

## Why Do Kids Set Fires?

Youth firesetting or the misuse of fire by children isn't necessarily arson. The best way to understand why children set fires is to look at their motivations for firesetting. For most young kids, the motive is experimentation and curiosity. Motives can involve curiosity, thrill-seeking, willful intent to cause destruction, or by children who suffer from mental or emotional problems.

There are four common factors that influence firesetting behavior among children and adolescents. These factors impact all types of firesetting and include:

1. Easy access to ignition materials. Easy access to ignition materials often proves deadly for children who start fires. In many homes where a child has been involved in starting a fire, the child easily discovered the ignition source or already knew where it was located and how to obtain it.
2. Lack of adequate supervision. The lack of adequate supervision is a factor that can influence all ages of firesetting among children and adolescents. Parents are often shocked to discover their child has engaged in firesetting over a prolonged period of time.
3. A failure to practice fire safety. A failure to practice fire safety is a factor that often affects children and their parents in the following ways:
  - Young children often lack understanding of the dangers associated with firesetting and safety rules about fire.
  - Older children and adolescents may not have received school-based fire safety education about the dangers of the inappropriate use of fire, penalties for such behavior, and direction on what to do if a fire occurs.
  - Parents or caregivers may not be aware of the significance of youth firesetting, appropriate fire safety education, penalties, or what actions to take in the event a fire occurs. They may not be aware of local youth firesetting prevention and intervention programs.
4. Easy access to information on the Internet. Information regarding firesetting, designing explosives, and how to do tricks with fire is a problem that demands attention. Technology has made explicit media available to youths on many dangerous and often illegal activities. They are able to experiment with fire or incendiary materials and instantaneously post results for the world to see and oftentimes replicate.

Parents, caregivers, and public educators, whether they are from the fire department or the school system, can build an informed foundation by teaching fire safety at an early age. Teach children of all ages that fires, even small ones, can spread quickly.

## Myths and Facts Concerning Children and Fire

**Myth:** A child can control a small fire

**Fact:** Most fires start small, but can become uncontrollable quickly.

**Myth:** It is normal for children to play with fire.

**Fact:** It is not normal for children to play with fire. Curiosity about fire is normal. Use of fire without an adult's knowledge, approval, or supervision is dangerous.

**Myth:** Firesetting is a phase children will outgrow.

**Fact:** Firesetting is not a phase. If a child is not taught fire safety, the firesetting can get out of control easily. It is a dangerous behavior.

**Myth:** If you burn a child's hand, he/she will stop setting fires.

**Fact:** Purposely burning a child's hand is child abuse and is against the law. The reason behind the firesetting must be discovered and addressed.

**Myth:** If you take a child to the burn unit to see burn survivors, he/she will stop misusing fire.

**Fact:** Going to the burn unit only instills fear, and does not teach a child anything about fire safety. More importantly, we need to be sensitive toward burn survivors who are trying to recover emotionally and physically from their burns.

It is important to understand myths concerning children and fire. Children need to be educated about fire and have their motives understood so that proper interventions can be used to stop the firesetting behavior.

## Teaching Children Fire Safety

The most critical message for children to learn is that lighters and matches are tools, not toys! Parents and caregivers should never use lighters, matches, and fire for fun; children will mimic you, and when they do it unsupervised, tragic events can result. Praise your child for practicing responsible behavior and showing respect for fire. Set a good example for safe use of fire.

- Always supervise young children.
- Never leave lighters or matches within reach of children. Keep lighters and matches out of reach in high, locked cabinets.
- Use child-resistant lighters, but remember that they are not child proof.
- Instruct young children to inform an adult if they find lighters or matches.