

The First Strike

Curiosity about fire is normal, but playing with fire is dangerous.

Whether it is the result of a curious child playing with matches or the malicious act of a troubled delinquent, juvenile firesetting is a serious problem that may escalate without proper intervention.

- Arson is the leading crime committed by juveniles and it is the fastest growing crime in the U.S.
- Over 55% of all arrests for arson are juveniles and half of those are 4-9 years old.
- Fire is the leading cause of accidental death in the home for children 5 and under and many are a victim of their own fire play activity.

50% of juvenile-set fires occur in people's homes and buildings.

Approximately 2/3 of the 67,000 fires set by children each year are "curiosity fires."

FIRE

holds a strong fascination for children.

Low Risk - Curious - 7 years old and under

Children are often fascinated by matches and lighters and may set fires accidentally. They have a lack of fire knowledge and awareness of fire's destructive nature.



These children may:

- imitate a smoking parent or guardian by lighting cigarettes and fires, using matches or lighters, not using solvents.
- ignite household items.
- set fires in the morning, close to home, often when their parents or guardians are sleeping.
- start fires in hidden places such as in closets or under beds.
- try to extinguish the fire.

Nearly half of all children have engaged in fireplay.

They lack adequate parental supervision and fire safety education. Parents may try to stop the behavior or they may even deny their child's involvement. **Treatment:** Fire awareness education.

Moderate - Troubled/Crisis-Related - 7-14

Children often set fires as a way to "act out" anger or frustrations or as a response to peer pressure without thinking about the consequences. They may have mental or emotional disturbances or poor coping / problem-solving skills. Fire setting may be a "Cry for Help."

- They create simple fires when alone, using matches or lighters - sometimes solvents.
- They destroy something personal when acting out of jealousy or revenge - a symbol of a crisis.

48% of children state that they could get matches without asking.



These children may live in a chaotic home environment, with neglect or abuse, a history of foster care, and possible problems with stealing, shoplifting, or truancy. They may have easy access to ignition sources and tend to be sick or show signs of depression, nervous disorders, poor eye contact, or difficulty speaking. Parents focus on the act, not the reason for the behavior. **Treatment:** Counseling to identify the problem and appropriate action to take.

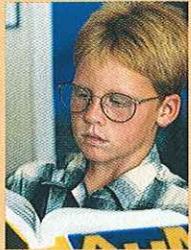
Extreme Risk - Delinquent/Strategic-Related 13-18 year olds

These children are impulsive, but know the dangers of fire. They start them for fun, possibly for revenge. They may have run-ins with the law. They can be cold and calculating, not taking consequences seriously, wanting to injure or kill. They play with fireworks, smoke bombs, false alarms, and use accelerants or incendiary devices.

These juveniles set fires:

- with others (*may be gang-related*) at school, in dumpsters, alleys, brush, fences, or trash cans.
- that are larger, possibly to cover up other illegal activities and cause harm or destruction.
- that are well-planned in multiple origins, and they rarely get caught or hurt.

They may be from a dysfunctional family. Their parents defer responsibility and are fearful of legal/financial implications. They may be peer-dominated with a history of school problems, substance abuse, or physical, emotional, or psychological problems. **Treatment:** Fire safety programs and positive interaction with local firefighters



Kids commit 55% of school arsons.

Severely Disturbed - 15-16 year olds

These children may have a life-long fascination with fire and a possible history of medical/neurological problems, severe emotional/psychological disorders, or mood swings. Usually intelligent, sneaky, devious, often successful in any endeavor for good or bad. They show little self-control, appear violent, and may be a loner or an insomniac.

- They may have a history of firesetting.
- The fires may be ritualistic with a distinct pattern.
- They are proud of their fires, acting on emotion.
- Their fires may be very refined and destructive.

The child may be a short male with physical limitations, lack of coordination, and vision or hearing problems or he may come from a neglected, unstructured home with substance, and/or physical abuse. **Treatment:** Intervention, education, aversion therapy, behavior modification, and psychotherapy.