

Children and Adolescents Who Set Fires

Fire-setting, by itself, is a term that needs no definition in the usual sense. Everyone is familiar with fire and its destructive capacity and we realize that the term means to deliberately start a fire. However, when used to describe the behavior of a child or adolescent, the term “fire-setting” takes on added significance because this activity is often an indicator of an underlying, potentially serious, psychological problem.

Let’s be clear that in using the term “fire-setting,” we are not referring to an accidental, one-time fire set by a young person. If such an occurrence is truly a one-time event and the person completely stops the activity when he is brought to realize its potentially deadly consequences, then we are probably not dealing with someone who would be termed a “fire-setter.”

Rather, fire-setting, in its clinical definition, means numerous episodes of deliberate, purposeful fire starting. Certainly, an activity that the law would term “arson” is included in this definition, such as what occurs when someone plans and carries out a series of deliberately set fires. In fact, forty percent of arson arrests involve people younger than 18 years of age. Fire-setting could also include those fires that result from extreme carelessness on the part of a young person. In this case, an objective observer could only conclude that the youngster’s intention was to start a fire in a way that he could later claim was unintentional.

Who are the children and teenagers most likely to take up fire-setting? Most of them are young males who have an underlying psychological condition such as Conduct Disorder or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. In addition, those who suffer from manic depression could become involved in fire-setting activity during the manic phase of their disorder. Thus, fire-setting is almost always secondary to other conditions.

What are the causes of fire-setting in young people? The causes are as varied as the problems which underlie the fire-setting activity. Negative experiences during the child’s upbringing can be elements in either stimulating the fire-setting activity or making it worse if it already exists. These experiences can include neglect by parents, a lack of supervision at home or school or learning disabilities which make it difficult for the child or adolescent to communicate the frustration that he feels. When enough anger builds up, the young person communicates it by setting a fire, perhaps without realizing, or caring, that lives can be lost and property damaged by this activity.

When should treatment be sought for young fire-setters? Parents need to realize the seriousness of the situation and seek professional help for the fire-setter without delay. Starting fires is obviously a danger to both the young person and everyone who lives in the same household. Multiple occurrences of fire-setting must not be overlooked or we risk tragic results. If you decide that a youngster needs help, the first step is to have him thoroughly evaluated by a mental health professional. Based on this evaluation, the most appropriate form of treatment can be recommended.

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