

Developing A Youth Firesetting Intervention Program

As child firesetting/juvenile arson gain prominence in the fire service consciousness, many agencies struggle with how to begin such a program in their community. A well thought out and executed approach to the development of a comprehensive youth firesetting intervention program will be the first step to serving the community and minimizing false starts and subsequent program changes later.

While it is always tempting to replicate a program that has been successful in another community, consider this approach very carefully. Successful firesetting intervention programs should contain the common “foundation components” that will ultimately lead to success. By containing these elements, it does not destine each program to appear the same. In fact, they will likely appear different due to the way each will apply these elements to their unique community.

Stakeholders Are Key

When reviewing youth firesetting intervention programs across North America, it can be said that successful programs seem to all employ the same foundation components of success. What will separate one program from another are the resources that the stakeholders in the community can (and do) bring to the table. Resources, in the case of firesetting intervention programs, are typically either human or financial in nature. While a program can contain the same foundation components as another program, the resources made available largely dictate how it functions and appears.

So the key to a successful effort is the gathering of the community stakeholders (human resources) that need to be an integral part of a complete program and including them in the initial program development. The commitment of the partnering organizations will go a long way in determining the financial requirements of a program. This will be discussed later.

Key partners to consider in the development of a youth firesetting intervention program include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ❑ Fire service
- ❑ Law enforcement
- ❑ Fire investigation
- ❑ Mental health
- ❑ Juvenile justice (related programs)
- ❑ Education (schools)
- ❑ Child welfare
- ❑ Burn treatment
- ❑ Pediatric medical

Also, consider bringing the following in as part of the effort:

- ❑ Local media
- ❑ Civic organizations
- ❑ Insurance industry

Once all of the appropriate stakeholders are on-board, the program structure, and the role all coalition members will play, can begin to take shape. By developing these roles around the foundation components, a successful program can be developed based on the essential functions necessary for success. Remember that the foundation components cover the essential functions but the people bring them to life.

Financial resources can become necessary when the people and/or facilities necessary cannot be absorbed or provided by the coalition members. In many cases, agencies can commit staff, office space, and materials to the cause. Combining these resources can sometimes eliminate the need to purchase or leverage funding.

Foundation Components

Foundation components are the building blocks of a complete program. While they may appear different from one intervention program to the next, all successful programs will contain them in one form or another. Careful consideration should be given to the inclusion of these elements to optimize the opportunities for success.

IDENTIFICATION

Identification is the process that brings children to the attention of an intervention program. This may be accomplished in a number of ways. The most likely way of discovering children who have experienced an inappropriate incident with fire is through fire agency response. It is important for the fire service responder to be aware of, and comfortable with, an accepted and understood process to follow once it has been determined that a child is responsible for a fire incident.

Another source that can readily identify juvenile firesetting behavior is the parent/caregiver of the child. Citizens within a community should know that the fire department (or intervention program) is ready and willing to help if they call. If a fire department is not equipped to help, it should, at the very least, be able to direct the public to someone who can. If the fire service cannot act as a point of contact for all fire-related issues, who can?

Mental health professionals, youth service agencies, schools, child protective services, law enforcement, juvenile justice programs, housing authorities, and medical facilities are other potential sources that may identify firesetting behaviors. An effective youth firesetting intervention program should encourage the identification of children in need of services. Developing a network, which includes all of the above listed identifiers, is the first step to a successful community coalition.

EDUCATION

Regardless of the reason behind a child set fire, education will almost always be necessary to prevent future mishaps with fire. Parents/caregivers must be as much a part of the process as the children. A child cannot be expected to use fire in an appropriate manner when their primary role model (their parent/caregiver) may be demonstrating the incorrect method several times each day. The parent may need as much (or more) education than the child.

Educational message delivery will be as varied as the number of fire and life safety educators. A good intervention program should play to the strengths of the people who conduct the education. Whether with puppets, songs, videos, or just straight forward talk, the person responsible for education must present the information in a way that is meaningful and appropriate for the child and family. The message and delivery that is right for one child may fall short for another. Individualized preparation and delivery are key.

Appropriate education must also take special learning needs into account. Children with a diagnosis such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Conduct Disorder, etc. are not unable to learn. These circumstances are simply barriers to conventional learning that the educator must take into account before beginning the education process. Sometimes, outside assistance may need to be employed, but the child's needs should not be ignored or discounted.

The message content will have some obvious topics. Be aware that many children know how to perform Stop, Drop, and Roll; Crawl Low Under Smoke; Feel the Door; Test Their Smoke Alarm; Make an Escape Plan; and many other *fire survival skills*. But remember fire survival skills emphasize what to do after a fire has occurred. Youth firesetting intervention education should emphasize how to avoid the inappropriate use of fire to prevent an incident from ever occurring.

As for the most important educational message, this might surely be the concept that matches and lighters are tools for adults, not toys for kids. And this message is not meant for children alone. This is a misunderstood concept that is often perpetuated by adults. Most children set fires for the simple reason that they don't understand this basic message and treat ignition material in a very casual and inappropriate manner...just like mom and/or dad might do.

INTERVIEW/SCREENING

The interview or screening is the root of the intervention service. This may be conducted in conjunction with education or during a separate meeting. This is the phase in which the intervention will try to determine (in broad terms) the motivation for the firesetting and what the child and/or family will need in order to prevent future firesetting behaviors.

There are many instruments available with which to structure the interview/screening. It is important to choose a single method acceptable to all members of the coalition. If one member of the coalition performs the interview/screening, the information should be able

to be passed to another member of the coalition and carry the same meaning. This level of cooperation and understanding can only occur through regular and effective communication. This is the true strength and measure of an effective youth firesetting intervention program.

It may be tempting to make a determination of the child's motivation for firesetting without the guidance of a good and accepted interview/screening tool. Interventionists should avoid this trap and be sure they operate within the scope of their training and skills. A system of checks and balances should be employed to ensure consistency, quality, and completeness of the interview/screening is maintained over time.

REFERRAL

The referral phase of the intervention program provides the necessary resources to serve the needs of the child/family that may be beyond education alone. When child-firesetting is motivated by a reaction to stress or crisis (which education will help, but not resolve), it is critical that they be linked to the resources necessary to appropriately address these issues. Resources may be in the form of mental health intervention, parenting classes, hospitalization for physical and/or mental impairments, youth service agency programs, juvenile justice programs, child welfare intervention, or any other appropriate service.

The key to proper referral is having knowledge of referral agencies before the intervention begins. The working relationships and trust developed through the coalition process will make the referral task much easier. If a referral agency understands youth firesetting behavior in the same way as all of the other coalition members, the child/family will be best served. The ease with which a child/family is moved from one segment of a program to the next is the hallmark of a good youth firesetting intervention program.

FOLLOW-UP/EVALUATION

No program of any kind can be successful without evaluation. Follow-up means evaluating the success rate as well as looking at client satisfaction and future client needs.

Effectiveness is best measured through recidivism. There are two basic ways to measure repeat behavior. The first is through repeat firesetting that is reported through one of the identifiers described earlier. The second is through a follow-up survey with the family after participation in the program. Ideally, recidivism should be measured in both ways and both should show a similar rate of reoccurrence.

The survey method of follow-up provides other opportunities. By questioning those who participate in the intervention process, the elements that were well received and recommendations for improvement can be gathered. Even information about the interviewer's skills and rapport can be measured. Only the recipients of the intervention can provide this valuable information. The intervention program itself cannot.

DATA COLLECTION AND PROACTION

While not part of the five "foundation components," data collection and the subsequent proaction are critical elements of any program and cannot be overlooked.

Many of the functions described in the foundation elements require accurate and well-maintained records. Whether for reference in the event of future behaviors or simply for the communication of intervention from one member of the coalition to the next, records and data are key to service for the children and families moving through a youth firesetting intervention program.

Data collection may encompass a wide range of meanings. It may involve collecting the specific data on an individual child, their family, and the firesetting behavior in question. It might also include the intervention services provided and the subsequent follow-up results. It can even contain a compilation or record of the intervention results collected on the interview/screening tools.

The content may vary from program to program but should always represent the needs of the program. To collect data and maintain records that are not pertinent to the task at hand is unnecessary and potentially inappropriate. The entire coalition should be consulted about these issues as well as legal authorities having jurisdiction over the program.

An effective method of collecting and reporting the data should also be employed. There is a tremendous amount of data collected in computers across the world, much of which is never extracted and put to use. All of the potential information in a database should be applicable and able to be put to use. But computer databases are not the only way to collect and utilize information. However, computers best organize large quantities of complex combinations of data.

Once the data can be extracted, it can be put to work. Since youth firesetting intervention programs are only reactive to a firesetting incident, they fail to stop the behavior before it occurs. When analyzing the data gathered through a comprehensive program, many clues indicative of the “thinking errors” made by children with fire become clear. These clues will be able to guide proactive efforts to discourage or prevent firesetting behaviors before they occur, thus preventing needless death, injury, losses, and the unnecessary waste of resources to deal with the aftermath of child-set fires.

Summary

Youth firesetting intervention programs continue to be developed across the world. Some will succeed while some struggle. Understanding the dynamics that make a program successful will significantly increase the odds for success.

Any program begins with the human resources dedicated to the task. In the case of youth firesetting intervention programs, the human resources must represent all of the key stakeholders in the community fire problem. This reaches far beyond the fire service and spans most any agency or organization dedicated to youth services. Whether they can all play a direct role in the coalition or not, they must have a basic understanding and recognition of the collective intervention effort.

Different programs will appear different on the surface due to the available resources. However, the “foundation components” for success are all similar. A recognition and

application of these foundation components will make the would-be coalition better equipped to design and apply a program that will meet the community needs.

Identification, education, interview/screening, referral, and follow-up constitute the foundation components. Each has a separate, yet interconnected involvement in a successful intervention program. From the moment the firesetting event occurs until the follow-up call to the family is made, a continuum of service must be employed to provide a meaningful and helpful service to the child/family in need.

The collection and dissemination of data greatly assist in the intervention process. Systems must be developed to handle case information in a useful and confidential manner. And the extraction of information that can be applied to proactive education programs (those that reach children before they begin to set fires) cannot be ignored as the true solution to child-set fires. Waiting until after the fire will only place lives and property needlessly at risk.

Developing and maintaining a youth firesetting intervention program is a lot of work, but well worth the effort. Lives are being saved every day through such programs. Join the solution and help your community build or improve its program now.