

# **Youth Firesetting: Collaboration Between Teachers And Fire Service Personnel For Early Identification And Intervention**

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In recent news reports, the topic of violence in America's schools has been at the forefront. Tragic examples of such school violence include the deadly shootings in Moses Lake, Washington; Pearl, Mississippi; Jonesboro, Arkansas; and most recently, in Springfield, Oregon. But what about the other acts of violence to which students and teachers in thousands of schools are exposed each day? Are we, as a nation, really doing all we can to significantly reduce the incidents of youth violence both in the schools and in our communities? The answer to this question is, sadly, no. Currently, society is reacting, often with a knee-jerk type of action, to such acts of violence. To be truly effective in combating youth violence, there must be a move toward proactive education, legislation and reinforcement of non-violent behaviors. Additionally, emphasis must be placed on early identification and intervention of students who exhibit behaviors and attitudes that are indicative of violent behavior.

Every member of society is impacted by youth violence – both directly and indirectly. Physically, emotionally, financially and politically, the costs of youth violence are very high. Therefore, each member of society must be responsible for addressing and dealing with issues related to youth violence. The more angles this nation can approach the problem from, the more effective we will be at combating youth violence. Youth violence takes many forms. The forms of youth violence most Americans recognize include shootings, theft, gang activity and a variety of other offending crimes (assault, drug abuse, and vandalism). These are the examples that are depicted most frequently in the media. However, there are several other types of violence that are exhibited by children at schools across America every day.

Other examples of school violence include fighting, which many people feel has become more violent over the years, threats with weapons at school, sex related crimes, intimidation and firesetting behaviors (often such behavior can be classified as arson). The focus of this article is on youth firesetting behavior. Sadly, arson in America is classified as a property crime and not as a crime of violence even though it injures thousands of people each year and causes hundreds of deaths each year.

Few Americans realize the extent to which firesetting behaviors are prevalent in children. Children account for about fifty-five percent of arson arrests in the United States (United States Fire Administration, 1996). Each year child-set fires cause more than 400 deaths, over 3,000 injuries, and \$150 million dollars in property loss. The significance of this problem is

almost overwhelming. More than 400 deaths and over 3,000 injuries directly related to children using matches, lighters and other sources of ignition. . . . Why are we allowing this to go on? Why do caregivers leave sources of ignition within the reach of children? Is it any different than leaving a loaded gun within a child's reach? Why do stores sell matches and lighters right at the same level as the bubble gum and candy? Why are children allowed to purchase matches and lighters? There are laws against underage drinking and against the purchase of weapons, but isn't fire just as dangerous for children? A statement made by Mary Corso, now Washington State Fire Marshal sums up these feelings into one powerful sentence. "Fire is the only weapon of mass destruction that is available to everyone - man, woman and child."

The scope of the youth firesetting problem is extremely broad and warrants careful examination and due attention. Youth firesetting is an issue that affects all facets and levels of society. From the inner city to the country club, from the urban hubs to the rural countryside, the problem of youth firesetting touches us all. Our schools are particularly affected. Hundreds of fires occur in schools across America every day. Most go unreported and there is little or no effort to prevent the same behaviors from occurring in the future. What message is this sending to our children? Because this dangerous behavior will likely continue without intervention and education, it is important that we take the time to recognize and properly address the issue.

Firesetting behaviors can be very difficult to understand. Often fire service professionals who work with these children hear the phrases: "Boys will be boys" (the majority of youth firesetting behavior is exhibited by males); "I played with fire as a kid, it's normal"; "it's a phase, they'll grow out of it". These phrases strike fear into the hearts of those who truly know what fire is capable of destroying. The complacency exhibited by most Americans regarding children and fire is unacceptable. If a child were to take a hammer and destroy every one of his toys, he would most likely be punished for his actions. If that same child takes a lighter and burns his house down, destroying all his toys, people hold fundraisers and toy drives to help recoup the damages. This exemplifies how Americans perceive fire as "accidental". There is nothing accidental about a child lighting fires. It is simple carelessness, lack of knowledge and complacency on the part of society. We must make every effort to educate ourselves, rethink our attitudes toward fire and actively work toward solving this problem.

Some background information regarding youth firesetting may be helpful at this point. There are three basic classifications of firesetting behavior exhibited by children as outlined in [A Family's Response to Firesetting](#): 1) Curiosity/Experimentation, 2) Reactionary, and 3) Delinquent. About seventy percent of youth firesetting behavior falls into the first category. Most of them are younger children who lack information on fire safety and have access to sources of ignition (Please note that a child's age alone does not place him/her into one of these classifications). They are curious and they want to know what fire will do. Typically, they do not understand or comprehend the danger associated with their actions. Early intervention and education is critical at this level. If the child is "successful" with the firesetting behavior at this level, it has a strong likelihood to continue and become more dangerous resulting in serious consequences such as legal issues, injury or even death.

Reactionary firesetting can occur at any age. These children tend to be upset about something in their lives and are unsuccessful at identifying and expressing their feelings. They also lack adequate problem solving skills. Their use of fire is a dangerous cry for help to grown-ups. Additionally, these children may have a history of firesetting. Again, as with the curious firesetting, lack of supervision and access to sources of ignition are contributing factors.

Delinquent firesetting is typically an adolescent behavior. These children light fires for a variety of reasons. The fires are usually lit as a prank or a dare. This speaks directly to the peer driven nature of delinquent firesetting. Most children in this category do not realize the legal ramifications of their actions.

Strategic firesetting is a growing problem. A child, usually a teen, who willfully and maliciously lights a fire to damage and destroy property and/or life, exhibits this behavior. Usually the strategic firesetter is aware of the legal consequences associated with the behavior but simply does not care. There is no value or respect for life or property. Children in this category are likely to be involved with gangs and other gang activity.

While the act of firesetting is often a crime in itself, and it accompanies a variety of other crimes, it can also be indicative of future violent behavior and should be taken very seriously. In an article highlighting the recent school shootings, Henry J. Gault (spokesperson for the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) says that disturbed children may have a history of firesetting, as well as other behaviors such as low self-esteem and bullying others (USA Today, June 1, 1998, 6D). Firesetting should definitely be perceived as a serious issue especially when observed with other "at-risk" behaviors.

Over the past thirty years, several studies have been done that lend their support to the statement made by Mr. Gault. In 1959, L. Bender studied 33 children who were all under 16 years of age and had killed or been associated with the death of another person. Nearly a quarter of those children could be considered to have compulsive firesetting behaviors. In 1966, Hellman and Blackman studied 84 prisoners that were divided into two groups based on their crimes. One group was characterized by aggressive and violent crimes against people. The other group had committed crimes that were misdemeanors or non-aggressive felonies. 74% of the aggressive group exhibited the behaviors of bedwetting, cruelty to animals and firesetting. In contrast, the non-aggressive group exhibited those behaviors in only 13% of its members. In 1982, a researcher by the name of Patterson stated that the mass murderers he had studied all demonstrated a background of hyperactivity, bedwetting and firesetting. Additionally, it is rather well known that some of America's most violent criminals were firesetters (e.g. David Berkowitz, aka Son of Sam).

So what do we do? There are studies to support that firesetting behaviors are often indicative of future violent behavior. There is significant data to support that children are participating in firesetting behaviors and are significantly contributing to the nation's arson problem. Do we just brush it off as being within the realm of "normal" behavior? We, as members of society, need to take responsibility for addressing the needs of the children. This means learning the warning signs and taking fire setting behaviors seriously. *Not every kid who*

*plays with fire is going to be a violent criminal or have serious mental problems, but every kid who plays with fire needs to be educated on fire safety and evaluated as to why he/she is setting fires.*

Early identification, intervention and education as measures of the prevention of future fire setting behavior do work. A 1997 study by the University of Maryland suggests that collaboration with families, schools and communities along with simultaneous investments in each are key to carrying out successful prevention initiatives. An effective youth firesetting program incorporates each of these key components into the process. Collaboration between the schools and the fire service is of particular importance in identifying these children as early as possible and the providing the necessary educational and, if needed, psychological intervention.

Teachers are unequivocally the most valuable windows to society's future. Every day teachers interact with students at a variety of levels. They serve as educators, coaches, disciplinarians, mentors, listeners/confidants, observers, and as people who truly care about kids. Teachers are in a critical and valuable position in helping to recognize some of the characteristics that are associated with dangerous behaviors. Teachers observe students over a period of time. They are often in contact with the student's parents/guardians. Teachers are also able to be part of educational planning teams for students along with other teachers, thus being able to communicate with other teachers and professionals about observed behaviors in a student. No doubt, increased communication between school district personnel and fire department personnel would be a powerful tool in reducing child-set fires and the devastating and violent consequences of such behavior.

Some ways that teachers can take an active role in dealing with the problem of youth firesetting is to teach and model fire safety in the classroom. This means explaining to students why the exits must be kept clear, why objects should not be placed too close to the heater and discussing the importance of fire drills among a variety of other fire safety education pieces. Demonstrating all of these things in the classroom while taking advantage of teachable moments in regards to fire safety is a great step in the right direction. Teachers can also inquire at their local fire department to increase personal knowledge and awareness of youth firesetting behavior as well as sharing that information with colleagues. Communication with agencies that have youth firesetting programs and knowledge of their resources is another great way for teachers to actively participate in the reduction of child-set fires.

The benefits of this type of collaboration are numerous. Increasing the safety of the environments, in which America's children live and learn, is the greatest benefit. Not only will the reduction in deaths and injuries improve the overall quality of life for everyone including children, but also the children will live in a more secure environment. This includes school. If teachers increase their level of awareness about the dangerous issues affecting children and actively work toward reducing those dangers, those dangers will be limited. Thus, more attention can be placed on other things, like getting a good education in a safe environment.

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