Counseling Children Who Play With Fire

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Whether they happen in school or at home, intentionally or unintentionally, fires set by children are always cause for concern. Most school counselors will, at some point in their careers, be called on to work with a child who has started a fire or played with fire.

Even experienced counselors may worry about their ability to help a child who has set fires, believing that highly specialized skills are required. In our experience, it is commonly believed that fire involvement is rare, and that it is always a sign of serious psychological issues.

The truth is, you've probably already worked with a number of children with fireplay or firesetting in their history, whether you knew it or not. Involvement with fire is far more common than most people realize. Far from being a rare occurrence, children's fireplay is common enough to be considered typical.

In some cases involving pathology, mental health referrals may be needed. But more often, what is needed are good counseling skills and a knowledge of current research on children's involvement with fire. This article will provide the latter.

Even in these more common situations, fire is a serious health threat. In the U.S there are over 380,000 home structure fires every year, resulting in more than 3,000 deaths and 13,000 injuries. Children are at particularly high risk; a Home Safety Council study of unintentional home injuries found fire and burns to be the leading cause of home injury deaths for children ages 1 to 14 years (www.homesafetycouncil.org).

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reports that in 2006, children playing with fire started an estimated 14,500 structure fires that were reported to U.S. fire departments, causing an estimated 130 civilian deaths, 810 civilian injuries and $328 million in direct property damage ("Children and fire" fact sheet available at www.nfpa.org).

A surprising number of reported fires—serious enough for the fire department to be called—are set by very young children. More than half of the children who set fires are between the ages of 4 and 9. These fires can be the most tragic: child-set fires are the leading cause of fire deaths in preschool children.

Playing with fire

Studies of children in major cities in the U.S. and Canada, over a number of years, have found children's fireplay is common. Studies in Rochester, NY, and Portland, OR from 1990 to 2002 (www.sosfires.com) found more than half of children reported having played with fire by the time they were out of elementary school. A similar study in Surrey, British Columbia, found more than 80% of girls and 88% of boys had played with fire by the time they were in high school (*Fireplay Report: A Survey of School-Aged Youth in Grades 1 to 12*, University College of the Fraser Valley).

More recent studies continue to find that fireplay is common. A 2005 study of almost 4,000 adolescents in grades 7 to 12 in Ontario, Canada (to be published in 2009 in the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*) found that two-thirds reported having played with fire in their lifetimes, and nearly a third reported firesetting during the past 12 months.

Why do children start fires? The nature and meaning of children's involvement with fire is strongly related to their level of cognitive development. Preschool children have limited understanding of cause and effect, or transformations, and cannot appreciate that even a small flame is capable of becoming a large fire. Nearly every day, most children see the adults in their lives use fire very casually. Adults often encourage children to use or exert control over fire, whether by holding candles in church or blowing out candles on a birthday cake. This can reinforce children's idea that fire is not especially dangerous, and that they would be able to control it under all circumstances.

Elementary school children do understand cause and effect and transformations, so they are able to grasp that a single match can burn down a house. But many still greatly overestimate their ability to control fire. Because they can't easily anticipate an event they haven't yet experienced, these children do not appreciate how quickly and decisively a small fire can get out of control.

As with younger children, adults' attitudes play a significant role in elementary school children's sense of empowerment for fire use. A study in Rochester, NY found that children who'd had greater exposure to household activities involving fire and been given responsibility for chores involving fire, such as cooking, were more sure than children who hadn't been given these responsibilities that they

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"could put out a small fire." They were also *three times* as likely to report at least one instance of fire play (Playing with Fire: A Developmental Assessment of Children's Fire Understanding and Experience, *Journal of Child Clinical Psychology*, 19)

Teenagers, like adults, can appreciate the full range of possible outcomes for fire. And like adults, they can underestimate the risk of those outcomes. When firesetting is deliberate, it's likely to be linked to risk taking or individual or family pathology. In the Ontario study of adolescents, those with more severe fire involvement were likely to report other risk variables including smoking, binge drinking, cannabis use, sensation seeking, and psychological distress.

Beyond the issue of cognitive understanding, children's fire involvement is related to family and socioeconomic factors. In Rochester, NY between 58% and 80% of children who started fires reported to the fire department lived in divided families, compared to 36% of the children in the city as a whole. They were also three times more likely to be on a reduced-price or free-lunch program than those who were not. In Portland, 80% of the children reported to the fire department lived in divided families. Half of these children lived in families with less than $20,000 annual income, and one in three lived in families with incomes less than $10,000.

Assessment approaches and tools

Assessing a child's involvement with fire should be done in the context of his or her overall behavior, cognitive functioning, social and emotional functioning, and family functioning. Some factors to consider include:

- Circumstances of the incident. Children who play with fire without intent to do damage typically act impulsively, using ignition sources available at the moment. Youth with more complex issues are more likely to search out ignition materials and use accelerants, and may conceal these items until needed.
- Appearance of remorse. Children struggling with emotional issues may not admit they set the fire, and rather than try to put it out may run away to watch the fire burn (this behavior in older children is different from preschoolers who don't understand possible consequences and are simply afraid of "getting in trouble.")
- The child's overall behavior. Aside from the fire involvement, are there other concerns about the child's behavior. Does he have impulse control? Is he frequently angry? How well does he manage his emotions? What are his peer relationships?
- History and frequency of fire involvement. A pattern of purposely planned, multiple firesetting over an extended time period is more likely to point to underlying issues than engaging in more unplanned, sporadic episodes of fireplay.
- Family and parental behavior. What is the parent's history of fire involvement? What is the parent's attitude toward the child's firesetting? Is parental supervision consistent and effective? What is the family's reaction to the fire incident?

Several structured interview guides are available to help assess fire involvement. Two of the most widely used are the TAPP-C Fire Involvement Interview available from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (www.camh.net), and the Children's Firesettnig Interview and Firesetting Risk Interview developed by Kolko and Kazdin (www.pitt.edu/~kolko/Articles.htm). Additional information about assessment approaches and interventions is available in *Juvenile Firesetting: A Community Guide to Prevention and Intervention* (www.fireproofchildren.com).

Fire safety education

All children who have been involved with a fire incident should receive an educational intervention. Fire safety education programs and materials should be appropriate to the child's developmental level.

The preschool approach is exemplified by the *play safe be safe!* program (www.playsafebesafe.com), which makes no attempt to explain or show how fire spreads. Instead it introduces and reinforces simple lessons that are incompatible with children's use of fire: that matches and lighters are "adult tools only," and that they should "go tell a grown-up" if they see these ignition materials left out.

For elementary school children these messages are still appropriate, but at this age children can better understand the full range of fire's potential. They may benefit from video presentations that demonstrate how quickly fire can get out of control. These should be used to support the basic message, not as instruction in how to manage fire. The educational message should be that matches and lighters are tools for adults only. Education for adolescents should include safe handling and use of ignition materials, but should still emphasize the power of fire and the speed with which it moves. RiskWatch, a safety education program widely used in schools provides lessons for grade levels through grade 12 (www.riskwatch.org).

Scare tactics should be avoided for all ages. It's tempting to think that giving a child a good scare about the consequences of fire would be an easy, one-time "inoculation" against future firesetting. But if a child's fireplay is the result of family or social issues, this approach could actually stimulate the behavior you're trying to prevent.

Even if there aren't such underlying issues, many children and teens won't respond to a "fear appeal" – any more than most adults do. Scare tactics designed to get people to stop smoking, for instance, often fail because people feel they are being manipulated or threatened. Their responses range from defiance ("You can't tell me what to do,") to avoidance ("I'd be careful, no one would get hurt.").

For younger children, fear can interfere with learning. A frightened child may simply stop listening. And scare tactics

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quickly lose their effectiveness if the child does play with fire afterward -- with no immediate dire consequences.

For older children and teens, scare tactics can even cause a "blowback" effect. Consider the evaluation of "Scared Straight" type prison programs, which expose juvenile delinquents pre-delinquents to prison life and interactions with prisoners. Studies have found that these programs don't change long-term behavior and in some cases seemed to increase the likelihood of delinquency.

Another tactic to avoid is attempting to satiate a child's interest in fire by “safely” involving them with fire. Some adults assume that if they teach children “how to handle” fire, this will satisfy their curiosity and prevent them from playing with fire when adults are not present. In fact the evidence shows that with more practice with fire, a child will gain more false confidence in his ability to control it, which may encourage rather than reduce the behavior.

What to tell parents and other adults

Parents need to understand that, even when started without any intention to do harm, fires set by children can cause serious damage and injury. They should also know that, although fireplay must be taken seriously and is a trigger for a psychological evaluation, typically it is not a sign of an emotional problem. As described above, most children see fire as familiar, fun, and easy to control. Young children just don't understand the consequences, and older children overestimate their ability to control fire.

Parents need to be aware that their own modeling of fire use sends unspoken messages. What they do can be more important than what they tell a child. Casual use of fire such as leaving a stove, campfire, grill or candles unattended, not only creates an immediate hazard but tells children that fire need not be treated seriously. Ignoring the smoke alarm, or going in search of the source of smoke rather than urging everyone to get out when the alarm sounds, sends a message that smoke and its cause is not a serious matter.

Parents need to know that supervision is just as important at home as outside of it. Many assume that their children are safe when they are in their own bedrooms, but in fact this is where most of the fires set by young children are started, often in closets. Many families are too casual about handling ignition materials and leaving them lying around on a tabletop or counter. Parents need to both monitor their children, and restrict access to ignition materials. Lighters and matches should be kept out of sight and reach, ideally in a locked cabinet.

Parents need to establish and stick to unambiguous rules about fire. They must firmly state to children that matches and lighters are tools for adults only. It's important that this rule be clear and consistent. Many children will assume that if they're allowed to do something with adult supervision, it's really all right for them to do the same thing when alone. This is especially true if they've performed a fire-related skill many times without an incident. Many cooking fires start this way.

In explaining to parents the need to avoid giving responsibility for fire use to children, it can be helpful to compare this to hiring a babysitter. Most people want a sitter who is older than elementary school age. They understand, intuitively, that one of the key responsibilities of a babysitter is to be able to respond if something unexpected happens. Elementary school children are not good at anticipating what might go wrong and how to respond if something does, such as if grease from cooking catches on fire or a napkin falls across a burner. The Babysitting Training Courses sanctioned by the American Red Cross and the National Safety Council are designed for 11-to-15-year-olds, setting a national standard concerning the age of responsibility.

Parents should also know the importance of maintaining smoke alarms, and planning and practicing the household’s exit plan. Information about this is available at www.homefiredrill.org.

To summarize, the key things school counselors need to remember are:

- Take fire and children's fireplay seriously. While fireplay is common and not usually a sign of serious psychological issues, it can cause serious damage, injuries and death. It should be a trigger for psychological evaluation and referral if necessary.
- Provide developmentally appropriate fire safety education.
- Engage with parents to educate them about the importance of supervision, modeling, avoiding premature assignment of fire-related responsibilities, having working smoke alarms, and planning and practicing a home fire drill.

About the Authors

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More information on assessing and intervening in children's fire involvement can be found in Juvenile Firesetting: A Community Guide to Prevention and Intervention, at www.fireproofchildren.