

Youth Firesetter Manual

*School Educator Information
& Referral Guide*



FIRESTOPPERS of GRANT COUNTY
Youth Firesetter Prevention Coalition



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Table of Contents

Why are Firesetters Dangerous?	3
School Fire Information	4
School Fires: How to Make the Referral.....	5
Fire: What is It and Why is It so Fascinating?	7
Reasons for Firesetting	8
Stages of Child Development and Firesetting	9
Categories of Youth Firesetters	10
Myths and Facts about Youth Firesetting	11
Reporting of School Fires: The Law.....	12
Bibliography.....	13

Why are Firesetters Dangerous?

Firesetting by children is a problem that needs immediate attention.

In one year, fires set by juveniles in the US accounted for more than 65,000 fires that caused 284 civilian deaths and 2,158 civilian injuries, according to the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS). In Washington State, children with access to ignition devices set fires that took 21 lives during 1998-2002. These figures are said to be conservative due to the possible numbers of fires that went unreported. According to the Uniform Crime Report, in 1999, 52% of all arson arrests nationwide were of juveniles. The victims of these fires are the children themselves and their family members.

The danger of fire in today's world is very great because of the high number of petroleum-based building materials and flammable liquids. Fires burn quicker and hotter and the smoke is more toxic than in the past because of these materials. A firesetter in an apartment complex or school can be likened to a serial sniper. Fire doubles in size every thirty seconds and consumes everything in its path, not unlike the serial sniper who kills those he/she comes in contact with, regardless of age, sex, ethnicity or skin color.

School Fire Information

School fires come in many forms:

- Using matches, lighters, a heated light bulb or a magnifying glass to light toilet paper or other combustibles on fire in the school bathroom, classroom or playground.
- Lighting firecrackers, smoke bombs or other firework type of devices on school property.
- Lighting paper or other products on fire in a trashcan or dumpster on or near the school campus.
- Lighting warming fires at a school bus stop.
- Using chemicals such as pool acid or other chemicals to cause a fire in a science classroom or on other school property.
- Using a spray can and a lighter to make a fire torch on or near school property.
- Setting off a fueled rocket on the school playground during recess.
- Flicking lit matches across the classroom or into another student's hair causing minor burns.
- Placing paper on the overhead projector light bulb until the heat caused the paper to catch on fire.
- Igniting lighters during a class movie.
- Setting off the school fire alarm when there was no fire
- Bringing assignments or schoolbooks to school with burned pages or edges.
- Making, possessing, and/or activating any kind of bomb-like device on or near a school campus.

School Fires: How to Make the Referral

What to do if a Child Brings Matches or Lighters to School or Sets a School Fire

- Follow school policy and procedures and the state laws regarding school fires
- Do not just chalk it up to “kids being kids. This child may be sending a message that he/she needs help
- As part of your school discipline policy, incorporate mandatory attendance at a youth firesetter class offered by your local fire department
- If your school has counselors or social workers, notify the counselor or social worker of the firesetting incident and have him/her work with the child to find out why the child set the fire
- Notify your local fire or police department of the fire incident, *even if the fire was small and was put out by school personnel*. This child is in need of assistance. Please call your local fire department
- Notify the child’s parent or guardian of the incident and the referral to a youth firesetter program

How to Make the Referral

1. If the fire has not been completely extinguished contact 9-1-1 immediately!
2. Contact your local fire department as soon after the fire incident as possible. Call 762-1160 24 hours a day.

Have the child’s biographical information available including child’s name, parent/guardian name, address and telephone number, child’s age and birth-date, if child has been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD or other disorder, what was used to start the fire, when and where the fire took place, how much damage occurred due to the fire and if there were any injuries.

3. The school administrator should decide if prosecution of the child is desired. If prosecution is desired, a fire investigator or police officer will need to be called to the school for disposition of the report and juvenile court referral.

4. If no prosecution is desired, a referral to your local fire department's youth firesetter intervention program is recommended. Through the program the child will receive fire safety education, information on the legal consequences of firesetting, how firesetting impacts the community, and how to make better choices regarding the use of fire.

Counseling for the child and his or her family is provided through some youth firesetter programs.

Attached is the Youth Firesetter School Referral Form used by schools in the Phoenix Area. Feel free to copy it and fax it to 602-495-5515.

Fire: What is It and Why is It so Fascinating?

Fire defined: According to Webster's New World Dictionary, "fire is the active principle of burning, characterized by the heat and light of combustion" (1988).

Fire Triangle: There must be 3 combining sources for fire to occur:

1. There must be a source of oxygen. Approximately 16% oxygen is required for fire. Normal air contains 21% oxygen.
2. There must be a source of heat to reach ignition temperature, such as:
 - a. Open flame
 - b. The sun
 - c. Electrical energy
 - d. Sparks
 - e. Compressed gases
 - f. Arcs
 - g. Lightening
 - h. Friction
 - i. Chemical reaction
3. There must be a source of fuel such as:
 - a. Gases: natural gas, propane, butane, hydrogen, etc.
 - b. Liquids: gasoline, kerosene alcohol, paint, etc.
 - c. Solids: wood, paper, hay, dried plants, synthetics, plastics, cloth, etc.

Uses of Fire: Fire is a very important part of our daily lives. We use fire for cooking, heating, transportation, celebrations, holiday ceremonies and in industry and technology. Along with these proper uses of fire, also come fire abuses. Many of these fire "abuses" result in property loss, injury, and death. Unfortunately, youth firesetters are responsible for a large number of these fire abuses, especially on school campuses.

So what is a youth firesetter? A youth firesetter is a child under the age of 18 who accidentally or purposely starts a fire.

Reasons for Firesetting

So, why do these youth set fires? Why do they find fire so fascinating? The answer to these questions can be found in the history and celebrations of fire, stages of child development and categories of youth firesetters:

- A child is celebrating his first birthday. There are balloons, presents, relatives and a birthday cake right in front of the child. His mother leans over and lights a match to a large candle in the shape of a number one. Everyone is smiling and singing “Happy Birthday” and then the child is told to blow the candle out.
- The family goes on a camping trip. During the day the family gathers plenty of firewood for the nightly campfire. At night the family builds a campfire so they can roast marshmallows, stay warm and tell stories by the glow of the fire.
- In science class different experiments show how different colored flames are created by burning different types of materials or how a combination of certain chemicals cause an explosion.
- It is the weekend and time for the weekly family barbecue. The charcoal or gas grill is heated in preparation for the cooking of the chicken, hamburgers, hot dogs and corn on the cob.
- It has been a stressful week at work and a mother prepares a relaxing bath with candles, bubbles and hot water.
- It is July 4th, and there are numerous firework celebrations throughout the community. This pyrotechnical extravaganza sets the sky on fire.
- In the winter- time a family uses a wood burning stove and a fireplace for warmth because they cannot afford electricity.
- A child sits down to watch his favorite television stunt show, the scene depicts a stuntman setting himself ablaze and then skateboarding over three parked cars.

All of these scenes depict how our society uses fire for celebrations, warmth, cooking, relaxation and entertainment. However to a child who is growing, developing, and learning, these uses of fire may be misinterpreted as being safe when without supervision they can be very dangerous. A child may not understand the dangers of fire or may not have been taught fire safety.

As children grow and develop they understand things in very simple ways. Concepts like danger, what is real and not real and their own invincibility are not easily understood. It is important to understand how children learn and develop when looking at the motivation behind a child’s firesetting.

Stages of Child Development and Firesetting

Ages 0-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are mainly gaining control of their bodies. They do not understand what fire is or that it can hurt them.
Ages 3-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children become mobile and explore everything around them. • Children imitate adult behaviors and want to please them. • Children learn by doing. • Children become fascinated by fire, the flame and want to touch it not understanding that it will hurt them. • Despite a firm, “No, No!,” if a lighter is left in a child’s presence, he/she will most likely pick it up and use it.
Ages 5-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children have short attention spans. • Fire and candles fascinate children. • Children tend to imitate adults. • Children may pretend to smoke cigarettes or light them to model a parent or other adult.
Ages 8-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children want to do things well and become good at something. • Children begin to expand their social life beyond family and friends. • Children continue to experiment in a “What will happen if I do this?” process, and may include other materials such as flammable liquids in addition to experimenting with matches or lighters.
Ages 12-17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puberty has arrived. • Growing adolescents are subject to moodiness and emotional outbursts. • Friends and acceptance by others is foremost in a child’s mind. • Frequent complaints of “boredom” or “nothing to do” are often heard. • Youth are still fascinated by fire and how it works in conjunction with other items such as gasoline, combustibles, butane, and aerosol containers. • Youth devise experiments using fire and many different items both flammable and non-flammable. • A youth begins to test his/her power and independence. Lighting a fire and putting it out repetitively may be occurring as part of a game, dare or in response to other types of peer pressure.

It has been said that it is normal for children to be fascinated with fire.

However, the accessibility of matches and lighters combined with the flammability and toxicity of today’s materials create a dangerous combination. Respect for fire should be taught carefully and at an age and level of maturity that reflects careful consideration for the stages of child development.

Categories of Youth Firesetters

Other than normal developmental stages of fire curiosity a child goes through as he/she learns and develops, there are children who either accidentally or purposely set fires. These children can be categorized into five areas of firesetting behavior:

Curiosity Firesetter	The curiosity firesetter is a child who is curious about fire and has not been taught fire safety. He/she may experiment with lighters, matches, candles, stoves, magnifying glasses, pilot lights, etc. to see how the device works and what fire does. Their motivation lies in how does fire work. Their intent is not to start a large fire or destroy property but rather to see how lighters and matches work and how fire behaves.
Crisis Firesetter	The crisis firesetter has experienced a recent crisis, trauma or upsetting experience in their life. They are attempting to communicate that they are frustrated and hurting. The firesetting is a behavioral manifestation of emotions and feelings of distress. Family conflict, divorce, a death of a significant person, problems at school and physical or sexual abuse are a few examples of the crisis these children may be experiencing.
Delinquent Firesetter	The delinquent firesetter may set fires as an anti-social act, to impress others or to get out of school. He/she may use fireworks illegally. Peer pressure, boredom and oppositional/defiant attitudes toward authority are contributing factors.
Strategic Firesetter	The strategic firesetter sets fires deliberately to gain acceptance by a group or gang, to threaten and intimidate others or to cover up some type of crime. The motivation is with complete disregard for others health or welfare.
Pathological Firesetter	The pathological firesetter may have a long history of firesetting. These children may have severe psychological or psychiatric problems, neurological deficits, or have suffered severe long-term physical or sexual abuse. Many times fire is their best friend. These children require immediate therapeutic and possibly judicial intervention.

Regardless of the age of the child or the reason for the fire curiosity, fire experimentation or firesetting, the inappropriate use of fire is very serious behavior that cannot be ignored. If there is no intervention it is very likely the firesetting will continue and even escalate. Serious fire damage, injury or death could occur because of the firesetting behavior.

Myths and Facts about Youth Firesetting

Myth	Fact
<i>It is normal for children to play with fire.</i>	It is not normal for children to play with fire. Fire curiosity is common, but the use of fire without a parent’s knowledge or supervision is extremely dangerous.
<i>Firesetting is a phase most children go through and will outgrow.</i>	Firesetting is not a phase. If there is not some type of fire safety education or other intervention, the firesetting can easily get out of control and damage, injure or kill.
<i>A child can control a small fire.</i>	All fires start small and can quickly become uncontrollable. Fire can double in size every thirty seconds. It just takes one strike of a match or flick of a lighter.
<i>All children who set fires do it because they are angry and want to hurt someone or something.</i>	The largest segment of youth firesetters are children who are curious about fire or want to experiment with fire.
<i>A child as young as 2 cannot learn fire safety.</i>	Two year olds can learn fire safety skills such as; “Stop, drop, cover the face and roll,” “Crawl low under smoke,” and the difference between tools and toys.

Reporting of School Fires: The Law

Schools are required to report all fires to the fire department in accordance with Uniform Fire Code 1302.2 per RCW 19.27.

It is estimated there are nearly 300 school fires a year. It is well known that these school fires are under-reported. Reporting of school fires is critical to understand the nature of the problem. Early access to fire department resources can prevent further property damage and can provide intervention for fire setters.

Reporting Fires

Early Access to Emergency Services.

All fires must be reported immediately upon discovery. Regardless of the size of the fire and the type of items burned, a fire has the potential to endanger and destroy lives and property in a matter of minutes.

Any Size, Anywhere.

Every fire regardless of its size or location is significant. Report all fires; whether extinguished or still burning, these fires must be investigated by the fire department.

Preserve the scene.

Every time a fire occurs or is discovered, staff should preserve the fire scene immediately until the local fire department can respond to investigate the incident.

Report findings.

Early notification is critical. Prompt and complete reporting assists in identifying youth using fire in an inappropriate and unsafe way and allows for successful community based intervention services.

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