best describe their match/lighter use as seen through the eyes of a young child:

- That looks like a very dangerous tool. Look how careful Mom is being when she uses matches/lighters.
- That looks like no big deal. Dad makes it look easy every time he lights a cigarette. I bet I could use that match/lighter.
- Most parents will reluctantly admit that they fall under choice number two. Now that they have admitted it, the door is open to educate the parent about their influence as a role model and key component to the solution of the firesetting behavior.

For the fire and life safety educator, understanding the behavior and adding some special tools to your educational tool kit will allow you to better serve these high risk children. Special learning needs require a special approach. ADHD children need not be written off as unteachable. Never underestimate the effects of well planned and properly presented education.

## **OTHER FACTORS**

According to the director of the group Stop Oregon Litter and Vandalism (SOLV), the 1996 annual fall beach clean-up effort estimates that about 75,000 cigarette butts were picked up along the 296 miles of Oregon's coastline.

Interestingly, smokers carelessness is statistically one of the leading causes of fires in Portland and accounts for approximately 14% of the fire origin annually.

The bottom line seems to be the human condition. Our society has accepted fire, fire risk, and fire loss and has no regard for fire in small quantities (such as occurs with cigarettes, matches, and lighters).

Child firesetting may cause concern to those that are directly involved (i.e. parents, teachers, siblings) but what about other people? A child-set fire no longer elicits societal rage or contempt toward a neglectful parent. It generally creates pity toward the child and family for their unfortunate luck.

The United States has the worst fire loss record of any other industrialized nation in the world. It should come as no surprise when one stops to analyze what happens when fire strikes someone's home.

First of all, a taxpayer (usually) funded fire agency responds to the emergency regardless of cause or ability to pay (in fact, it is generally the areas carrying the least of the tax paying burden that place the highest demand on fire agencies). Once the fire is extinguished, a variety of social service agencies immediately respond and provide aid to the stricken family. Fire insurance generally pays but other social service providers are available if insurance is absent. Total strangers will often donate food, clothing, and money to the "victims." The more tragic the loss, the more generous the donations.

While fire and the accompanying loss continue to be tragic, the pervasive message given by society is that life will go on and society will provide where the citizen is deficient. Responsibility for one's own action is becoming less necessary with time. Are these factors motivating families to create a safe environment?

## **WHY SHOULD THIS CHANGE?**

There are many compelling reasons why a focused effort should be made to change this behavioral trend. First and foremost is cost.

The cost of child-set fires is too high. The cost in lost lives (most often the lives of the children setting the fires), the cost of the damaged property, and the cost to taxpayers because of the increasing resources needed to deal with this problem.

But there are other costs, costs that are often overlooked. The impact on the mental well-being of the individuals who must deal with the aftermath of a firesetting tragedy can be

devastating. This can affect not only the individual, but the individual's organization and their family.

Emergency responders will usually be the first to deal with a firesetting situation. Nothing pulls harder on the heartstrings of emergency response personnel than the death or mutilation of a child.

And let's not forget the thankless efforts of those who work in the many youth firesetting intervention programs across the country. As this author can testify, little compares to the anxiety brought on by the death of a child that has been educated in a program and then gone on to take a life through continued fire play.

Changing societal behavior and response to a problem such as youth firesetting takes time, vision, and commitment. Anyone who has taken the time to read this far into this article probably has the vision. Time and commitment are often under the control of others. It is incumbent on those with vision to convince those controlling time and commitment of the magnitude of the youth firesetting problem so prevention efforts can be developed and implemented.

## **CONCLUSION**

With all of this societal reference to fire and the attractive way in which the media presents fire, it is no wonder society, and children in particular, cannot be convinced of its dangers.

Apathy has surpassed the fear of fire. How can a force that has for so long been an element of fear come to be seen as a mundane part of day to day life? How can normally protective families provide dangerously mixed messages to their children?

As familiarity and the desensitizing effects of the media, societal rituals, and ignorance fuel the apathy for fire safety, the cycle of apathy gains momentum with each passing generation. It must be stopped. But how?

The fire service must step forward and more aggressively tackle the youth firesetting behaviors. Many agencies across the country have stepped up to the task of not only understanding the problem, but developing innovative ways to deal with it. Others lag woefully behind.

The fire service was founded from the need for a service. The question is, can that needed service be changed, altered, or reduced? The fire service has traditionally justified its existence by the number of responses, the amount of hose used, or the number of suppression tasks performed? Occasionally, a dip or spike in fire service performance trends may occur. But is it linked to an identifiable effort or is it just a chance happening?

It is comforting to know that the fire service can boast a 100% suppression success rate: every fire that has ever started has eventually been extinguished. Maybe the time has come to develop a new criterion for success.

Unfortunately, within most fire agencies, education (pro-active) always seems to take a back seat to emergency operations (reactive). Overwhelming evidence can be presented showing the effectiveness of education, but it still struggles to be a legitimate segment of the fire service. Perhaps, this is another one of the great mysteries to face today's fire service.

Is it not time to shift the fire service approach to finally prevent unnecessary tragedies from occurring? Can society's perception of the fire problem be changed to reflect the true dangers of fire? Why do children continue their unnecessary involvement with fire? Asking these questions is the first step in finding an answer.

The journey to answer these questions will be long and arduous, but one that must be made. If the fire service equips itself with time, patience, and hard work, change can occur. Push for change. The fire problem can be influenced but the change must begin within the fire service, it must begin with you.