

## ***Youth Firesetting Prevention/Intervention Programs in the U.S: Where it all began...***

by  
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Although the issues of child firesetting and juvenile arson appear in mental health and law enforcement/criminal justice literature as early as 1940<sup>1</sup>, with earlier references to behavior with fire in 1924<sup>2</sup>, the birth of a movement and national focus in the United States for youth firesetting behavior (ages 3-18), began in 1975 at the California State Psychological Association convention in Anaheim, California. Psychologists and fire service personnel discussed the role of the fire service interviewing youth with firesetting behavior who come to their attention either through response calls or concerned parents/caretakers bringing children into the fire station. Thirty-five fire departments were present with the outcome of two major points:

1. The fire departments in attendance all did some form of an interview with young firesetters
2. They had received little, if any, training in interviewing children and parents, assessing their needs, and providing effective solutions.

This landmark discussion led to the formation of the Fire Services and Arson Prevention Committee, Division I of the California State Psychological Association. The County of Los Angeles Fire Department received the initial grant from the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) in 1977. With the vision of Laura Buchbinder, USFA Project Officer, and a team effort led by Capt. Joe Day, Los Angeles Fire Dept. and Dr. Kenneth Fineman, Huntington Beach, California, they developed a training manual with a screening tool, to aid fire department personnel in interviewing youthful firesetters under the age of seven and their families. The results of these interviews helped determined appropriate interventions (fire safety education, referral for counseling or social services, etc.).

A workshop for fire service personnel and psychologists interested in working with juvenile firesetters followed. This was the beginning of an intense 40-year focus to better understand youth firesetting behavior and assist fire service personnel in becoming skilled in providing effective prevention and intervention strategies by involving key agencies in the community.

During the initial years (1978-1985), and with the ongoing support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)/USFA, critical work took place to build a foundation to better understand youth firesetting behavior, family dynamics, and the role of the fire department in coordinating and implementing community screening/intervention programs. Building partnerships in the community with mental health, juvenile justice, police departments, child protective services, and other related agencies was essential for establishing a strong foundation to understand youth firesetting.

The community based program approach in addressing youth firesetting was a fresh look at an age old, but ongoing fire problem. Kenneth Fineman, Ph.D. designed and developed the assessment and screening tools in comprehensive fire risk evaluation. The tools were the

essence in identifying meaningful questions for fire personnel (and other trained professionals) to use during the screening interview. Training materials also included the production of the videos (e.g., How to Interview and Counsel Juvenile Firesetters) and a California case study film "The Clarke Family Tragedy". The initial team involved in this project included Capt. Joe B. Day, Los Angeles County Fire Dept. (Project Manager), Dr. Kenneth Fineman, Charles and Ester Brudo, EdD., Lynne Michaelis, Fountain Valley California Fire Department, Connie Morris, City of Fountain Valley, California, Pat Mieszala, RN, Psychiatric Burn Nurse Clinician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, Illinois (consultant). Reviewers and workshop instructors in this early phase delivered 77 workshops in 30 states to multi-disciplined participants, from May 1980 – August 1981.

Feedback from these workshops and during a meeting in Crystal City, Maryland in the spring of 1985, indicated that follow-up manuals were needed to deal with youth ages 7-13. Pat Mieszala (project manager for cooperative agreements from the USFA/Arson Division, Tom Minnich, Project Officer) developed the training materials and workshops in the mid-1980s. The USFA supported hundreds of local workshops throughout the country to train fire department personnel and multi-disciplined audiences to better understand the scope of the youth firesetting/arson problems, interview youth and their families to determine the appropriate interventions, and develop a community coalition to effectively address this destructive behavior. In late 1985, with the support of USFA, 100 multi-discipline professionals were brought to the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland, for a three-day workshop to review the set of USFA manuals, share their program experiences, network, and identify a future direction for assisting communities in developing their intervention programs.

Given the available national statistics regarding child set fires in the late 1970s, the "Fire Related Youth Counseling Program (FRY)" began in Rochester, New York by Rochester Firefighter John Beldue who was injured in a house fire that started by a 13-year old boy in 1977. Together with Jerry Bills, Investigation Unit, they sought assistance from Paul Schwartzman, M.S., L.M.H.C., D.A.P.A, and other professionals working with high risk children and families at the University of Rochester. With a grant from the New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control, they conducted a comprehensive, community-based study of children and fire. This was the first broad-based, systematic study of its kind. The principal findings were published in 1982.

Although majority of the juvenile firesetter intervention programs at that time were led by local fire departments, burn units in Sioux City, Iowa Kalamazoo, Michigan and Tacoma, Washington took the lead in organizing agencies and providing program services. Many other initiatives emerged, including the "Firehawks" Program in San Francisco, California, adding a mentoring component (as in the Big Brother organization) to intervention services.

The Phenomenon of Juvenile Firestarters Hearing before the U.S. Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Sub-Committee on Juvenile Justice took place on April 23, 1985 (Participants: Jessica Gaynor, Ph.D., Clifford Karchmer, M.A.) to establish continued support for community programs.

Articles and publications focused on the youth firesetting, especially in the mental health community continued, including the books "Children and Arson: America's Middle-Class

Nightmare”, Wooden, W and Berkey, M.L (1984), and “The Psychology of Child Firesetting: Detection and Intervention”, Gaynor J, Hatcher C (1987).

In 1987, The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and USFA began a grant funded research and development project intended to conceptualize, design, develop, and evaluate a variety of community-based approaches to prevent and control juvenile firesetting. This resulted in the development of a series of five FEMA/USFA publications in 1994 to heighten the awareness of model programs. In 1997, all of the FEMA/USFA youth firesetting related publications were compiled into a handbook by Dr. Jessica Gaynor and included both the Comprehensive Fire Risk Evaluation Tool by Dr. Kenneth Fineman (ages 3-18), and the Juvenile Firesetter Risk Survey by Cheryl Poage and the Colorado Juvenile Firesetter Prevention Program, as an alternative, and shortened screening version for the fire service. Other mental health practitioners developed alternative screening tools for the fire service to use in their programs, such as the Firestoppers of Washington State in the late 1990s.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) published their initial report *“Children Playing With Fire – U.S. Experience, 1980-1987* (by John Hall) in 1990 identifying an astounding average of 152,090 fires set by children during this time period, which caused 394 civilian deaths, 2,352 civilian injuries and \$160.7 million dollars in direct property damage<sup>3</sup>. Subsequent reports were published annually through 2014. The 2014 report indicated between 2007 and 2011, an average of 49,300 fires involving playing with fire were reported to U.S. municipal fire departments per year. These fires caused annual averages of 80 civilian deaths, 860 civilian injuries, and \$235 million in property damage. It was noted that the child resistant lighter legislation of 1994 assisted in decreasing youth firesetting incidents throughout the years. This was due to the increases in the awareness of the problem, local program services, and local primary prevention programs.

In 1994, the Juvenile Firesetting and Arson Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Report identified that 52 percent of all arson arrests in the U.S. are children ages 18 and under. It is the crime with the highest rate of juvenile involvement. Nearly half arrested are age 15 and younger. Nearly 3 percent are under the age of 10.

1993 was the beginning of SOS FIRES: Youth Intervention Programs (OR) that was established by Don Porth, with a purposeful move to use the term “youth” in place of “juvenile” when referring to non-criminal cases of firesetting behavior. In 1996, SOS FIRES launched the first (and only) website dedicated exclusively to the issue of youth firesetting intervention.

The next two decades were filled with a frenzy of activity among fire services, mental health organizations, and agencies in critical studies researching the behavior of youth firesetting, publications, establishing training opportunities to develop and implement community based programs, and hosting state/regional/national and international youth firesetter conferences. Communication among practitioners dedicated to making a difference in the lives of youth who set fires trended across the country. This included the distribution of the “Hot Issues” newsletter dedicated to the issue of youth firesetting, published with support of USFA, and distributed by the Oregon State Fire Marshal’s Office, Judy Okulitch. Opportunities for ongoing training classes (resident and field courses) became a reality at the National Fire Academy in 2000, following the introduction to youth firesetting in their investigator’s Management of Arson

Prevention and Control course in 1996. The International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI) developed a training package for investigators in 2003. In 2000, NFPA 1035 Professional Qualifications Standard included professional qualifications for Juvenile Firesetter Specialists (JFIS I and JFIS II), now in the 2015 Edition it's revised to Youth Firesetter Specialist and Youth Firesetter Program Manager. In 2011, the International Fire Service Training Association (IFSTA) Fire and Life Safety Educator Handbook, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, included nine chapters on JFIS I and JFIS II based on the NFPA 1035 Standard. In 2014 the Insurance Service Office (ISO) rating included points for fire departments that have a youth firesetter prevention/intervention program!

This period saw varied attempts at data collection, without much success in standardization, until the current Youth Firesetting Information Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES) initiative developed over three years, which was launched in 2015 through the International Association of Firefighters, with the support of several FEMA/Assistant to Firefighters Grants (AFG).

In conclusion, what started decades ago as a simple discussion in how to best assist the fire service in interviewing children who misuse fire, and their families, has evolved into bringing a better understanding of youth firesetting behavior and effective solutions, to the fire service, and related disciplines. The need for community agency collaboration is essential in identifying the needs, interventions, and services that effectively bring fire safety and peace of mind to youth, families and communities everywhere. It is a mission that is ongoing and has no end...

***“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead***

## Sources

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