



Youth Set Fires: A Connecticut Overview for Social Services, Schools, & Mental Health

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Agenda

- I. Introduction to Juvenile Firesetting
- II. Scope of the Problem: Incidence and Prevalence
- III. Responding to Firesetting
- IV. Working with Fire Service
- V. Program and Service Resources

Kids and Firesetting: Who Are We Talking About?



Firestarting vs. FireSetting

- “FIRESTARTING”

The use of fire by a person who has little or no understanding of consequences of fire and without intention to cause harm or damage

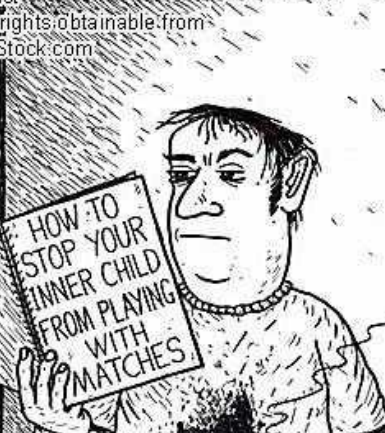
- “FIRESETTING”

The use of fire by a person for intentional acts designed to create a disturbance and/or to inflict damage and/or harm

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KIDS!
PARENTS
KID UNDOING
EAR OLDS
ARE YOU SERIOUS YET?

Connecticut Youth Firesetting





Scope of the Problem: Incidence and Prevalence

Prevalence – How Big is this Issue

- Capturing the complete picture about juvenile firesetting is difficult.
- ✓ Up until 2015, there has not been a central data collection system-YFIRES
- ✓ Police departments charge firestarter/firesetter with vandalism or criminal mischief
- ✓ Studies are often conducted on individuals who are involved in either the mental health system or Juvenile Justice System, thus giving our understanding from these studies a particular bias- these youth are either “sick” or “bad”.

Who should be involved when there is an incident

- Many different agencies are involved when a fire occurs. Obviously the local Fire Departments, often the police and local authorities. (which you will see in a future slide). When a juvenile is involved, schools, parents and treatment providers may also be involved. It is important that all of the systems come together to address this issue and work collaboratively.

Fire Risk to Children

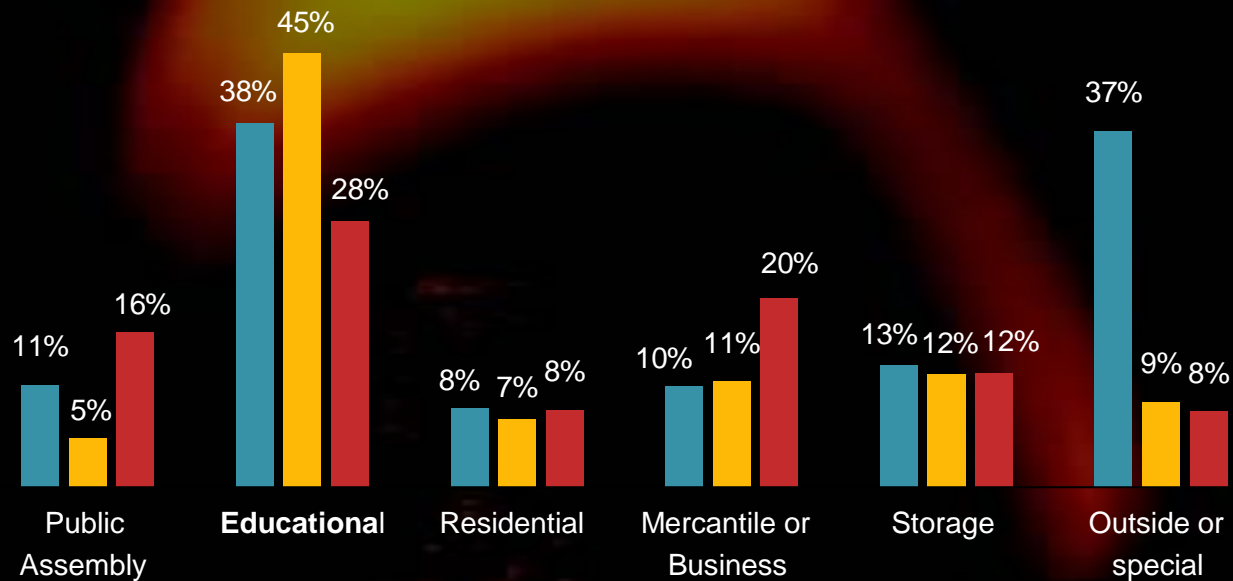
- **Between 2014-2018 there were 30,460 fires as a result of children misusing fire, resulting in 50 deaths, 510 injuries and 250 million in property damages.**
- **36% of home fires were children, age 5 and younger**
- **Youth ages 11-17 were responsible for 55% of outside fires or unclassified fires**
- **These occurred mostly during the months of July**

School Fires in the U.S.

- Local fire departments in the United States responded to an estimated average of 3,230 fires in school properties from preschool through grade twelve from 2014 to 2018.
- More than two in five fires (44%) in high schools and middle schools were intentionally set and one in five was caused by playing with a heat source. • Fires in high schools and middle schools were much more likely to originate in a lavatory or locker room (32%) than any other area. -NFPA 2020



FIRES IN PUBLIC PLACES



Fires Civilian deaths Direct Property Damage

Connecticut Youth Firesetting
1/2023

NFPA INTENTIONAL FIRES 72017

CT LAW YOUTH FIRESETTING

- In 2019 a law was passed allowing the courts to suspend delinquency for youth arrested for firesetting
- If the youth successfully completes the program the youth can be placed on probation or charges can be dismissed.

Diagnostic and Behavioral Characteristics

- Children and youth involved in firesetting are typically a diverse population.
- Recent findings indicate stronger correlations with ADHD and Conduct Disorder.
- Incidence of ADD/ADHD is highest (40-60%) among the younger populations (ages 3-8).
- Among the conduct disordered population, firesetting appears more commonly within the higher risk population.

Diagnostic and Behavioral Characteristics

- Normal distribution of intelligence
- No evidence of ***correlation*** between firesetting and enuresis or histories of sexual abuse.
- Often when the youth presents with firesetting issues and cruelty to animals it is predictive of a higher risk for violence and aggression.
- Can be less socially active, more isolated from peers.

Source: Stadolnik: Drawn to The Flame

Firesetting Intent and Motivation

Curiosity/Interest/Fascination

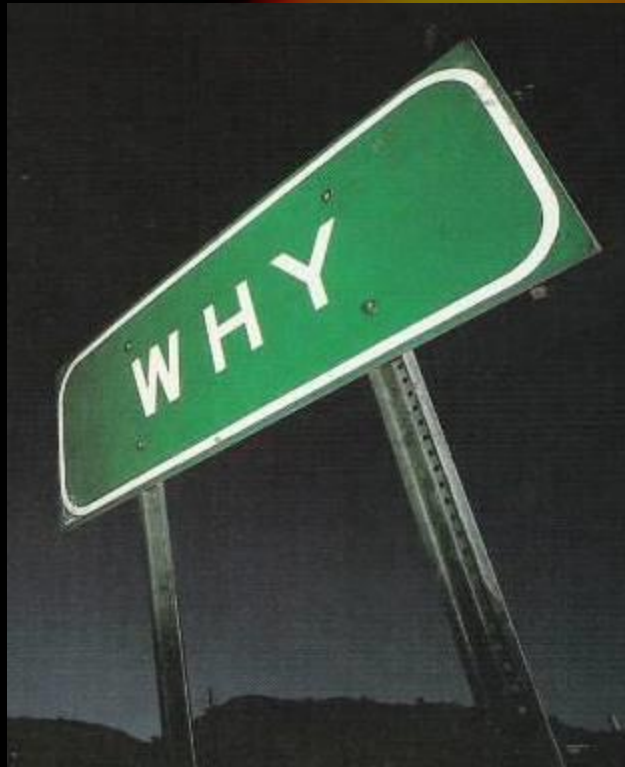
Crisis

Delinquency

Thrill Seeking

Severe Disturbance/Pathology

Motivations: Why Kids Set Fires



Motivations are:

- Helpful in describing the behavior, not the child
- Helpful in guiding intervention pathways
- Not mutually exclusive, a youth can have high risk behaviors that fall into more than one typology.
- Ways to describe a behavior, a shorthand , but don't replace a good understanding of the youth and youth's behavior with fire.

Curiosity Motivated Firesetting

Curiosity
Fascination
Experimental

Curiosity Motivated Firestarting



- Most often are boys (85-90%)
- Most frequently seen among younger children (5-8 y.o) but can occur at older ages.
- Can be single episode or repeated pattern of experimental fire use.
- Simple, easily accessible combustibles (paper, leaves, twigs) are common.
- Higher levels of curiosity can lead to increasing complexity of fuels, use of accelerants, etc.
- Responsible for high mortality and injury rates.

Crisis Motivated Firesetting

Revenge

Anger Expression

Cry for Help

Self Harm and Self Injury

Stimulus Seeking

Cognitively Impaired

Thought Disordered

Crisis Motivated Firesetting

- Most frequently boys (75%), latency age (7-11) or adolescent age.
- May or may not have previous firesetting behavior.
- Firesetting is response to any number of internal or external crisis.
 - Within the Family System
 - At School
 - Some response to 'traumatic event'
 - A Response to Peer or Social Issues
 - There may be concurrent psychiatric issues emerging as well
- At times there is a history of some form of abuse/neglect, socially isolated and awkward, aggressive, or serious emotional disturbance.
- Power, control, mastery, emotional expression are common themes.

Delinquent Motivated Firesetting

***Delinquent
Crime Concealment
Peer Group Pressure
Attention to Cause***

Delinquent Motivated Firesetting



- Occurs within, or as the result of, a peer dynamic that encourages irresponsible or reckless use of fire.
- Approximately 75% males with increasing activity by females.
- Varying levels of aggressiveness or antisocial motivation.
- Fires most frequently occur outside the home (schools, vacant buildings, wooded areas).
- Use of accelerants is common.
- Can be a socialization activity for the group or attempt by one member to gain social standing.



Thrill Seeker

Risk Taker

Thrill Seeker / Risk-Taking

- Experimentation with explosives fire and pressure-creating devices, can serve as the ultimate risk. Today's technology creates a surplus of opportunities
- Often adolescents take these risks without thinking about the consequences
- Caregivers often have no idea what is being researched
- These kids enjoy attention – seeking and are very peer influences, often oppose authority figures
- Fires are usually set outside

Pathologically Motivated Firesetting

***Disordered Coping
Severely Disturbed
Sensory Reinforcement
Pyromania-
(often referred to as this diagnosis)***

Pathologically Motivated Firesetting

- Very rare when compared to other motivations.
- Child has chronic history of pervasive and severe disturbance and abuse.
- Multiple deficit areas with some combination of compromised cognition, distorted thoughts, and disturbed relatedness.
- Fires are often part of a disturbed response pattern or maladaptive coping mechanism.
- Often numerous fires, secretive, set in isolation.



Assessment Constants

- While the venue in which the assessment is conducted can raise a variety of issues there are still specific areas that all firesetting assessments need to cover. These include:

**FIRESETTING
HISTORY**

**DYNAMIC FACTORS
AFFECTING
THE BEHAVIOR**

MOTIVATION

**COMPREHENSIVE
FORMULATION**

**REALISTIC
RECOMMENDATIONS**

Firesetting Behavior

- What do we mean when we talk about firesetting behavior and firesetting history?
 - What actually happened and how did it happen?
 - How often has it happened?
- Why are these issues important?
 - Past behaviors yields insight into potential future behaviors.
 - Details of past behavior yield insight into developing ongoing safety parameters.
 - Before we discern what dynamics factors may contribute to firesetting and what the motivation is we need to know the details of what happened.

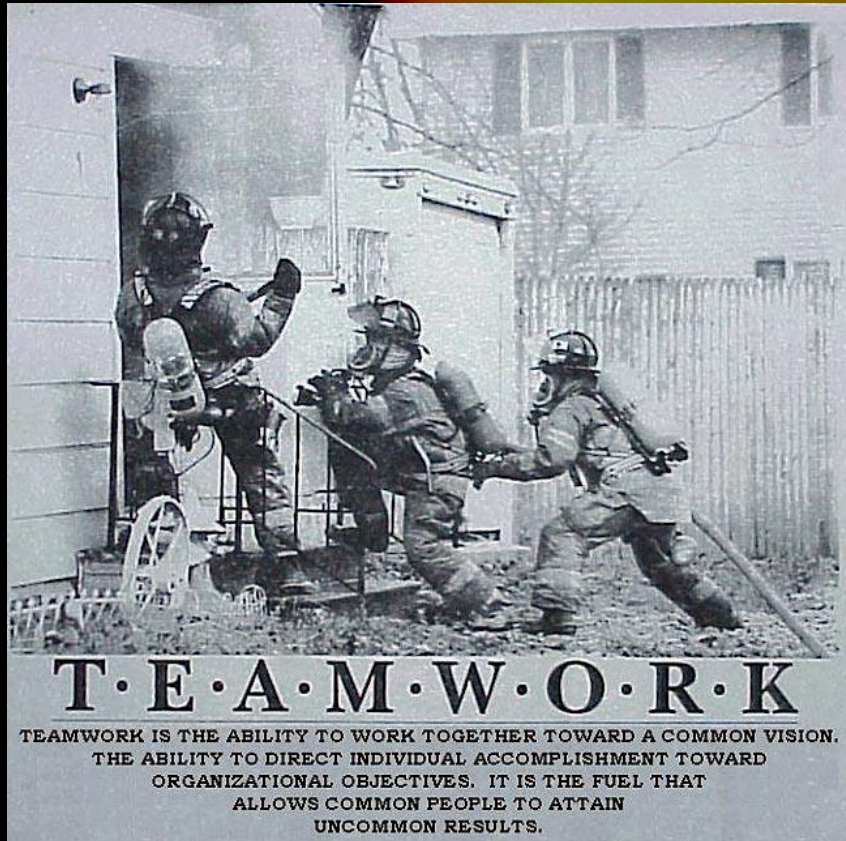
Firesetting Behavior History

- How often has this behavior occurred?
- What are the intrinsic and contextual factors which may have contributed to the incidents?
- Have the fire starts changed over time?
- How have they changed?
- What about the behavior has changed over time?
- The firesetting history needs to give you a clear picture of the details of each incident and any pattern of change in the behavior over time.



Evidenced Based Treatment Interventions

Multidisciplinary Collaboration



- This population is best served through an array of services provided by community-based collaborative intervention programs that use the expertise of fire service, law enforcement, education, and mental health services. (Bumpass, et al, 1985; Cole, et al, 1993; Kolko, 1999a, Sakheim and Osborn, 1996, Sharp, et al. 2006)
- Advantages far outweigh the drawbacks.
- “important advance” in this area (Kolko, 1999a)

Working with Fire Service

Keys to Success:

- Respect the profession.
- Understand their role(s).
- Take advantage of their expertise.



The Fire Service

Points of Contact



Local Fire Department:

- ✓ Chief
- ✓ Public Educator/JFS Coordinator
- ✓ Fire Prevention Officer
- ✓ Fire Investigator

Local Police Department:

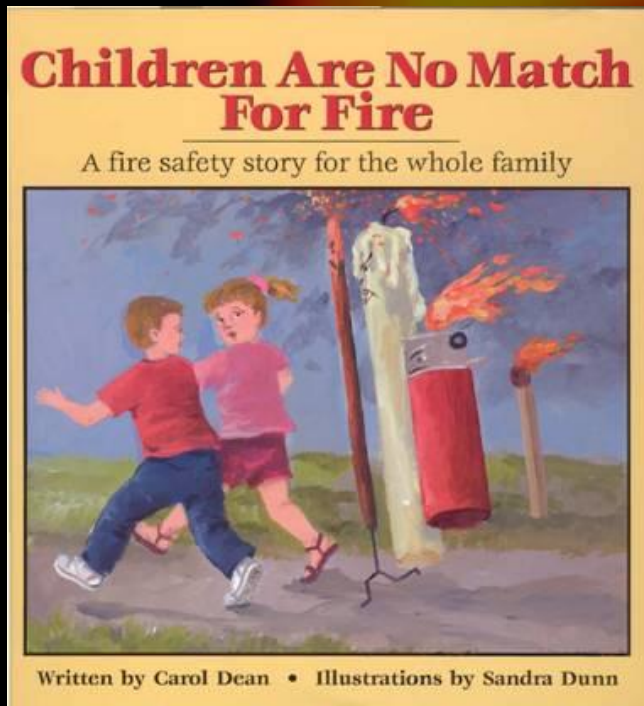
- ✓ Chief
- ✓ Detective/Youth Services/SRO

Office of the State Fire Marshal

- ✓ State Police Fire Investigator

Ct Commission On Fire Prevention and Control

Fire Safety Education



- Regardless of the seriousness of the behavior, fire safety education has been considered a universal component of community-based programs.
- Delivered by trained instructors in individual or group format.
- Fear-inducing techniques are ineffective teaching tools and at times produce results that are counterproductive.
- Parent fire safety education focuses upon access, responsibility, and supervision.
- Parent education serves to reduce parent fears and can increase their sense of control and safety.

Outpatient Treatment of Juvenile Firesetting

- Treatment is not particularly different from existing recognized approaches to psychotherapy, but does require additional coordination and networking to eliminate fire use.
- Choice of an appropriate treatment strategy is dependent upon factors that include:
 - Motive(s) for the behavior
 - Firesetting history
 - Family dynamics
 - Fire knowledge/cognitive level
 - Diagnostic profile

Individual Intervention Strategies



Frequently Employed

- Cognitive Behavior Therapies
- Behavioral Therapies/Safety Contracting
- Fire Safety Education
- Anger Reduction Training
- Assertion/Problem Solving Training
- Community Service/Restitution

Rarely Employed

- Hypnosis
- Contingency Management
- Medications
- Covert Sensitization
- Satiation Practice

Group Therapy Models

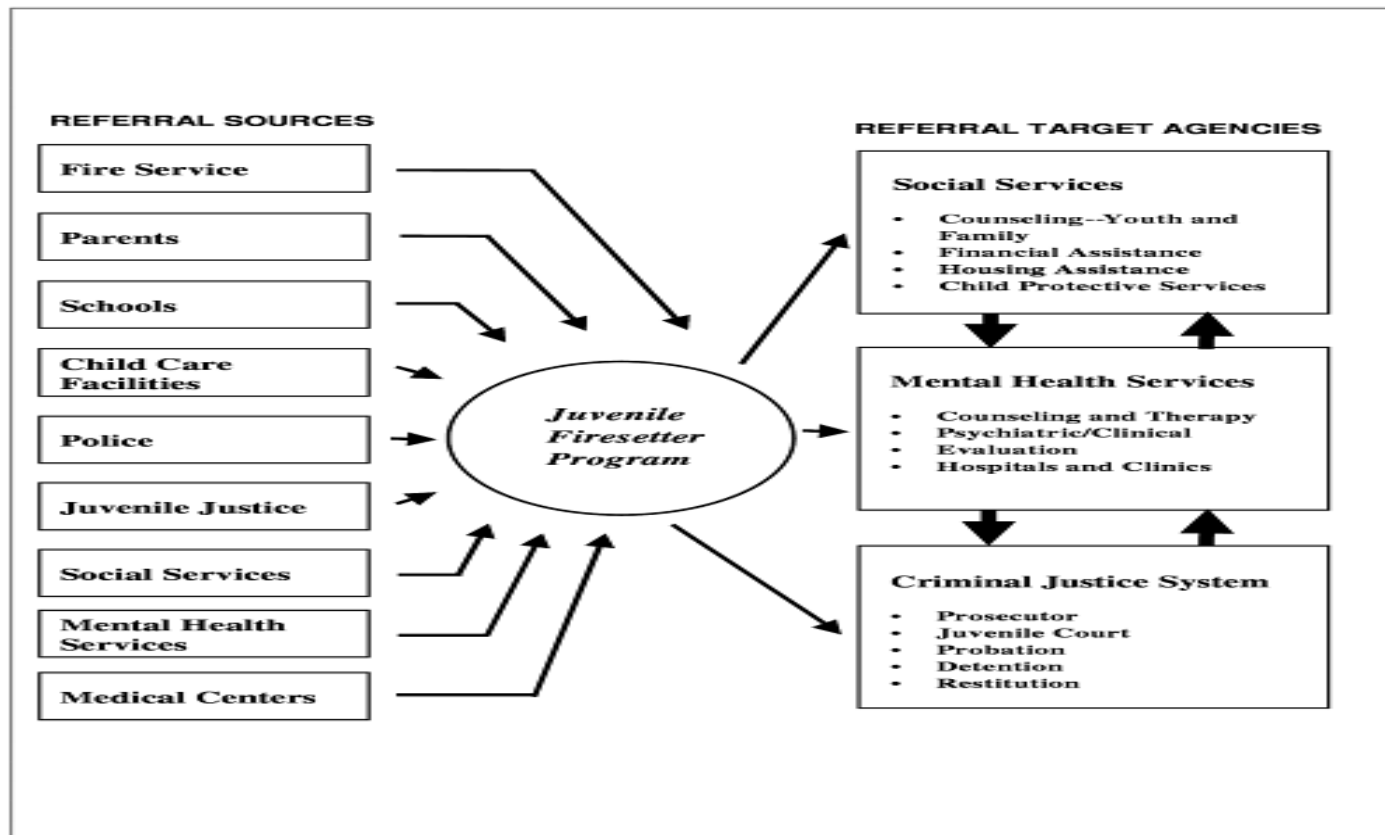
- CBT Group Interventions
- Cycles Groups
- Anger Management/Anger Reduction Groups
- Social Skills Groups
- Assertiveness Training



Program Model

The National Juvenile Firesetter/Arson Control and Prevention Program

Figure 4.1
Juvenile Firesetter Referral Network



Implementation

Connecticut Youth Firesetting

Model JFS Program

- Step 1- Interview/Information
- Step 2- Screening/FRAT Risk Assessment
- Step 3-Mental health risk assessment if necessary
- Step 4- Education and/or treatment
- Step 5- Follow up and case closure

Summary

- Each child/ youth and their families are viewed individually
 - Interventionists don't make assumptions based on the fire setting behavior
 - Interventionists are cognizant that the behavior are most likely a product of other issues
 - The focus is on the youth and families strengths and interests
- Interventionists determine the motivation of the fire(s)
 - firestarting or firesetting
 - Curiosity to pathological
- Interventionists design an appropriate treatment plan based on the issues, not solely focusing on the firesetting
 - There is no cookie cutter approach

Conclusion

- Firestarting or firesetting behavior must not be viewed any differently than any other at risk or challenging behaviors.