

CHILD PLAYING

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Most parents are never forced to watch flames consume their home because their child was “playing” with a lighter. Most parents never experience the grief of losing a son or daughter in a fire caused by the child “playing” with an ignition device. Two Minnesota families experienced these horrors first-hand. Both fires were determined to be “accidental”.

On April 10, 2014, a ten-year-old girl died in a fire that she possibly started in hay bales. She may have had a history of playing with lighters. Perhaps her parents thought her behavior was something she would eventually grow out of (“just a phase”). Perhaps her parents were unaware of available help.

Another child with a history of firesetting behavior died along with his sister when their house burned down of winter 2013. The “playing with ignition source” category cannot be ruled out as a cause in this case. Bad things usually happen when children play with fire.

In a non-fatal incident on May 14, 2014, a house fire started after a child was reportedly playing with a lighter. The local newspaper told the story as if the lighter had acted on its own, but we know that fires don’t just break out.

“Fire play” is virtually sanctioned in our society. Traditionally, we light a candle on a cake in front of a one-year-old child and make a game of blowing it out. Fire appears in a lot of advertising (from insurance to ladies’ panties). A poster in downtown St. Paul near the Children’s Museum recently featured a photo of a young girl starting bugs on fire with a magnifying glass. One season finale of “Glee” portrayed a disgruntled cheerleader soaking her uniform in gasoline, bringing it to school and lighting it on fire in front of the coach. Movies are full of these images and examples are unlimited. Children learn about fire thorough observation.

Parents often do not understand the potential danger of children misusing fire. They probably learned about fire the same way their children did — through observing irresponsible misrepresentation in the media and elsewhere. In addition, some parents delay reporting their child’s misuse of fire because they were “just small fires.” Most large fires start small.

People these days have few ways to gain a proper understanding of fire. Most jurisdictions do not allow residents to burn garbage anymore; they have garbage service. Most people use furnaces rather than fireplaces to heat their home. While our education efforts can be effective, they often don’t focus on fire behavior, but rather fire safety — how to survive rather than how to prevent a fire.

Firefighters understand fire science and know that fires can start small and end in devastation to communities. While communities work to share important information with residents, we need to take action by recognizing children with firesetting behavior and intervening. We’re not doing anyone a favor by not identifying or reporting youth-set fires.

Although some firefighters and investigators may be uncomfortable interviewing children, but intervention to change behavior is best. We need to follow up, not give up; and enroll a child into

a youth-firesetting prevention-and-intervention program, even if it is only suspected firesetting behavior. Early detection and intervention will be more effected than waiting.