

# JUVENILE FIRESETTERS PROGRAM

If your child has played with fire; If your child has deliberately set a fire;  
If you are unsure of how to teach your child about fire safety...*Call the fire department, we can help!*

Juvenile Firesetters is an intervention program designed to educate children and parents about fire safety and the consequences of fire.

Each family meets individually with a trained fire service educator. The educator will discuss the situation with the family and provide fire safety education. If a child needs additional intervention, such as counseling, they can link the family up with these services. Fire department services are free, and financial assistance is available for counseling.

Who can make a referral? Anyone who cares about the safety of a child can call for help: Families, friends, neighbors, teachers and you.

The program takes approximately 1 ½ hours. All information discussed is confidential. To schedule an appointment, call the Fire Prevention Bureau at (209) 538-5703, or send an e-mail.

## Why do Kids Play with Fire?

Children play with fire for a variety of reasons. By determining the motivation for the firesetting, we can best determine how to deal with it. There are five basic classifications - curiosity / experimentation (most common), reactionary, delinquent, strategic, and pathological firesetting.

- ***Curiosity/Experimentation***

The majority of children who play with fire (about 70%) are in this group. They are typically younger in age, and are curious about fire. The opportunity is there because the child has access to fire tools and is not supervised at the time of the incident. He or she decides to "see what fire will do." They usually don't think about or understand the danger of their actions.

*Example:* Six-year-old Michael finds his parent's lighter on the table. He is feeling kind of bored, so he decides to light some papers and sticks on fire. His home life is stable and there haven't been any recent stresses. He seems sorry for what he did.

- ***Reactionary***

If a child is upset about something and not good at expressing themselves, they may use fire as a way to let grown-ups know they need help. Their firesetting is in reaction to a problem, a new baby in the family, divorce, family problems, moving, a death, problems at school or with friends.

*Example:* Mom and step-dad are fighting loudly. Amy (age 11) is scared and wants them to stop. She doesn't know how to communicate how she feels, so she takes a lighter into her bedroom and sets her bedding on fire. When the parents notice this new emergency, they stop fighting. What's likely to happen the next time the parents fight if nothing changes?

- ***Delinquent Behavior***

Sometimes kids will light a fire as a prank or dare. Sometimes it's to cover up another crime. Most of the kids in this group, typically adolescent, don't realize they are breaking the law and could go to jail. They know what they are doing is wrong, but they may not understand the consequence of fire or potential liability to them and their family.

*Example:* Other kids dare 14-year-old Brad to light toilet paper in the school bathroom. Brad wants his friends to like him. Even though he knows it is wrong, he does it anyway.

- ***Strategic Firesetting***

In some cases, children will escalate to deliberate acts of firesetting, with no regard for life or property (including their own life). They know what they are doing is wrong, and they understand the consequences. They may use fire for retaliation, as part of a group initiation, or to cover up a major crime.

- ***Pathological Firesetting***

This type of firesetting is rare, and may be connected to a mental disorder or problem. Pathological firesetting may occur for obscure reasons, not easily understood by those other than mental health professionals.

## **The Fire Problem**

Fire is the third leading causes of "accidental" death in the United States.

Most fires and fire fatalities happen in residential properties - homes and apartments. Young children and older adults are at greatest risk.

Children who play with fire start many of the fires that kill young children. These fires are often started by children who find matches or a lighter and are curious about fire.

Arson is the second leading causes of residential fires. Over 50% of all arsons are committed by people under the age of 18 (typically adolescents 12-17 years old).

## **Myths About Youth Fire Setting**

**Myth:** It is normal for children to play with fire.

**Fact:** While curiosity about fire is common, use without a parent's approval or knowledge is dangerous to the child and anyone around them.

**Myth:** If you burn a child's hand, they will stop.

**Fact:** Burns only create fear and scars. The reason behind the fire use must be discovered and addressed.

**Myth:** If you take a child to the burn unit to see burn victims, they will stop playing with fire.

**Fact:** Going to the burn unit only instills fear, and does not teach the child anything about fire and fire safety. More importantly, we need to be sensitive to burn survivors who are trying to

recover (emotionally and physically) from their burns and we should not put them on display.

**Myth:** Put a child in the back of a police car or have a firefighter talk sternly to them and they will be so scared they won't ever do it ever again.

**Fact:** A police officer will put a child in the back of their patrol car only if they have the legal authority, and it is appropriate to do so. Scare tactics don't get to the root of the problem, and these kids typically continue to set fires.

**Myth:** It is a phase the child will grow out of.

**Fact:** It is not a phase. It is a dangerous behavior. You cannot afford to wait for fire behavior to change. It only takes one match to cause serious injury or death.

**Myth:** Some children are obsessed with fire.

**Fact:** In reality, very few children are obsessed or would be considered pyromaniacs. There is almost always a reason behind the behavior.

## What Parents Can Do

- Set a good example. If you smoke, be very responsible in your use of matches and lighters. Children learn by watching you.
- Keep matches and lighters out of children's sight and reach. Even toddlers can use lighters and matches to start a fire.
- Teach children the safe and proper ways to use fire. Be sure they understand a responsible grown-up should only use it.
- Set clear ground rules. Teach children what they should do if they find matches and lighters. If they are young, they should "tell" a grown-up and not touch them. Older children can give you matches and lighters. As an adult, respond by putting the matches and lighters in a safe place.
- Match and lighter round up. Ask your children to tell you where all the matches and lighters are located throughout your home. You will be surprised to learn what they know. Be sure to then take all the matches and lighters and put them in a safe place.
- What's a safe place? You may think your purse is a safe place; however this is one of the first places children go to get matches and lighters. Put matches and lighters in a high secure location.
- Other ignition devices - in addition to matches and lighters, fire place starters are common ignition sources. Treat these items in the same way you would matches and lighters.
- Childproof lighters - while these devices provide a safeguard, they are not totally foolproof. Assume children can manipulate and use these lighters as well.
- Teach children what they should do if they are around other kids who play with fire. They need to get away and tell a grown-up. This can happen at home, while they are out playing, or at school.
- Children need supervision. Children will set fires if they have the ignition devices (matches and lighters) and opportunity. Be aware of what your children are doing and whom they are playing with.

- As children get older, teach them how to use fire responsibly. We need fire in our life for many things - heating and cooking. They should only use fire under your supervision and never on their own.
- Install and maintain smoke detectors in your home. Smoke detectors should be located on every level of your home, outside of bedrooms, and inside bedrooms.
- Have an escape plan. If you do have a fire, everyone should know how to get out of the house.
- Teach your child how to stop, drop and roll if their clothes should catch on fire, and how to treat a burn (with cool running water).
- If your child plays with fire, contact the fire department. We can help!

If you would like educational materials on this subject and fire safety, please contact our office at (209) 538-5703. We would be happy to answer any questions and mail you additional information.