

Childhood Fire Play To Adult Arson: Is There A Progression?¹

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Introduction

Child fire setting is generally not referred to as “arson” because in a legal context it is considered that children as young as 10 years cannot form an “intention” to commit a crime. However, many child development specialists and educators openly object to the use of the word “play” in describing a child’s negative behaviour, or misuse of fire and fire tools. According to these professionals, the word “play” should only be associated with positive, learning activities. Alternative, perhaps more appropriate terms have been proposed and include “fire-starting” or (more formally) “experimentation with fire and/or fire tools” (NFPA 1035 Standard).

Stages

It is widely accepted that fire behaviour follows a naturally occurring developmental sequence in children, with at least three distinct phases: fire interest; fire-starting; fire-setting. The labels used for these stages differ across different researchers, and some authors have divided these categories up further to provide more descriptive classification system. At the end of the day, however, there are similar underlying general principles across these systems that can be neatly expressed in these three stages.

Fire interest

Most children experience fire interest between ages of 3 years to 5 years. This interest can be expressed in a number of ways, for example, asking questions about fire or incorporating fire-related themes in play. The questions often focus on the physical properties of fire, such as how hot a fire is or what makes a fire burn. The

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fire play frequently involves wearing fire hats, playing with toy fire trucks, and cooking food on toy stoves.

These activities are healthy and provide children with ways to explore and understand fire as a productive and useful part of their lives. However, younger children have a limited understanding of cause and effect and are therefore more at risk of fire with limited supervision and fire safety skills at their disposal.

Fire-starting

Fire starting occurs when children experiment with ignition sources such as matches and lighters. A majority of children will engage in at least one unsupervised fire-start. Most of these unsupervised fire-starts are single episodes motivated primarily by curiosity. This can involve experimenting with matches and burning pieces of paper - often hiding in bedrooms or cupboards. In general, fires resulting from these incidents are accidental or unintentional. They are started with available ignition sources and there is no typical target for these fires. If these fires get out of control, often children will make an attempt either to put the fire out or to go for help. But not always.

Usually fire starting drops off during the early primary school years with fire education, then resurfaces in late primary / early secondary school through carelessness or delinquency. If children continue to participate in more than one supervised fire-start, the probability of starting a significant fire increases dramatically. It is, therefore, very important not only to discourage unsupervised fire-starts, but also to provide a solid education in fire safety to children to prevent unsupervised experimentation.

Fire-setting

The shift in the pattern of fire-setting from fire-start to fire-setting is associated with a variety of other changes that accompany adolescence: increasing independence, greater freedom from parental involvement; greater reliance on peer-group. Repeated fire-setting is seen in children aged between 7 years and 10 years who

understand the rules of fire safety but continue to light fires, mainly in secret. These children are likely to have difficulties in regulating intense emotions, such as anger and frustration, and are more impulsive. This type of fire-setting can lead to more serious problems if ignored.

It can be motivated by psychological or social problems, but not in all cases. The fires tend to be planned, take place over several weeks, months or even years and, the severity of the fires varies. The primary motivation is boredom, anger, attention seeking, or revenge. Once the fire is started, the fire-setter will rarely make an attempt to extinguish it. If the child is lighting fires repeatedly, alone, and in secret, this should serve as a red flag for involved professionals that further investigation of the child's situation / behaviour is required.

One of the most important points arising from the literature is the notion that any professional dealing with behaviourally disturbed children needs to ask the child questions about their involvement with fire and fire-related tools. Serial arson is frequently overlooked in child populations where professionals are focused on treating different types of problems (Dittmann, 2004).

References

Please contact the author for references at www.firefocus.net.

About The Author

Rebekah Doley is a psychologist specialising in the behavioural analysis of arson. Rebekah has a history of researching and lecturing in the psychology of serial firesetting in the UK, USA, NZ and Australia. As a result of her work in this area she has been awarded the Queens Trust Award in 1995 and CFS/S.A. Great Training and Research Award in 1995, 1998, 1999, and 2000. Rebekah's background is in human resource management where she has had extensive experience in the areas of recruitment, selection, training and personnel development. Currently she is also a lecturer in psychological aspects of arson with Charles Sturt University (Goulburn, Australia) and consults to organisations on the issue of serial arson and firefighter selection.