

# Preventing Child-Set Fires

## Fires Kill Children

Fires are the number-one cause of death at home for children under six. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) estimates that two of every five of those children killed in home fires die in fires started by themselves or other young children. More than one of every eight fatal structure fires is started by a child under the age of 15.

## Why Children Set Fires

The principal reason most children play with fire is out of curiosity. Troubled children may act out their anger or frustration by setting fires. Abused children may cry for help. Older children may set fires due to peer pressure, or as part of gang activity.

## Playing With Fire

It is normal for young children to express a natural curiosity about fire, so don't overreact.

Don't try to scare children away from fire. Teach them to respect it -- the way you would teach them to respect traffic or power tools. Children model older kids' and grown-ups' behavior, so use caution when working with fire and always demonstrate safe use of fire tools.

Teach your children that fire is dangerous and that matches and lighters are tools for grown-up use only. Keep matches and lighters up high, out of sight and children's reach, preferably in a locked cabinet. Never leave a child alone with an open flame.

Older children should be taught to use fire properly. Have them help you use fire responsibly -- blowing out candles or putting charcoal in a barbecue grill -- before you teach them to handle matches. If older children find matches or lighters, teach them to bring them to an adult so a younger child can't get them.

## Fire Starters

For some children, setting fires deliberately is a response to situational or emotional problems. Fire setting may be a cry for help from a child trapped in an intolerable situation of abuse. It may be a way of asserting power when events, or personal limitations, seem to underscore the child's powerlessness over things that matter.

Most fire setters are male, and the peak age for fire setters who are not motivated by natural curiosity is the early teens (13-14 years old).

## Some Crisis Fire Starters

- Are upset by a major change in family life (a death, move, or divorce) or
- Feel alienated due to a learning disability or other source of chronic failure or
- Come from an abusive household.

These children need help. Their fire setting is a symptom of a problem, not the problem itself.

But it must be stopped. And it takes community support to stop it. Crisis fire setting is often an educational/developmental problem, often a mental health problem, often a social-services problem, and always a criminal justice problem and child-rearing problem. Anyone with responsibility for some aspect of children's behavior may be first to see signs of fire setting, any such person may be part of the solution for a fire setter.

## When to Seek Help

If your child demonstrates a chronic or exaggerated interest in fire, or plays with matches or lighters and won't stop, counseling may help. Parents who suspect, or find evidence, that their child is setting even small fires should be direct about the fact that fires can kill. They should also direct any crisis that may be behind the behavior, listen carefully when the child describes his or her feelings, and get professional help.

**Where to Find Help**

Many schools and fire departments offer to help children who play with fire or set fires. Contact your local fire department or school counselor for details. Social-service and related agencies may have relevant programs, depending on the problems that motivate a particular crisis fire setter.

**Take Responsibility**

Set a good example for children by following basic fire safety practices in your home.

- Talk openly about all aspects of fire safety with children, beginning at a young age.
- Teach older children to use fire responsibly, and to bring found matches or lighters to an adult.
- Keep matches and lighters up high out of children's sight and reach -- preferably in a locked cabinet.
- Store flammable liquids properly and away from children.
- Keep your property clear of convenient fuels for arsonists, such as brush and rubbish.
- Never leave young children alone with an open flame.
- If you suspect your child is overly curious about fire or setting fires, get help immediately.
- Information supplied by National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, MA