

# JUVENILE FIRESETTING

Children are naturally curious about fire and their curiosity can unfortunately lead to accidental fire incidents. Between 2014 - 2018 municipal fire departments in the US responded to an estimated 8,100 structure fires each year that were started by people playing with fire [1]. Children younger than 10 years of age were responsible for 79% of the incidents [1]. One third of the fires were started in a bedroom, presumably where the child was playing with fire [1].

## Why Do Children Set Fires?

Children will set fires for several reasons [2]:

- Curiosity - Most commonly, a child wants to learn about how fire works and experiments with it.
- Crisis-Motivated Firesetting - A child feels they have no control of their lives and playing with fire gives them a sense of control over a powerful element. Crises can be caused by things like depression and family stress.
- Sociocultural Influence- A child sets a fire due to things like peer pressure or because they see their parents using lighters for smoking or starting campfires.
- Rebellious Firesetting - A child uses fire as a destructive way to rebel against authority, typically intending to harm only property and not people.
- Pathological Firesetting - Extremely rarely, a child may meet criteria for a psychological disorder that involves difficulties with impulse control, paranoia, or delusions that fuel their desire to play with fire. Even more rarely, a child can meet the diagnostic criteria for pyromania.



## What Can We Do?

A brief overview of what parents and caregivers can do to prevent juvenile firesetting [2]:

- Educate children about fire safety! Teach them fire is a tool, not a toy, and can only be handled by adults. Encourage them to tell an adult if they see another child playing with fire. **Do not encourage the child to intervene; tell them to come get you.**
- Keep firestarting tools out of reach of children - matches, lighters, and blowtorches need to be kept somewhere children cannot get to.
- When the firesetting is motivated by crisis, delinquency, or pathology, it is best to get a professional psychologist involved.
- **Do not ignore the problem. Do not use scare tactics. Do not burn the child as a method to discourage them from playing with fire.**



[1] National Fire Prevention Association: Playing with Fire: Structure Fires, (May 01, 2021)

[2] Virginia Commission on Youth: Juvenile Firesetting, (2019)