

A Letter From the FireSetter Intervention Program Coordinator

Realizing that youth fire-setting is becoming a major community issue, the Firefighters' Burn Fund, Victoria, BC has prepared this booklet for families with a child or children involved with fire play or fire-setting. The Firefighters Burn Fund, Victoria, BC wants parents to know help is available through their Youth FireSetters Intervention Program.

This booklet provides some of the warning signals parents need to be aware of concerning their child's fire-setting. We hope it will help parents in the sometimes difficult task of understanding and communicating effectively with their children.

We extend our thanks to the following professionals who, through their thoughtful comments, helped significantly in finalizing the text: Nancy Bartunek, Sylvia Echeveste, Carol Gross, Donna McCloe, Bunny Shuch, Jeff Thomas and Larry Waldman.

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BACKGROUND

Fire has always fascinated us, whether it's a summer campfire or a crackling log in the hearth. Children are especially attracted to fire, their interest sparked by natural curiosity and a desire to learn about the world around them. But while their interest is understandable, it can also be dangerous unless they are taught to understand its ability to hurt and destroy. Studies have shown that the majority of children are interested in fire and nearly half have played with matches or fires. That can be highly dangerous and lead to even riskier behaviours, including fire-setting. The causes of fire-setting aren't fully understood. Research has found a higher rate of Attention Deficit Disorder among youths who set fires. Children who have been through a recent crisis - divorce, a move or death of a loved one - sometimes begin setting fires. And some experts believe that unless early incidents of fire-setting are addressed children may progress to more serious, dangerous fire-setting.

FIRE FACTS

Fires started by youths in Canada increased in recent years with a dollar loss into the millions. In one year alone, youth between eight and 18 were responsible for up to 30 per cent of fire-related crimes. The figures only tell part of the story. Fire-setting kills people and destroys innocent lives. The evidence is clear. Families need help in dealing with the problem of youth fire-setting.

THE PROGRAM

Established in 1986, the Youth FireSetter Intervention Program has taken a positive approach toward stopping youth firesetting. The FireFighters' Burn Fund, Victoria, BC operates the program, focusing on the needs of children and families. The program provides educational and counselling intervention for youths and their families experiencing small or large problems with Presetting. We work closely with other community based organizations. Confidential counselling to youths and their families is provided by a panel of mental health care providers, including counsellors, psychologists and doctors.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

No matter how difficult the situation, it's important to remember that help and support are available. This handbook was developed to provide parents and guardians with an overview of the warning signs that a child may be developing behaviour that could lead to fire-setting. It also sets out what you can do to prevent the behaviour and help your child if it does become a problem. It also offers an over-view of normal childhood development and offers some advice that would be useful in all areas of parenting. If the information in this booklet triggers additional questions or concerns, or you simply want to know more, please call us at 250.370.2846. There's no charge, and confidentiality is assured. Prevention starts with education in the home.

THE CHALLENGE OF PARENTING

It isn't easy being a parent. It requires time, understanding, and more time to raise capable, kind, self-reliant children. Studies have found effective parents share some common traits.

- They encourage their children - recognise strength, support without pressure.
- Communicate their love affectionately, verbally and respectfully.
- Create a positive atmosphere using gentle humour, a climate of hope and advice.
- Demonstrate balanced discipline by clarifying expectations, providing consequences, sharing reasons and developing trust.
- Make their children feel safe, both emotionally and physically.
- Model a good relationship - how to disagree, how to love.
- Spend time with their children - reading, communicating and playing.
- Recognizing and dealing with fire behaviours

FIRE-SETTING MYTHS

MYTH: It is normal for children to play with fire.	MYTH: If you burn a child's hand, they will stop playing with fire.	MYTH: Fire-setting is a phase the child will outgrow.	MYTH: Some children are naturally obsessed with fire.
FACT: It is NOT NORMAL for children to play with fire. Curiosity about fire is common, but children who start fires or play with them without a parent's approval are dangerous to the child and everyone around them and is an important warning sign.	FACT: Burning a child's hand can create fear and scars and is AGAINST THE LAW . It does not address the reasons behind the behaviour or reduce the risk of continued fire-setting.	FACT: Fire-setting is. NOT A PHASE . It is a dangerous behaviour. You can't wait for fire behaviour to change. It only takes one match to cause serious injury or death.	FACT: Very few children are "obsessed". There is almost always a REASON behind the fire-setting behaviour.

OVERVIEW

Youth firesetters can be described from a developmental overview.

- **Children under seven years**
- **Children 8-12 years of age**
- **Adolescents, ages 13-18**

Children Under Seven

Generally the fires started by children under the age of seven are the result of curiosity. Young children have active imaginations and a drive to explore the world around them. Children in this age group may:

- Light matches
- Play with matches or lighters left around the home
- Imitate parents by lighting candle or paper
- Not fully understand parents' rules about use of fire around the home
- Be secretive, hiding under a bed or in a closet to play with fire

Parents are lifelong teachers and our children learn not only from what we say, but what we do. In the end, children will model the action and behaviours of the adults in their lives. Children also depend on adults to establish boundaries and provide a safe environment in which to grow and learn.

PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY

Parents or guardians of children at this age must assume responsibility for their child's behaviour. A parent or guardian can do a lot to prevent children from being involved with fire, heading off dangerous behaviour. Children look to parents for leadership, guidance and as role models.

TIPS

1. Lead by example. You can't expect your child to treat fire any differently than you do. Model safe behaviour when camping or lighting candles.
2. Explain why they can't use fire. Simply saying "Don't" isn't good enough. Children need to be told that fire can hurt, in terms they can understand. For many children, simply forbidding them to play with fire increases their curiosity.
3. Treat lighters and matches like tools and give them the same respect you would other dangerous items around your home, like knives or power tools.
4. Keep matches and lighters out of the reach of all children, preferably locked away. Remove all unnecessary matches and lighters from your home. Most children are only involved with fire because these items are available.
5. Encourage children to treat matches, lighters and fire with respect. Make the consequence of misuse clear, explaining the risk to family and pets and your rules. Increase supervision of your child.
6. Encourage your child's school to provide fire safety instruction in the classroom.

Children From Eight to Twelve

This can be a high-risk period. Children at this age may begin to experiment with fire, with typical actions including:

- seeing what type of things will burn, such as plastic toys, leaves or household cleaning agents.
- seeing if they can control fire by stamping on it or smothering it.
- finding hidden locations, like a corner of the backyard or a shed.

PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY

Parents or guardians of children at this age must intervene with education and by setting clear consequences for risky behaviour.

Children should be educated in fire safety, fire as a tool and the importance of a fire escape plan.

Fire-play should result in discipline, not punishment. The word discipline means, 'to teach.' Effective discipline is based on four principles that the child needs to understand.

1) Actions produce consequences - playing with matches may mean the loss of other privileges

2) Choosing an action means accepting the consequences

3) We are all responsible for our actions

4) We are all held accountable for our choices

It's important that we support appropriate behaviour with positive consequences, just as bad behaviour should result in negative consequences.

TIPS

1. Be reasonable. Parents must know a child's capabilities and set standards that the child can meet.
2. Be explicit. Children can listen and still not understand the words or ideas you're trying to communicate. Use terms your child can understand, and involve him or her in the discussion. Ask them to tell you what they think you are saying - what behaviour you're describing, what the consequences will be and why you are concerned.
3. Be consistent. Set rules that are necessary and important to the family. Set rules that can be enforced every time, even if it's inconvenient.
4. Be fair. Children deserve to know what will happen if their behaviour is out of bounds. Consequences should teach, not punish unfairly.
5. Children will often forget and make mistakes. Consequences that are logical will help them remember next time.

The Teenage Years (13-18)

Children between the ages of 13 and 18 may be curious about lighters and combustibles. They often experiment with friends, and their actions often involve much greater risk to themselves and others.

PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITY

Teens are striving for independence, but still depend on their parents for guidance.

The parents' job is to help the adolescent develop good interpersonal skills, sound judgment and a sense of self esteem.

Parents still need to set some absolute boundaries, establishing non-negotiable expectations on alcohol or drugs.

But it's also important to help the teen develop his or her own boundaries by working out expectations, limits and consequences with you. The rules will be more likely to be followed, and the child learns to judge their own needs and develops self-control, and self-discipline.

Many teenagers often do act in impulse, without thinking of potential harm or destruction. That's true in the use of fireworks or play with fire. Parents need to discuss the issue, and the potentially deadly consequences.

Above all, work on communication, talking and listening. Good communication and continued use of logical consequences help build a trusting environment in which your support and guidance are welcomed.

TIPS

1. Establish rules, boundaries and consequences before conflict begins.
2. Review these with your child to be sure he or she understands their role and that he accepts that consequences will follow action.
3. Establish consequences that can be enforced and that are linked to the behaviour.
4. Follow through with consequences in a matter-of-fact way, without belittling or insulting the child.
5. Be consistent.
6. Make it clear that you are acting out of respect and love for the child

Principals For Establishing Logical Consequences*

- Must be closely related to positive or negative behaviour
- Must be reasonable to both adult and child
- Should be established prior to the event by mutual agreement of both adult and child
- Should be established in an environment of unqualified love and mutual respect
- Once established, should have consistent follow through
- Should be enforced with dignity and respect

(* Source: H. Steven Glenn, Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World. Capabilities Inc.)

For All Families

Children misbehave. The challenge for parents is to handle misbehavior positively. When a child does something that is not allowed and that has not been discussed, handle the incident in a natural way, without too much criticism or anger.

If it is possible the behaviour will be a problem in the future, agree with the child on the consequences for repeat performances. Family meetings provide excellent opportunities for children to be involved in decisions regarding consequences that are meaningful, fair and clearly understood.

Start early on educating your children about fire and acting as a responsible model. Establish consequences for actions like touching a lighter. In many cases, that is all that will be required.

If your child shows extreme fascination with fire, lights more than one fire or persists in playing with matches, you should be more concerned. The fire-setting could be a cry for help in some way, an indication of extreme pressure. For some children fire-setting is caused by some unresolved problems or conflicts. In others it is an early step towards increasingly serious problems with the law.

In any case, in those situations additional help is suggested, in the form of assessment, education or counselling.

What Can YOU Do?

If you're concerned about your child or want more information on prevention, call:

(250)370-2846

THE FIREFIGHTERS' BURN FUND

VICTORIA, BC

Youth FireSetter Intervention Program

We can help.

Every attempt is made to assist families with children who have been involved with fireplay.