

# SELF-STUDY COURSE

## Fostering a Fire Safe Home: A Guide for Foster Parents Caring for a Child with Fire Setting Behavior

June 2000

4.0 Training Hours



**Assembled By:**

**Alaska Center for Resource Families  
815 Second Avenue, Suite 202  
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**1-800-478-7307 or (907) 479-7307**

**With Assistance From**

**The Anchorage Fire Department FIRE STOPPERS Program**

This self-study module addresses part or all of the following Child Welfare League of America Competencies for Foster Caregivers:

**921-8.1** The foster caregiver knows the dynamics of fire setting behavior and knows strategies to work with children and youth who set fires.

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for further on-line self-study courses!**



## *Fostering A Fire Safe Home*

**Written By the Anchorage Fire Department FIRE STOPPERS Program and the Alaska Center for Resource Families**

Fires are not what you may think! In movies, fires are flames and white smoke and move slowly through a home, giving you a chance to gather up the kids and a few belongings. In real life, fires cause immense black smoke, suck the oxygen from the air and kill people more quickly through the carbon monoxide poisoning than through burning. Your foster child is at particular risk because he may not be familiar with your home and may not remember how to get out.

To make sure everyone in your home is safe, remember to foster a fire safe home by following the following suggestions.



**Install smoke detectors** on every level of the home, particularly near the bedrooms. **Change batteries regularly** (such as during the daylight savings time when we set clocks back or forward.) Replace smoke detectors over ten years old.



**Plan an escape plan** with your children. Make sure they know two ways out (one may be blocked in case of a fire!) Press the fire alarm and have fire drills on a regular basis (monthly or quarterly). This is required of all foster homes by the foster care regulations, but it is common sense to have regular fire drills in your home.



**Talk to kids about how to get out**—crawl low below the smoke, feel the door before opening—if it's hot, go out another way—don't stop to pick up valuable and meet at a prearranged spot outside.



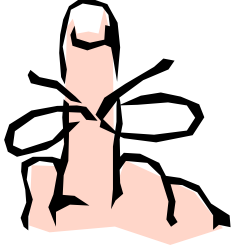
**Round up all matches and lighters.** Gather up all your matches, lighters and other fire starting materials. Throw them away or lock them up. Just hiding them or putting them out of reach is not enough. One of the biggest reasons kids start fires is that matches and lighters are accessible. Treat matches and lighters like guns – keep them locked and out of the hands of children!



The other big reason why kids misuse fire -- lack of supervision! **Keep an eye on your kids.** Provide close supervision, especially for kids with a history of firesetting or emotional disturbance.



**Set a good example.** Do you respect fires and put matches away and take the threat of fire seriously? Or do you play with the campfire, leave lighters in a child's reach, or play with fireworks? Your example speaks the strongest... make sure it's a good one!



## If a child who has misused fire is placed in your home, you should know this...

### Misuse Of Fire Happens On A Continuum:

Children misuse fire for different reasons. The biggest group of children misuse it out of **CURIOSITY**. They are usually young, play in secret and have access to lighters and matches. These children need fire safety education. Some children are **TROUBLED**. They may be acting out in other ways, set fires to get attention or use it destroy clothes or personal property that hold some meaning to them. These children need fire safety education too, but may also benefit from counseling for the underlying problems. **DELINQUENT** firesetters are usually older, may show little regard for other around them, use other acts of vandalism or have other mental health problems such as depression or conduct disorders. These children often need assessment and intense mental health intervention.

### RED FLAGS or Warning Signals

- Chronic history of misusing fire
- Firesetting seen in a child who also shows a pattern of being cruel to animals
- Firesetting in older children
- Threats of setting fires or actual firesetting to scare or control adults
- Psychiatric diagnosis of conduct disorder along with firesetting behavior
- Rageful, vengeful anger that accompany firesetting

\*Any time that you feel that misuse of fire goes beyond curiosity and becomes serious or becomes a pattern, contact your caseworker for additional help for the child. For more information about firesetting, contact the Alaska Center for Resource Families.

### What A Foster Parent Can Do?

- First of all, follow all the precaution on the previous page. Keep fire related materials away from children. If a child has a history of setting fires, tell him or her you will need to randomly search his or her possession for matches. With young children, focus on educating children about respecting fire as a tool, not a toy, and teach them the dangers of fire. Place a smoke detector in the child's room. A child who has a history of misusing fire should never be left home alone.
- If you feel you need more help with the child in your home or think the child needs mental health services, talk to the child's caseworker about your concern.
- If you would like more information about firesetting and misuse of fire by children, contact the Alaska Center for Resource Families at 1-800-478-7307 for more information.



## INTRODUCTION

It is frightening to be a foster parent or caretaker of a child who has a history of setting fires. Knowing why children misuse fire and knowing about fire prevention are the most important tools a foster parent can have when caring for such a child. Children who misuse fires may be young children who are experimenting with matches; older children who are causing vandalism by setting an abandoned car on fire; or a disturbed teen trying to get revenge by starting a house on fire. Most fires set by children are out of curiosity or a way to get attention. However, even these fires can get out of hand and people can get hurt. Older children who set fires for reasons of boredom, revenge, or anger may need an assessment to understand why they set fires and what intervention may be helpful.

This packet uses several tools to help you as a foster parent understand the misuse of fire in children. It gives you *Three Strategies* that will help you get the help these children need and keep your family safe. In addition to the *Three Strategies* presented in this introduction paper, we suggest you read through the following additional material included in this training packet:

**Frequently Asked Questions About Juvenile Firesetting** [www.SOSFires.Com](http://www.SOSFires.Com)  
**A Family's Response to Firesetting** *Fire Stoppers of Washington*



## *Strategy #1: Educate Yourself About The Misuse Of Fire By Children*

### **Fires Set By Children Are A Problem In Alaska**

National statistics show that juveniles under 19 are responsible for approximately 60% of all fires set in large cities. Many of these child firesetters are under nine and there seems to be a cluster of this behavior around four years of age, especially in boys. Many children are curious about fire. It seems natural that most children at some time in their childhood may experiment with fire. But even a fire started out of childhood curiosity can have disastrous, even deadly consequences. Children who experiment with fire out of curiosity make up the biggest portion of children who misuse fire. Some children, however, go beyond curiosity and misuse fire because of other emotional problem. Child-set fires are the third most frequent cause of fires in Alaska. It is important to take firesetting in children seriously.

#### **Top Causes For Fires In Alaska**

1. Smoking Related
2. Unattended Cooking
3. Children Setting Fires
4. Combustibles Too Close to Heat Source.

### **Children Don't Know What Fire Is Really Like**

There are many factors that contribute to misuse of fire in children. The first factor is **a child's misunderstanding of what fire is really like**. Many children, especially young children, only know about fire from movies or television. But these images often falsely portray fire. In the movies, fire burns bright and slow. The hero runs into a building, finds the hiding children, and gets out without even having to cough from smoke! But fire in real life is not like that at all. Fire burns fast and hot. A small fire can get out of control in a matter of seconds. Real fire gives off smoke and gas from burning common household items like furniture, carpeting and paint. Smoke and gas kill more people in fires than do the actual flames. Real fire burns dark. A fire will give off lots and lots of black smoke, so finding your way out of a house might be like trying to walk around with a blindfold on in a windy furnace! Fire is much more dangerous and hurtful than children (and adults!) often think. One way to prevent curiosity firesetting is to teach children a healthy and realistic respect for what a fire can do.

### **Children Have Access To Fire Starting Materials**

Another factor that contributes to misuse of fire is **access to matches and lighters**. These are important and useful tools in everyday life, but in the hands of children they can be deadly. Leaving matches near the stove, leaving a cigarette lighter out on the table, or tossing matchbooks into a kitchen drawer means that children have easy access to these materials. Matches and lighters should be treated like guns. They should be inaccessible to children and preferably in a locked place. Out-of-sight doesn't always mean out of reach! Teach young children to tell you about matches and lighters when they find them, so that you can pick them up. Older children can pick them up and give them to you directly. If you treat matches and lighters seriously, then you provide a good role model for your children. Home is not the only place children find matches. Children can get matches from classmates, stores and restaurants.

## Children Are Not Supervised Adequately

Another contributing factor is **lack of supervision**. When children are not under adult eyes and ears, they are more likely to get in trouble! The same applies to children who misuse fire. So know where your kids are and what they are doing, and provide appropriate supervision. Keep doors open in rooms where young children play. Some children will need more supervision than others. This applies to children with firesetting history. Children who are alone often feel lonely as well. Your presence may not only inhibit poor behavior, it may help build a positive relationship between you and the child.

## Children Have Different Motives For Misusing Fire

The last major contributing factor to children's misuse fire is that children have **different motives for misusing fire**. When we label a child as a "firesetter", we define all his problems around one behavior. Yet, firesetting is actually just one of several symptoms child may show. A fire setter is defined as *a child who has been involved in the unsanctioned and/or unsupervised use of fire*. The firesetting may or may not cause damage, injury or death. The term firesetter does not necessarily denote mental illness (e.g. pyromania) or a crime. Children with a history or pattern of setting fires usually have some other emotional or social difficulties as well.

### DEFINITION OF A JUVENILE FIRE SETTER:

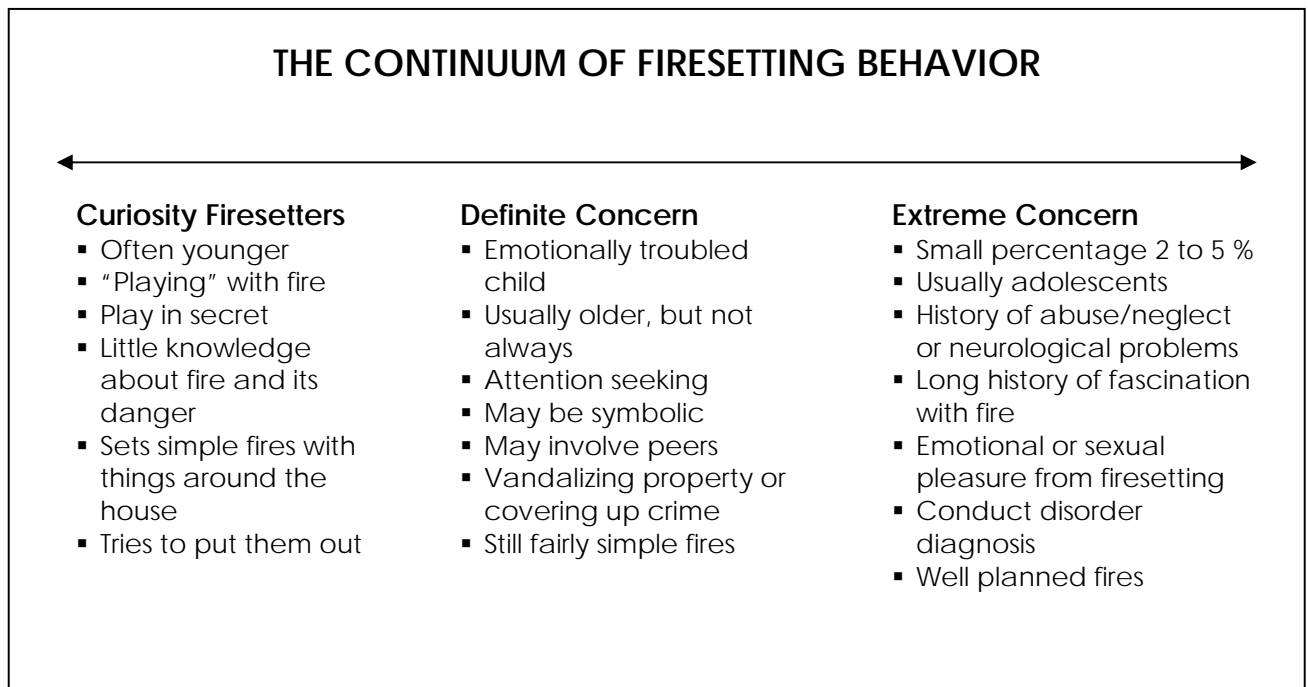
*Children who have been involved in the unsanctioned and/or unsupervised use of fire. The firesetting may or may not cause damage, injury or death. The term fire setter does not necessarily denote mental illness (e.g. pyromania) or a crime.*

The biggest group of children misuse fire out of **CURIOSITY**. Children may be curious or fascinated with fire. They are usually young, play in secret and have access to lighters and matches. They "play with fire" to see what will happen, but probably don't have the motive of destroying a house or hurting anyone. They usually light simple fires and may try to put them out, instead of letting them burn. These children often imitate the adults around them who they see lighting cigarettes, candles, fireplaces or cooking grills. They often try to light materials that they find around the home, such as paper or cloth. Often these children are younger, but some children with developmental delays may fit in the curiosity category. Some children set fires because they are bored and unsupervised. These children most often need fire safety education and supervision. Just as important, parents or caretakers of these children also need education and skills for making their home safe from fires.

Some children's misuse of fire is of **DEFINITE CONCERN**. These children are emotionally troubled. They may be acting out in other ways, set fires to get attention or use fire to destroy clothes or personal property that hold some meaning to them. These children are typically older, such as between 7 and 14. but can be of any age. Something may be upsetting them or troubling them and they may not have very good skills to talk about them. They may set fires to get attention or in a veiled way to let adults know they are hurting. Sometimes these children have mental emotional disturbances or are psychologically stressed because of events in their life. They have poor coping and problem solving skills. They may feel powerless and firesetting gives them a way to feel powerful. These children may be beginning a pattern of misusing fire to gain attention or to cry out for help. Like the curiosity fire setter, these children often set fairly simple fires and use matches and lighters and materials around the house. These children need fire safety education too, but will also benefit from counseling for the underlying problems. Some children may be more extreme in their firesetting. They may show little regard for others around them and will set a fire to vandalize a property. Their planning is more extensive and thought out and may involve peers.

School can be a common target, as can dumpsters, fields, or trashcans. These kinds of firesetters may also have a history with setting off fireworks or smoke bombs or calling in false alarms. Some children may be very troubled or have mental health problems such as a conduct disorder. They may be already involved with the juvenile justice system and probably have a history of setting other fires. They can be quite impulsive and sometimes their fires are to cover up evidence of another crime, such as setting a stripped down stolen car on fire. Firesetters of **Definite Concern** usually benefit from a combination of fire safety education and mental health counseling or intervention. Again, parents and caretakers also benefit from fire safety education in this category.

Firesetting that is considered **EXTREME CONCERN** is the most dangerous of the continuum of why children misuse fire. This is a small percentage of children who set fires, about 2 to 5%. These are usually older adolescents often have a history of medical or neurological problems, academic and behavior problems. They have a long history of fascination with and misuse of fires and have probably set dozens of fires. These children may find pleasure or gratification in setting a fire, or use fire as a way to get revenge on people who have wronged them or made fun of them. The severely disturbed fire setter has often been a victim of physical or sexual abuse, and may get sexual pleasure or excitement in the planning and setting of fires. They may intend to cause damage or injury to others. They have a history of chronic, disruptive behavior and often a diagnosis of conduct disorder. These children and youth already know the danger of fire. Their fires may be well planned, and are often ignited with fire starting materials such as gas or kerosene. Fire education is not what these children need. These children need assessment and intense mental health intervention, possibly even residential treatment.



**ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY:**

*Read the article included at the end of this self-study called **Frequently Asked Questions About Child Firesetting**.*



## *Strategy #2: Do Everything You Can To Control Your Home Environment*

### **Teach Basic Fire Safety**

**Install smoke detectors** on every level of the home, particularly near the bedrooms. **Change batteries regularly** (such as during the daylight savings time when we set clocks back or forward.) Replace smoke detectors over ten years old.

**Plan an escape plan** with your children. Make sure they know two ways out (one may be blocked in case of a fire!) Press the fire alarm and have fire drills on a regular basis (monthly or quarterly). This is required of all foster homes by the foster care regulations, but it is common sense to have regular fire drills in your home. This is especially important if a child in your home has a history of curiosity about or history of setting fires.

**Talk to kids about how to get out**—crawl low below the smoke, feel the door before opening—if it's hot, go out another way—don't stop to pick up valuables and never go back in a burning building! Decide on a spot to meet outside and away from the house.

#### **Practice E.D.I.T.H. (Exit Drill In The Home)**

1. Everyone in his or her bedrooms, doors closed.
2. Someone sounds the smoke alarm.
3. Each person tests his or her door.
4. Pretend it's hot; use alternate escape route.
5. Everyone meet outdoors at the meeting place.
6. One person goes to the prearranged phone.

### **Control Access To Fire Starting Materials**

**Secure all matches and lighters.** Gather up all your matches, lighters and other fire starting materials. Throw them away or lock them up. Just hiding them or putting them out of reach is not enough. One of the biggest reasons kids start fires is that matches and lighters are accessible. Treat matches and lighters like guns – keep them out of the hands of children! You need to be especially vigilant with children who have a history of fire curiosity or firesetting.

**Set a good example.** Do you respect fires and put matches away and take the threat of fire seriously? Or do you play with the campfire, leave lighters in a child's reach, or play with fireworks? Your example speaks the strongest... make sure it's a good one!

### **Provide Supervision**

The other big reason why kids misuse fire -- lack of supervision! **Keep an eye on your kids.** Provide close supervision, especially for kids with a history of firesetting or emotional disturbance. Adults can act as a deterrent and at the very least, monitor the child's activity.



## A Note For Foster Parents With A Child With Firesetting History in Your Home:

The reason most children come into foster care is because of child protective reasons. So the initial information gathering focuses on the parent's actions or inactions and the safety needs of the child or adolescent. Office of Children's Services, the State of Alaska agency that investigates child abuse reports, rarely gets a complete history of a child's behavior and past before placing him in foster care. If a child has a history of setting fires, you may *or* may not know that. If the OCS worker knows a child has a history of setting fires, this information should be shared with you. But you as the foster parent may be the first in the system to know. Pay particular attention to children who seem fascinated with fire or candles, who start talking about fire a lot, or who like to draw pictures of fire. Pay attention to children who stash matches or steal lighters from other's purses.

If a child with a firesetting history is placed in your home, you may consider taking some of the following precautions:

- *Install numerous smoke detectors throughout the house. (More than the one required for each floor.) The same for fire extinguishers.*
- *Lock up fire starting materials, including matches, barbeque lighters, cigarette lighters, gasoline and kerosene. Pay attention to stoves, ovens and furnaces as a source of ignition.*
- *Let children know clearly that matches, lighters and other firesetting material is not allowed. Conduct regular searches of pants pockets, dresser drawers, backpacks, rooms, and jackets for firesetting materials. Let the child know that you will be doing this on a regular basis. Remember, children can pick up matches in restaurant, so carefully monitor these children in public places.*
- *Some foster homes with children who have a serious history of firesetting also install motion detectors and surveillance cameras to help with supervision of children.*
- *Train all the children in the home to let an adult know about unsafe situations or activity involving fire.*
- *If the child has not yet been assessed for his or her firesetting behavior, talk to the social worker about having an assessment completed and follow through with all suggestions.*
- *Children who have serious firesetting behaviors usually have other emotional problems and difficulties. Work with a mental health counselor on these issues and educate the counselor on firesetting issues (such as sharing this self study with the counselor.)*
- *Report all firesetting behavior to the social worker and to the police.*

### WARNING SIGNALS:

Fascination with fires and candles

Stashing matches or lighters; hiding or hoarding matches

Talk about fires

Smelling smoke in bedrooms, bathrooms or hiding places

Past history of misuse of fire

Other signs of stress related misbehavior such as lying, stealing, enuresis or cruelty to animals

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY:

If you are caring for a child who misuses fires who is in your home, read the booklet **A Family's Response to Firesetting** located in this training packet.



### *Strategy #3: Get Your Child Assessed For Firesetting.*

Children set fires for many reasons. So effective intervention with the child will depend on why a child is doing this in the first place. A child who starts a fire more out of curiosity may need education about the realities and dangers of fire. His parents or caretakers need education around fire prevention and safety education. But a child or teen who sets a fire because they are trying to get revenge may need much more intensive help. Behind firesetting behaviors are usually other emotional difficulties and disturbances. These problems need to be treated as well as intervention into the firesetting behavior. When firesetting is serious or potentially serious, if a child has set several fires, or if a child is older or a teen, an assessment may be quite helpful in determining what treatment is best in order.

### **What Can An Assessment Tell Us?**

The goal of the assessment is to determine why the child misused fire in the first place. The standard assessment used in Anchorage (and beginning to be used around the state) was developed by the United State Fire Administration in conjunction with mental health, education and fire service professionals. The outcome of the assessment divides the motive for a child's fire behaviors in to one of three categories: *little concern* (curiosity level); *definite concern* (beyond curiosity); or *extreme concern*. Once the assessment is complete, the intervention specialist can then determine the best course of action.

What kind of questions will an assessor ask? The assessor will ask questions about the incident, the child's history with fire, family indicators, and a child's social and emotional history. A parent or caretaker will also be asked questions about these areas. These questions help determine where a child fits into the three categories.

#### **REMINDER:**

For children in the care of OCS or foster care, the social worker must pre-approve any assessment or treatment.

If a child's misuse of fire is determined to be at a curiosity or little concern level, education intervention is likely to be the most effective. If a child's behavior falls into the definite concern category, the children may receive fire safety education but may also be referred for mental health services. The child assessed at extreme concern is referred directly to mental health. These children are often highly disturbed. Education alone is not effective. Firesetting is a behavior that is almost always a symptom of other emotional problems. Effective intervention demands that we work both with the underlying symptoms as well as with the firesetting behaviors. One without the other will not be effective with this last group. Referrals of a child may be to a mental health professional, child protective services, school counseling, inpatient hospitalization, or physician.

# RED FLAGS

***The presence of the following signs and current firesetting behavior in child should cause concern to a foster parent or social worker:***

- Child has ADHD and family is having trouble managing this problem
- Child has had fire safety education, knows that firesetting is wrong and is 8 or older
- Child has been severely punished for firesetting
- Child is the victim of physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Child experiences an anxiety release from setting fires
- Child has intense feelings of powerlessness or has trouble controlling impulses
- Child is a member of a gang or has a history of aggressive criminal behaviors
- Child relies extensively on thinking errors and is extremely uncooperative with assessment
- Child has been unsuccessfully treated for firesetting; the family is unable or unwilling to support intervention

***The following behaviors should also cause concern to caregiver:***

- Bed or bedroom fire
- Fires are set to specific materials related to stress
- Recent changes in the family
- Chronic history of firesetting with progression
- Bizarre or ritualistic firesetting
- Uses fire to torture/injure animals, self or others
- Obsessive/compulsive fire thoughts/behaviors

If you are seeing these “red flags” in a child with current firesetting behaviors, contact your social worker about getting an assessment or intervention for the child in your home. Contact the Anchorage Fire Department for a current list of trained assessors in your part of the state.

# Frequently Asked Questions About Child Firesetting

From The SOS Fires Youth Intervention Program in Portland, Oregon [www.SOSfires.com](http://www.SOSfires.com)

## ***Is it normal for my child to play with fire?***

While curiosity about fire is a common issue with almost all human beings (usually in the form of campfires, candles, fireplaces, etc.), the use of fire by children is a very dangerous behavior. A tragic situation can be created the first time a child misuses fire, or the same tragedy could occur after months of misuse. Adults must instill in children the idea that matches and lighters are tools, not toys. If adults lead by their example, children will usually gain a better understanding. This leaves children with the idea that while fire is okay, it is an important tool that is only for adults.

## ***If I burn my child's hand, will that make him stop setting fires?***

To burn a child's hand for setting a fire will teach him that he doesn't want to get burned. However, most children do not believe they (or anyone else) will be injured by a fire they set. Most often, children do not think about the fire extending beyond the object they are igniting or that they will have it under complete control. This lack of knowledge is what makes fire so dangerous in their hands. Children need to learn why their behavior is unacceptable and what is expected of them. Teach children to tell an adult when matches or lighters are left about the house or on the street or playground. When children understand what is expected of them, not just what is wrong with their behavior, they can perform better.

## ***Is firesetting a phase my child will grow out of?***

A child's interest in many things comes and goes. The same may occur with fire. However, each time a child misuses fire, they are at great risk for injury or to cause damage. It is far too dangerous a behavior to ignore until "it runs its course." Immediate steps must be taken to address the behavior and bring it to a stop. Intervention programs are designed to do just that.

## ***Are some children obsessed with fire?***

In very rare instances, children may be afflicted with "pyromania." This is a very specific clinical diagnosis left to mental health professionals. In the greater majority of cases, children are simply curious and have poor information about the dangers of fire. In some cases, the child is reacting to a crisis or stressors in their life. Whether lack of knowledge or a crisis of some sort, the behavior can typically be tracked back to something other than an obsession with fire. It should also be noted that the longer the child is allowed to engage in the misuse of fire, the more normal it becomes for them and the harder it is to "undo" the behavior. If your child is misusing fire, act quickly to intervene before a tragedy occurs.

## ***If I make a child light hundreds of matches, will it deter his firesetting behavior?***

It will most likely be unsuccessful. Children have most likely learned their firesetting behavior through social learning (i.e. observation and imitation) and are interested in experimenting with this observed behavior. Within this context, lighting matches may serve as a reinforcer rather than a deterrent. Repetition or rehearsal is one of the most common and successful forms of

increasing a child's ability to repeat or recall a given behavior at a future time (i.e. rehearsal increases a child's ability to remember). Observation and imitation, compounded by rehearsal, can reinforce the behavior making it very difficult to deter. Educationally, a good way to deter a child from continuing firesetting behavior is to:

- Educate the parents/caregivers on how to significantly limit the child's access to ignition sources
- Educate parents/caregivers on child supervision techniques and responsibilities
- Teach the child, in a cognitively appropriate manner, how to make consistently good choices about match/lighter use (or lack of use)
- Educate the child, at an age appropriate level, about his/her responsibility as it relates to the issue.

*The idea is to focus on the behavior that is desired rather than the behavior that is causing a problem.* With this in mind, begin providing the child with the necessary knowledge and terms they will need to perform in a safe and successful manner, then check their comprehension of that knowledge. Have the child apply or practice the knowledge and comprehension. Have the child break down and/or analyze the lesson they just completed. Have the child bring the information together by explaining why all of the steps and knowledge are important. A very important step is to have the child form an opinion of what they have learned and be able to communicate (at their level) what the learning meant to them. Following such a cycle when teaching will enhance the quality of education and increase the chances of the lesson being remembered in the future.

### ***What resources are available for parents who are looking for help?***

In most cases, your local fire department should be your best point of contact. However, not all fire departments have chosen to address the problem of children playing with fire. You may find information through your state's State Fire Marshal. Their number will be found in the blue pages of the phone book under "State." If unable to find other resources, drop us a line here at SOS FIRES. We have many contacts across the nation and have helped connect many families to local programs. Please remember, if you encounter a program or agency that uses tactics that, you as a parent, do not support, consider a second opinion. While this field has come a long way in the past two decades, there are some who have not chosen to join along. You know your situation and child best.

### ***What information do I need to get for my child so he will stop setting fires?***

Many caregivers do not understand why their child is setting fires. A firefighter has visited the child's classroom or the family has gone to the neighborhood fire station. The caregivers have even told the child that they will kill someone if they continue playing with fire. So why does the behavior continue? The approaches taken above, while important, do not always focus on the problem at hand. Teaching a child to "Stop, Drop, and Roll" does not give them the information they need to understand the dangers of fire. Knowing what to do when a smoke detector sounds does not emphasize that matches/lighters are dangerous tools for adults only. The information needed to quell a child's firesetting behavior must address realistic things you want the child to do. They must recognize matches and lighters as a tool. Too often, adults do not treat them that way. They must know what to do when they encounter matches or lighters in the home, on the playground, on the sidewalk, or at the babysitter's home.

Once a child is equipped with the information to make good decisions, they can now begin to make them. Consequences for the failure to follow the rules must also be clear. When rules are broken, consistent follow-through is very important. Once the caregivers begin to lead by example, once the rules have been explained in a way that is age-appropriate for the child, and once the punishment for breaking the rules has been made crystal clear, most children will now behave in a very safe way. When children do not, that is a warning sign that you must find help. Do not hesitate to seek help. A child's first fire is potentially as dangerous as the tenth.

***If my child sets a fire, does that mean he/she is an arsonist?***

Arson is a very misused term. Arson is a criminal definition of a behavior that meets specific criteria (which can differ from state to state). It usually requires the child to be of an age at which they can understand the consequences of their actions. Their actions also must meet certain criteria, such as intent to do damage, etc. With this in mind, it should be apparent that not all children who set fires can be considered arsonists. It should not, however, be misunderstood to mean that a child-set fire of any type is not potentially dangerous. Some of the most innocent acts with fire by children as young as three have caused the death of another child and sometimes, the child himself. Conversely, even older kids, who are intent on setting fires, may be unsuccessful in accomplishing their goal and have a fire that appears minor. *The size of the fire or age of the child is not a good indicator of the level of concern for the firesetting behavior.* Only a careful interview that is designed to help determine the child's motivation will begin to find such answers.

***Are there ways to make a contract with my child to influence his firesetting behavior?***

Sometimes, a contract with someone a child respects can help motivate them to change their behavior. This respected individual can be a parent, teacher, firefighter, police officer, or anyone important to the child. The conditions for their behavior can be spelled out on paper (in terms understandable to the child) and the parents, the respected individual, and the child can all sign off on it. A good contract should include a reward for the appropriate behavior and consequences for not meeting the conditions of the contract. Both the reward and consequence should be things that are important to the child, not the adults. For example, if a child is very fond of visits to the library, an additional trip or other treat might make good rewards. A specific time frame that is realistic and obtainable is critical as well. This also needs to be geared to the child's age. Of utmost importance is the follow through for both rewards and consequences. A parent can lose credibility very quickly if they don't stick to an agreement. Clear rules and expectations give children the tools necessary to make good decisions.

# TEST