

# Ten Facts about Youth Firesetting for Therapists

by

Jerrod Brown, PhD

Don Porth

Kathi Osmonson

Kimberly D. Dodson, PhD

Firesetting can be a dangerous and even deadly issue among youth. In the United States, males account for the majority of youth firesetting incidents (U.S. Fire Administration, 2012) encountered by fire and law enforcement officials. Typically, the onset of firesetting behavior occurs between the ages of 5 and 10 years old, which is a developmental period ripe with cognitive changes (Johnson, Beckenbach, & Kilbourne, 2013; Walsh & Lambie, 2013). The Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2014 National Report (Sickmund & 2014) estimated that approximately 40 percent of all suspects arrested for arson are younger than 18 years old. Because youth with learning, developmental, and behavioral disorders are at an elevated risk for firesetting, therapists are in a unique position to improve youth firesetting interventions and decrease the likelihood of this dangerous behavior. Highlighted are 10 important concepts you should consider about youth firesetting.

1. **Understanding Fire:** Although many children are naturally curious about fire, such behavior is generally learned. Starting at an early age, children learn from instances featured in the media and parentally modeled behaviors (lighting birthday candles, use of fireworks, etc.).
2. **Youth Understanding of Fire:** Youth may not understand fire as well as caregivers and guardians assume they do. Often, parents do not understand fire science either. Learning disabilities, unknown barriers to normal learning, and ineffective educational messages all may limit the youth's comprehension of fire. Even in the absence of such challenges, fire is a complex physical and chemical process that is not easily understood. As such, youth must learn about fire science, prevention, and safety through age and developmentally appropriate messages.
3. **Capacity:** The physical size or grade level of a youth does not dictate her or his capacity to learn about fire. Each youth is different, as the capacity to learn, understand, and apply knowledge varies on an individual basis. A youth's caregiver is in the best position to determine the capacity of a youth to learn about fire. Nonetheless, the caregiver may prematurely assign fire responsibility to a youth who lacks the capacity to fully understand and appreciate the seriousness of fire behaviors and the potential consequences.
4. **Concept of Safety:** Concepts of safety vary considerably among youths and families. Identifying what a family or youth considers "safe" or "dangerous" is an important first step in determining how they might view the use of fire in and around the family home. Most people do not understand the devastating power of fire, and often think that a fire disaster will not happen to them.
5. **Family:** A youth's fire behavior is significantly influenced by their family's behavior. If caregivers make ignition tools easily available and use them regularly (such as lighters, fireworks, and candles), these items may seem trivial to the youth. If caregivers set a poor example or allow the youth to use fire too soon, the wrong message may be endorsed. Caregivers are typically the most important source of knowledge regarding safe behaviors.

Therefore, early familial guidance and intervention are key components to teaching young children appropriate behaviors about fire.

6. **Crisis:** Not all youth engage in firesetting as a result of inexperience with fire. Crises can drive youth to communicate through their behavior, and fire is an excellent means of gaining attention and affecting others. As such, the precipitating factors occurring prior to and contemporaneously with the firesetting behaviors should be carefully evaluated. In other words, caregivers, therapists, and fire and law enforcement professionals should carefully examine situations and circumstances that trigger firesetting behaviors. For example, crises often include suicidal thinking, depression, peer or social pressure, difficulties managing friendships and relationships, substance use and abuse, physical or sexual abuse, and death of a close friend or family member.
7. **Chaos:** Some families devolve into disorder and disarray that render them ineffective at communicating the circumstances of their own life or to participate meaningfully in problem solving and intervention strategies. They also may be unable to follow through with recommendations for services without assistance. These youth and their families often need close guidance to get the help necessary to resolve inappropriate firesetting behaviors.
8. **Media and Social Influence:** Aside from the family, television, movies, and social and popular media provide routine examples of firesetting behaviors. These can often be problematic because most of these examples can be incomplete, sensationalized, or completely artificial representations of fire's reality. Youth can develop distorted beliefs regarding fire and become desensitized to what is real. As a result, reprogramming a youth's cognitions about fire may be necessary.
9. **Collaboration:** Youth firesetting is a community issue. Professional disciplines like the fire department, law enforcement, child welfare, and juvenile justice all have a stake in addressing firesetting behaviors. Collaborative working relationships between mental health professionals and all of these practitioners are best established prior to the discovery of a youth with firesetting tendencies. More efforts are needed to broaden awareness of youth firesetting and increase familiarity with the tools available to address this issue.
10. **Rehabilitation:** Youth firesetting is typically driven by a lack of knowledge. The proper resources and interventions can help provide the youth with the appropriate information to dissuade firesetting behaviors. Because not all firefighters are trained in fire and life safety education, therapists should seek out firefighters who specialize in education and youth firesetting intervention. Even in more serious cases, such as crisis-driven firesetting, these firesetting behaviors can be overcome. However, this requires identifying the root causes of what is precipitating the firesetting behavior. This process may take extensive family and youth intervention. Even incarceration or in-patient mental healthcare may become necessary for extreme behavior or behavior that is not easily modified. Quality assessments by a collaborative team have the best chance to be successful at preventing future firesetting behavior.

Though firesetting can be an extremely serious issue among some youth, therapists can play an integral role in decreasing the likelihood that the firesetting behavior persists into adulthood by working with the youth and family to ensure that safe firesetting behaviors are being modeled in the home and parents and caregivers are effectively communicating with their children about the dangers of fire. Such interventions are often enhanced by enlisting the assistance of the fire department, law enforcement, child welfare, and juvenile justice professionals, all of whom may interact regularly with the youth. Through such systematic intervention efforts, the short- and long-term outcomes of these youth and public safety can be improved.

## The Authors:



Jerrod Brown, PhD, is the treatment director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. Pathways provides programs and services benefiting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. Brown is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS) and is certified as a Youth Firesetter Prevention/Intervention Specialist.



Don Porth, BS, is a youth firesetting intervention specialist who served with Portland (Oregon) Fire & Rescue for 27 years as a firefighter and public educator. He has served on various committees and organizations related to youth firesetting behaviors, including 21 years as President of SOS FIRES: Youth Intervention Programs, a nonprofit specializing in support for firesetting intervention programs. Don currently works as a consultant on fire and life safety issues.



Deputy State Fire Marshal Kathi Osmonson, BA, coordinates the Minnesota State Youth Fire Intervention Team (YFIT). YFIT partners with law enforcement, mental health, justice and social agencies to sustain a network of professionals who collaborate to provide intervention.



Kimberly D. Dodson, PhD, is an associate professor and criminology program director in the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences at the University of Houston – Clear Lake. She formerly worked as a law enforcement officer and criminal investigator with the Greene County Sheriff's Department in Greeneville, Tennessee. She has over a decade of experience investigating crimes committed by juveniles including firesetting.

## References

Johnson, R., Beckenbach, H., & Kilbourne, S. (2013). Forensic psychological public safety risk assessment integrated with culturally responsive treatment for juvenile firesetters: DSM-5 implications. *Journal of Criminal Psychology, 3*(1), 49-64.

Sickmund, M., & Puzzanchera, C. (Eds.) (2014). *Juvenile offenders and victims: 2014 National report*. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice.

U.S. Fire Administration. (2012). Prevent youth firesetting. Retrieved from [https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/arson/aaw12\\_media\\_kit.pdf](https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/arson/aaw12_media_kit.pdf). Emmitsburg, MD: Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Walsh, D. P., & Lambie, I. (2013). If he had 40 cents he'd buy matches instead of lollies: Motivational factors in a sample of New Zealand adolescent firesetters. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 57*(1), 71-91.