

Children and Fire; Just a Phase?

Spring Lake Park-Blaine-Mounds View Fire Department

Identifying the Problem

A terrifying problem is facing the American people; juvenile firesetting. Whether it is out of curiosity, a cry for help, misguided or delinquent behavior, or a truly pathological situation, it affects us all. No matter what the reason for the act, the result is the same, property loss, injury, and death.

The sad fact is that most people, both in and out of the fire service, aren't aware that juvenile firesetting is not an act of "pyromania" or simply a natural harmless "fireplay". It is an extremely dangerous criminal act that in many cases could have been prevented. This is not to say all juvenile firesetters have the intent to commit a crime or create a situation which could lead to death and destruction. Actually 9 out of 10 juvenile firesetters were not aware of the magnitude of their actions.

While some may feel that "It's normal for kid's to play with fire" or "It's just a phase they're in", the truth is that fires set by children are one of America's leading fire problems. When left untreated 81% of the children will repeat firesetting behavior. Experience surely shows that early intervention and treatment will prevent future criminal behavior and save countless lives, injuries and property loss.

There is a great lack of understanding of the physics of fire and it's current role in society. This role has changed considerably over the years as technology has reduced it's purpose as a tool in our daily life. This lack of knowledge, coupled with the diverse characteristics of behavioral, emotional, and psychological problems young people face are but a few of the many issues relating to juvenile firesetting today.

According to an FBI report over 53% of the arrests for arson are people under the age of 18, which is the highest percentage of juveniles involved in any crime. And if that statistic isn't staggering enough the U.S. has an average of 2.2 million fires every year, of which 1/4th are arson. During 1999 Minnesota experienced over 350 fires set by children, and suffered 2 deaths, 23 civilian injuries, 4 firefighter injuries and \$2.6 million dollars in property loss. This is truly alarming when you consider that less than 10% of fires started by juveniles are ever even reported.

Tips for Caregivers

Parents are the most influential people in a child's life. All others, though they may contribute significantly (teachers, scout leaders, coaches, other family and friends), are of secondary importance. Parents have the primary responsibility to serve as role models, to be a source of comfort and support, to nurture and to teach, as well as provide the necessities for their children. A major portion of these responsibilities is to ensure a safe environment and teach safe behaviors. Effectively done, these lessons will impact not just the child but the community as a whole. Below are just a few of the things parents can do to help:

- ***Set a good example*** - Install and maintain smoke alarms and fire extinguishers per manufacturer's directions, and always use fire in a safe manner.
- ***Take responsibility for fire safety*** - Point out to your children the fire safety rules you follow throughout the day and discuss the dangers of fire.
- ***Control access to fire*** - Keep all ignition devices out of reach of children and teach them to notify an adult if they find them.
- ***Identify telltale signs*** - Check in waste baskets, under the beds, and in closets for burned matches or other evidence your child is misusing fire and, if you find evidence, react positively by using it as a teaching opportunity.
- ***Develop a positive identity*** - Children with positive self esteem are less likely to fall victim to peer pressure, and they tend to make better decisions and look towards their future.

- ***Empower your child*** - Teach your child a home escape plan, how to crawl low in smoke the importance of maintaining smoke alarms, and give them an understanding of situational awareness so they can provide *themselves* with a safe environment.
- ***Provide boundaries*** - Help your child understand responsible behaviors in various settings (home, school, neighborhood, etc.) and provide clear and consistent consequences for violating these rules.
- ***Nurture and support*** - A well nurtured child will seek advice and counsel prior to making decisions they don't fully understand, and they will show an interest in helping others.
- ***Invest time in your child*** - By committing time for them and making them your companion you help them acquire values such as integrity, honesty and responsibility.

Locally, residents should know that it is illegal for a minor to be in possession or use an ignition device until they are 18 years old in Mounds View and Blaine.

Residents can call the Spring Lake Park-Blaine-Mounds View Fire Department if you have concerns with firesetting and your child. Specific programs have been developed to help your child at their level of growth and development for ages 2-17 years. Call 763-786-4436 if you need assistance.