Introduction to Juvenile Firesetting Brief

Definition

Juvenile firesetting is best defined as any unsanctioned use of or involvement with ignition materials the intent of which is to produce a flame or fire.

Background

The problem of juvenile firesetting is significantly more widespread than our current statistical analyses show. According to the USFA, 25% to 40% of incendiary structure fires can be attributed to children playing with matches or lighters. However this takes into account only those structure fires for which there is a public safety response. In several published studies it was shown that child firesetters set, on the average, 5 fires that are extinguished and not reported to the authorities prior to the incident that gains them the attention of outside officials. Another indication of the true scope of the problem is that it more often involves non-structural fires (e.g.: dumpsters, brush ad other scenarios) which are not factored into the arson statistics. The safest approach for an arson investigator to take, particularly when a fire involves a home where children reside, is to first rule out a child or adolescent as a possible source of ignition.

Locations that are particularly indicative of child-set fires:

- to, under and around beds
- to, under and behind couches or chairs
- in closets
- in basements or attics, on porches or areas the child perceives of as "hidden"
- in bathrooms, over the sink
- in a living room, over an ashtray

Clearly, children can and do sets fires anywhere, but the above locations are the most frequent scenarios.

Materials that are particularly indicative of child-set fires:

- use of matches and lighters as ignition devices
- ordinary combustibles such as paper and clothing that is readily available and
- indicates a spontaneous, impulsive fire
- toys, school papers, particular possessions of adults for which a child went to some
degree of difficulty to attain and/or ignite

Firesetting Scenarios: Impulsive vs Premeditated

Impulsive fires are the work of impulsive children, and these young people can be struggling with impulse control problems, so it would not be surprising or unusual to come across a child with Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without Hyperactivity), or Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or Conduct Disorder. All of these are diagnostic terms that relate to problems controlling impulses, and they underscore that the child is significantly more impulsive than a "normal" child. For this kind of child, easy access to ignition devices and a moment of unsupervised, unstructured time is all that's needed for a fire to result. In general, as a rule of thumb, spontaneous, impulsive fires are the work of children under the age of 8. The older the child, the less likely this scenario can be accepted without suspicion on the part of the investigator.

Fires with more specificity are the work of children in trouble. Children, even adolescents, are very concrete. If they burn one paper among a series, one photo from an album, one toy among all others, there is something about that one item and it is probably the key to solving the motive for the fire. Children
crisis typically admit their actions without remorse and seem unable to explain them. This is not subterfuge, it is the mark of a child in trouble.

**Developmental Limits on the Thinking and Memory of Young Children**

For reasons of development, language acquisition and self-preservation, children make lousy witnesses. Children under 8 cannot reliably sequence events or project the consequences of their actions. Their brains are not developed enough to measure and hold the concept of time.

Children of all ages remember visual images with greater clarity and prominence that other sense memories, and they may even give them more weight in retrospect than they had at the time of the incident in question. There is less of a barrier between fantasy and reality for children, and this makes them better at blocking real events from memory and at imagining things that never actually happened. All of this is why children need adults around them to sort the world out for them. It's also why the work of fire investigators is so critical in the field of juvenile firesetter intervention.

Fundamental to the assessment and treatment of children firesetters is a complete understanding of what they did and how much trouble they had to go through in order to do it. For this, we have to rely on an investigation that tells us not only that the fire started on a pile of clothes, but whose clothes and whether or not they belonged there in the first place; or, that tells us not only that the child used a lighter, but whose lighter, how he got it, how long he had it before he used it and what he did with it after the fire.

**Interviewing Young Children**

Investigators should get training in child development before interviewing a child, but there are some general guidelines that can help in most situations. In general, avoid "why" questions that require insightful analysis of motives. Instead, think of the Dragnet television show and "stick to the facts..." the concrete what, where, when and how. Whenever possible, ask the child to draw or show you what he did. This allows the child to rely on his strong visual skills and avoid the language skills that are the weakest link in the cognitive chain. Another idea is to use concrete reference tools for the child ("was it bigger than this notebook here?" or "what was on television when you decided to make the fire?"). This strategy can help you avoid leading questions while at the same time giving the child guidance in understanding what it is that you are asking about.

**Understanding the Firesetting Dynamic**

Investigators should avoid assigning motives or classifying the behavior too quickly. Recent studies from University of Maine, Boston Children's Hospital and University of Pittsburgh have all shown that over 70% of the children fire investigators labeled "curious" had diagnosable mental disorders. These studies prove that motive and risk for recidivism do not necessarily correlate. These and similar studies also demonstrated that the tired old triad of symptoms: firesetting, enuresis and cruelty to animals are not common occurrences, even among the category of children considered to be "pathological." If by chance an investigator comes across a child who exhibits all three behaviors, the child protection agency in that jurisdiction should be immediately contacted, since the three are all indications of severe sexual abuse.

Far more common characteristics for firesetters across all motivational categories are the following traits:

- issues of power and control (diagnosed by ADHD, ODD or even a parent complaining of having to struggle for power with the child)
- language deficits or limits (reliance of acting out feelings and ideas as opposed to talking about them; better at math and science than reading)
persistent interest in fire (as opposed to momentary bouts of curiosity, and continuing despite punishment and sanction)

a perception of themselves as less vulnerable to injury than peers and contemporaries ("I can control it," and "I never get hurt")

Implications for Connecting Investigation to Intervention

Firesetting behavior is complex and dynamic, but it requires two distinct sets of skills and bodies of information to fully understand and intervene with it. The first set of skills belong to fire investigators who can reconstruct what the child actually did. The second set of skills belong to child development specialists who can explain why and prescribe the appropriate course of action to reduce the likelihood of recidivism. This has to be the primary goal of intervention, since firesetting behavior without treatment has an 81% probability of recidivism. With appropriate treatment, there is only a 10% probability of recidivism. The key to appropriate treatment is in the work of the fire investigator, since the best clinicians in the world cannot operate without at least come incontrovertible facts from which to gauge the child's honesty, awareness, intent and mental state.

For Further Study

The articles on the following pages represent the best of the work in their field to date. The resource director that follows contains a listing of credible firesetter programs and specialists in the United States.

Bibliography: Recommended Readings


National Program Resources:

Beverly Burns, President
Arizona Fire and Burn Educator's Association
P O Box 1117
Tempe, AZ 85280-1117

Judy Okulitch, JFS Coordinator
Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office
4760 Portland Road NE
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Martin King, JFS Coordinator
Wisconsin IAAI/Juvenile Firesetter Program Network
2040 South 67th Place
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Juvenile Firesetter Program
Rockville Fire Department
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National Fire Service Support Systems
20 North Main Street
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St Petersburg Fire Department
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