



U.S. Fire Administration

Prevent Youth Firesetting

National Arson Awareness Week



FEMA

Arson Awareness Week

Prevent Youth Firesetting

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is pleased to partner with the International Association of Arson Investigators; Safe Kids USA, USAonWatch, National Volunteer Fire Council, and the National Association of State Fire Marshals to announce the theme for the 2012 Arson Awareness Week: “Prevent Youth Firesetting.”

USFA and its partners will use the week of May 6-12 to focus public attention on the importance of a collaborative effort with fire and emergency service departments, law enforcement, mental health, social services, schools, and juvenile justice to help reduce the occurrence of juveniles engaged with fire.

Understanding Youth Firesetter Behavior

The misuse of fire has many variables, including age, motivation for firesetting behavior, type of fires set, ignition materials used to set the fire, and the child’s understanding and limitations of fire. Firesetting behavior is often a symptom of the problem and may be manifested through stress and crisis in children’s lives.

Juvenile firesetting or the misuse of fire by children isn’t necessarily arson. Myriad terms have been considered to describe the misuse of fire by kids. They include juvenile firesetting, juvenile arson, child arson, youth firesetting, fire lighting, fireplay and match play.

Judy Okulitch, the coordinator for the Oregon State Fire Marshal’s Youth Fire Prevention Intervention Program, says: “Language both reflects and molds thinking. The words we choose define our understanding of firesetting and our perceptions of juveniles displaying this behavior. Through the years, we have tried different words to better understand the intentional use of fire with children and adolescents. The word juvenile even became a problem for some. Juvenile was often shortened to ‘juve.’ A youth involved in the juvenile court system was a delinquent and that didn’t fit the mode of our youth motivated by curiosity about fire. Youth who intentionally set fires for reasons that are not appropriate, i.e., to destroy, vandalize, get revenge or show power or control over others are ‘misusing’ fire to satisfy their own needs. Likewise, the word ‘fireplay’ has outlived its usefulness. ‘Fireplay’ nor-

malized the behavior and minimizes the potential for serious consequences, making it more likely the youth with ‘firesetting behavior’ won’t get the appropriate and necessary intervention. It follows that the words we choose to describe the behavior of children and adolescents with fire drives the intervention they receive. That is why we must choose our words—carefully.”

The first National Fire Academy (NFA) course that addressed this topic was called “Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Specialist,” receiving its title from the Juvenile Firesetting Intervention Professional Standard, which is part of National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1035, *Standard for Professional Qualifications for Public Fire and Life Safety Educator*. The revised course is now called “Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention.”

Youth Firesetting Facts

According to NFPA:

- Fires started by children playing accounted for an average of 56,300 fires with associated losses of 110 civilian deaths, 880 civilian injuries, and \$286 million in direct property damage per year between 2005 and 2009.
- Younger children are more likely to set fires in homes, while older children and teenagers are more likely to set fires outside.
- Males are more likely to engage in fireplay than females, as 83 percent of home structure fires and 93 percent of outside or unclassified fires were set by boys when age was coded as a factor.
- Lighters were the heat source in half (50 percent) of child-playing fires in homes.
- A child’s bedroom continues to account for 40 percent of child-playing home fires.

USFA’s National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) data indicate, where age was cited as a factor in a fire’s ignition by lighters or matches, that 37 percent of these fires were started by juveniles aged 10 to 17.

According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program:

- Juveniles (people under age 18) accounted for roughly 46 percent of arson arrests in 2005 to 2010.
- In 2010, 40 percent of arson arrests were juveniles, with 47.6 percent of those children under 16 years of age. Arrests of juveniles for the crime of arson were higher, proportionally, than for any other crime.
- Juveniles were involved in 34.3 percent of arson offenses cleared, which was the highest percentage of all offense clearances involving only juveniles.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) reports that from 2000 to 2009:

- There were 1,637 juvenile-involved fire incidents reported in the Bomb Arson Tracking System.
- More than half of these fires (56 percent or 909 incidents) were classified as arson.
- Twenty-nine percent (or 476 incidents) were classified as accidental, and 15 percent (or 251 incidents) were classified as undetermined.
- The total dollar damage reported for these fires is estimated at more than \$75 million.

What Families Can Do to Be Fire Safe

Youth firesetting is often referred to as the preventable arson.

Each year in this country, fires set by children are responsible for more than 100 fire deaths, nearly 1,000 painful burn injuries, and hundreds of millions of dollars in property loss, according to the USFA. Children are often the victims in these fires. While curiosity about fire is natural, fires set by children are dangerous and deadly.

Why Do Kids Set Fires?

The best way to understand why children set fires is to look at their motivations for firesetting. For most young kids, the motive is experimentation and curiosity. Motives can involve curiosity, a cry for help, thrill-seeking, willful intent to cause destruction, or children who suffer from mental or emotional problems.

Remember, if you suspect that your child is setting fires, you are not the only parent ever to face this problem. Contact your local fire department immediately. Explain the situation to them. Many fire departments offer youth firesetting prevention and intervention programs.

Parents, caregivers and public educators, whether they are from the fire department or the school system, can build an informed foundation by teaching fire safety at an early age. Teach children of all ages that fires, even small ones, can spread quickly.

Teaching Children Fire Safety

The most critical message for children to learn is that matches and lighters are tools, not toys! Parents should never use lighters, matches and fire for fun; children will mimic you, and when they do it unsupervised, tragic events can result. Praise your child for practicing responsible behavior and showing respect for fire. Set a good example: Use matches, lighters and fire carefully, as children will imitate positive behavior too.

- Always supervise young children.
- Never leave matches or lighters within reach of children. Keep matches and lighters out of reach in high, locked cabinets.
- Use child-resistant lighters, but remember that they are not childproof.
- Instruct young children to inform an adult if they find matches or lighters.

Home Fire Safety Tips

- Regularly inspect your home for fire hazards.
- Install and maintain working smoke alarms throughout your home.
- Plan and practice home fire-escape drills that include two ways out from every room.
- Install residential fire sprinklers in your home.

Successful Intervention Programs

There are four intervention services for the child, parent and caregiver to address youth firesetting behavior. They include services by 1) fire service; 2) mental health; 3) social services counseling; and 4) juvenile justice.

National Fire Incident Reporting System: Arson and Juvenile Firesetter Module

Data is an indispensable tool in the war against arson. The ability to identify when and where the crime takes place, what form it takes, and the characteristics of its targets and perpetrators is crucial. Armed with such information, fire service and law enforcement agencies can develop and implement arson prevention initiatives, allowing them to use their resources in the most efficient and effective manner.

The NFIRS 5.0 Arson Module (NFIRS-11) was developed and released in 1999 with this goal in mind.

The optional Arson Module may be used whenever the cause of ignition (NFIRS-2 E1) is coded as “intentional” or as “under investigation,” without a distinction as to whether or not a crime has occurred or a determination of criminal intent. The Arson Module can also be used in cases where the cause is “undetermined after investigation.”

In addition, the Arson Module can be used to document juvenile-set fires, whether determined to be intentional, unintentional or under investigation. This information will permit analysis of juvenile firesetting trends, including intervention strategies and repeated activity.

The Arson Module consists of two parts: a local investigation module, which permits a fire department or arson investigation unit to document certain details concerning the incident, and a juvenile firesetter section, which identifies key items of information that could be used for local, state and national intervention programs.

The NFIRS Arson Module is not intended to replace arson information management systems used by fire and law enforcement units, but to identify data elements that could be exported to NFIRS and be included as an integral part of the USFA’s National Fire Database and the ATF’s National Repository.

For more information on the Arson and Juvenile Firesetter Module, see Unit 11 of the “NFIRS 5.0 Self-Study Course” (Q0494) and Chapter 13 of the NFIRS Reference Guide (PDF, 7 megabytes (MB)).

Publications

- Youth Firesetting: What You Can Do (572KB).
- Juvenile Firesetting — A Growing Concern Spanish (PDF, 663KB).
- Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Handbook (PDF, 5.9MB).
- Fire Risk to Children in 2007 (PDF, 370KB) Topical Fire Research Series, Vol. 11, Issue 9, February 2011.
- School Fires (PDF, 657KB) Topical Fire Research Series, Vol. 8, Issue 1, August 2007.
- Arson and Juveniles Responding to the Violence: Special Report (PDF, 599KB).
- National Juvenile Firesetter/Arson Control and Prevention Program (PDF, 1.9MB).
- Fires Ignited by Lighters and Matches (PDF, 145KB) Topical Fire Research Series, Vol. 4, Issue 1, October 2004.
- Matches and Lighters Poster (PDF, 458KB).