

Speaking  
of Fire

SPECIAL EDITION

**YOUTH**

**FIRESSETTERS**



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### What are they Thinking?

#### *Kids and Social Media*

*Kathi Osmonson*

Children are connected to video games, communication devices, and social media. It seems like they're born more techno-savvy than we can ever hope to be.

Technology is changing everyone and their future, and the pace can be difficult to keep up with (An informative YouTube video — search “Did you know 2014” — will fill you in on just how fast things are happening). Familiarity with the online world will serve our kids well someday — but right now a lot of discussion about kids and social media is focused on negative behavior.

Take the fire challenge, for example. During this cyber-epidemic in August and September 2014, children videotaped themselves or others as they lit the flammable liquids they had applied all over their bodies. Then they posted the videos online. Interestingly, the youths appeared to be surprised when the burning hurt. In one high-profile case, a mother taped her son doing the fire challenge; she was subsequently arrested. Fortunately, the fire challenge was short-lived, and by November 2014 the only sites where fire challenge videos appeared were running documentaries on how stupid the whole thing was. The National Fire Protection Association was quick to develop educational materials for parents and caregivers. You can find the information on their website: <http://www.nfpa.org/firechallenge>.

Why do kids do things like that? Perhaps children think they are invincible and nothing bad will happen to them. However, studies show they are just uninformed. According to Sue Scheff, author and parent advocate, children want to see how far they can go and what they can accomplish (read more about the invincibility theory among teens on Scheff's website at [www.suescheffblog.com](http://www.suescheffblog.com)).

Typically, social acceptance can be more important than logically thinking to children, which can be reflected in social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) and *hits* and *likes* on YouTube. Being popular was historically developed through physical relationships and physical actions; these days, popularity also develops virtually.

Video games contribute to this virtual phenomenon because the graphics and quality are becoming more realistic. Children can blur the line between real and fake. For youth who have chaotic home lives, social media and video games offer welcome escape. It's important for parents, teachers, fire-department personnel, police, and other community leaders to know what kids are up to — what they're seeing and experiencing in their virtual activities. *Parent Magazine*, Jan. 2015 has a useful article about preventing children from abusing these opportunities to escape from their real lives online. Some strategies include having children only use computers, tablets, etc. in public places in the home such as the kitchen or living room. Don't let your children sleep with their phones. Simply putting media aside and talking with your children, perhaps sharing a meal and conversation will deter some of the activity.

Social media is a new landscape for us to navigate, and we need to stay in tune with what our citizens are doing. Our awareness of the dangers and benefits of social media is tied to our ability to continue saving lives and property, through fire prevention education and every other life-safety effort we can provide. Social media is not all bad, children need to be supervised and guided responsibly in their use of media.

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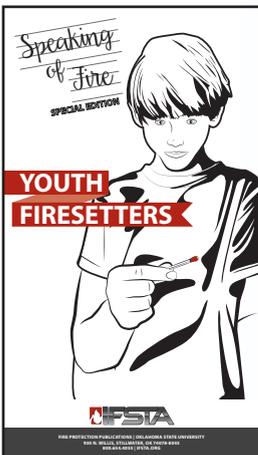
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### National Fire Academy Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention Courses

Mary Marchone

Have you ever responded to a house fire where a child started the fire? Have you ever been at the fire station and had a parent call and say they have a child who is setting fires? How are you and your department handling these situations? The U.S. Fire Administration's National Fire Academy (NFA) can help prepare you and your department to meet this challenge.

The NFA offers classes across the country, and at its campus in Emmitsburg, Maryland, they provide important knowledge, skills, and abilities to help children and adolescents involved in firesetting. Major emphasis is placed on building partnerships and programs to help families address the firesetting behavior. The courses are taught by instructors who have experience managing youth firesetting prevention and intervention programs.

The 6-day and 2-day courses are designed to meet many of the skills in the National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) *Youth Firesetter Intervention Specialist and Program Manager Professional Qualifications*, which are part of *NFPA 1035*. You will learn about the extent of the problem and examine national trends that include incendiary devices used by children and adolescents. The course includes research on motivations, identification, and typologies of children and adolescents who set fires. You will learn how to conduct an intake, screening, disposition and follow-up. The courses also address how fire departments can provide effective educational interventions, build community partnerships, conduct case management, and provide program development and evaluation.

If you attend a 6-day course at NFA, you will visit a residential treatment center for male adolescents involved in firesetting. This provides an opportunity for students to practice their interviewing skills. A panel discussion follows and students have a chance to interact with residents. Students who attend this course say it is the highlight of their week.

Courses are open to fire service personnel with responsibilities related to developing, implementing, coordinating, and managing a youth firesetting prevention and intervention program in their community. If you would like to attend a course at NFA, selection priority is given when two members of a jurisdiction (state, country, or local entity) apply together. One member must be from the fire service. The other member can be from any agency collaborating on youth firesetting such as law enforcement, fire investigation (police or fire service) mental health, social services, or hospitals.

If you cannot attend NFA courses in Emmitsburg, MD, you can contact your state fire training agency and ask them to sponsor a course (NFA gives funding to each state to offer NFA courses). You can also have the training offered in your locality as a local partner where your fire department is responsible for all expenses including instructors and course materials (grant funds can be used to support these course deliveries).

Russ Fiset, Director of the Greater Lowell, Massachusetts Fire Education Program said, "The Greater Lowell Fire Education Program has benefitted from the NFA Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention 6-day course offered in Massachusetts. Upon completion of the course, members of the team quickly realized what they needed to do to meet the current and future needs of the clients who were required to attend their program. Several grants were secured and partnerships were established with the mental health professionals, courts, law enforcement, schools, and neighboring fire departments."

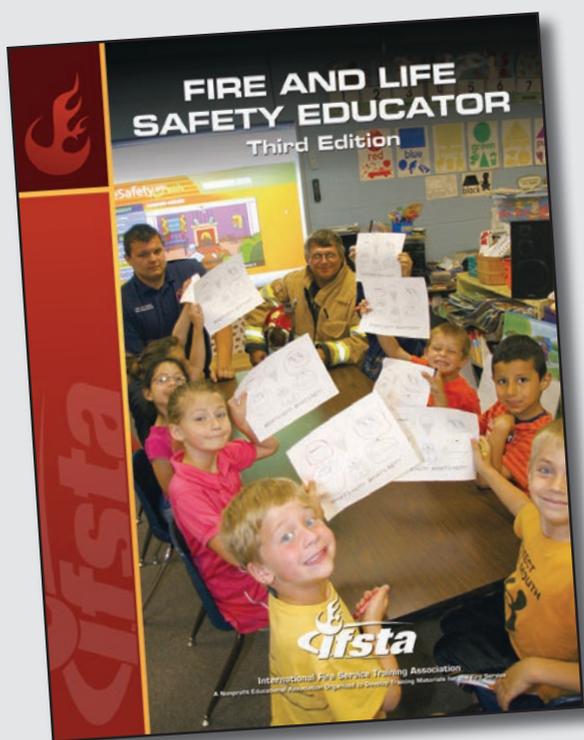


If you want to learn more about Youth Firesetting Prevention and Intervention courses and offerings, visit the website at: <http://search.usa.gov/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&affiliate=usfa&q=young+firesetter+prevention+and+intervention&commit=>. If you have questions about attending or hosting an NFA course, please contact Mary Marchone\* at [mary.marchone@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:mary.marchone@fema.dhs.gov).

\*Mary Marchone is a training specialist/course manager at NFA. She is a longtime fire safety advocate and the recipient of the 2014 Dr. Anne W. Phillips Award for Leadership in Fire Safety Education.

# FIRE AND LIFE SAFETY EDUCATOR

## Third Edition



## NINE YOUTH FIRESETTER CHAPTERS

The **Fire and Life Safety Educator** manual is the addition of two levels: Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Specialist I and Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Specialist II. All levels are covered separately for ease of use. In all, the third edition covers five levels of the standard.

- Fire and Life Safety Educator Level I: Chapters 2-6
- Fire and Life Safety Educator Level II: Chapters 7-11
- Fire and Life Safety Educator Level III: Chapters 12-16
- Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Specialist I: Chapter 17-20
- Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Specialist II: Chapters 21-25



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### Child Playing

*Kathi Osmonson*

Most parents are never forced to watch flames consume their home because their child was “playing” with a lighter. Most parents never experience the grief of losing a son or daughter in a fire caused by the child “playing” with an ignition device. Two Minnesota families experienced these horrors first-hand. Both fires were determined to be “accidental”.

On April 10, 2014, a ten-year-old girl died in a fire that she possibly started in hay bales. She may have had a history of playing with lighters. Perhaps her parents thought her behavior was something she would eventually grow out of (“just a phase”). Perhaps her parents were unaware of available help.

Another child with a history of firesetting behavior died along with his sister when their house burned down in the winter of 2013. The “playing with ignition source” category cannot be ruled out as a cause in this case. Bad things usually happen when children play with fire.

In a non-fatal incident on May 14, 2014, a house fire started after a child was reportedly playing with a lighter. The local newspaper told the story as if the lighter had acted on its own, but we know that fires don’t just break out.

“Fire play” is virtually sanctioned in our society. Traditionally, we light a candle on a cake in front of a one-year-old child and make a game of blowing it out. Fire appears in a lot of advertising (from insurance to ladies’ panties). A poster in downtown St. Paul near the Children’s Museum recently featured a photo of a young girl setting bugs on fire with a magnifying glass. One season finale of “Glee” portrayed a disgruntled cheerleader soaking her uniform in gasoline, bringing it to school and lighting it on fire in front of the coach. Movies are full of these images and examples are unlimited. Children learn about fire thorough observation.

Parents often do not understand the potential danger of children misusing fire. They probably learned about fire the same way their children did — through observing irresponsible misrepresentation in the media and elsewhere. In addition, some parents delay reporting their child’s misuse of fire because they were “just small fires.” Most large fires start small.

People these days have few ways to gain a proper understanding of fire. Most jurisdictions do not allow residents to burn garbage anymore; they have garbage service. Most people use furnaces rather than fireplaces to heat their home. While our education efforts can be effective, they often don’t focus on fire behavior, but rather fire safety — how to survive rather than how to prevent a fire.

Firefighters understand fire science and know that fires can start small and end in devastation to communities. While communities work to share important information with residents, we need to take action by recognizing children with firesetting behavior and intervening. We’re not doing anyone a favor by not identifying or reporting youth-set fires.

Prevention and Intervention programs are the best ways to prevent and change a child’s behavior even though some firefighters and investigators may be uncomfortable interviewing children. We need to follow up, not give up; and enroll a child into a youth-firesetting prevention-and-intervention program, even if it is only suspected firesetting behavior. Early detection and intervention will be more effective than waiting.

If you do not have a program, consider establishing one (local, county, regional, or state level). The Minnesota State Fire Marshal has resources for you at: [www.fire.state.mn.us](http://www.fire.state.mn.us), under the Public Education tab. Early intervention saves lives and property. Fire can affect everyone and therefore is a shared responsibility for everyone to act.

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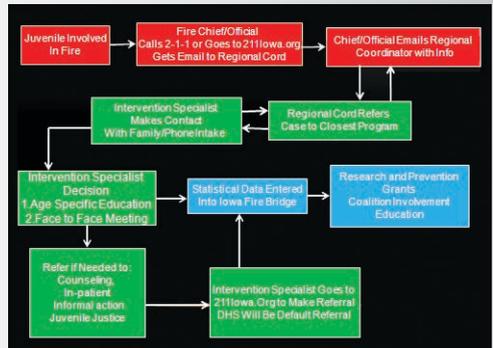


## Iowa's Juvenile Fire Intervention Program

Brent Smith

### The Development of Iowa's Juvenile Fire Intervention Program

The Iowa Fire Safety Task Force identified that juvenile fires were the 3rd leading cause of fires in Iowa. In response, the Juvenile Firesetting Program Managers focused their efforts on a state wide program that would allocate resources to all Iowa fire departments to reduce the number of juvenile firesetters. Led by Fire Captain Brent Smith with Cedar Rapids Fire, a task force was created including fire chiefs and fire marshal from Iowa City fire, Coralville Fire, and West Des Moines Fire with the Iowa State Fire Marshal's office and the United Way's 2-1-1 call system to develop a new standard of care for Iowa's juvenile firesetters.



Fire Intervention Program Flow of Information.

### How Our New State Program Works

“The success of a Juvenile Fire Intervention program is the ability to accurately gather information, score and evaluate what you learn within a scientifically tested system, and apply proven interventions” stated Captain Brent Smith with Cedar Rapids Fire, “Our Juvenile Fire Intervention Program is designed to intervene in destructive behavior. The intervention process begins with an initial interview and assessment followed by the planning and implementation of a strategy. Our program includes an interview of the child and the child’s parents or guardians to try to determine the rationale for the fire play or fire start. Based on the assessment, the fire department helps determine the likelihood of recidivism and can offer fire and life safety instruction for the children and their family. We have also established a strong relationship with the State of Iowa Juvenile Court Office to assess youthful offenders in an effort to safeguard the community from future criminal arson activity.”

Once a juvenile with firesetting behavior has been identified, we can then recommend:

- Fire safety practices for the family (e.g., inspect the home for safety concerns, discuss fire safety, and install smoke alarms).
- Fire prevention education classes (e.g., discuss the use of fire (advantages vs. disadvantages), discuss the consequences of fire (risk to themselves, neighbors, firefighters, and the community), and assign homework to help reinforce the lessons and information during the intervention and treatment program).
- Professional counseling services (consisting of partners across the state including mental health facilities, social workers, family therapists, and juvenile authorities).

The concept of utilizing a state “standard” and regionalizing juvenile firesetting intervention programs will provide better utilization of the multiple disciplines required to effectively prevent and mitigate the problem of juvenile fire setting. Every child will get the help they need no matter where they live!

It is the responsibility of ALL of us to inform and educate the children to the problems associated with fire. Mothers, fathers, teachers, and firefighters alike, have the responsibility to teach the children of our community. Do your part to help the children in your community understand what fire is, how it can help and most of all, how it can hurt!

For detailed information on how the program works, including a regional map of the participating programs near you, please visit: <http://www.dps.state.ia.us/fm/main/JuvenileFiresetters.shtml>.

We would like to thank the Iowa Volunteer Chiefs Council, Iowa Fire Fighters Association, Iowa’s Professional Chiefs and the Fire Service Training Bureau for their partnership in making this program a success. Together, we can reduce the number of juvenile fires in our state and prevent injuries and deaths to our kids.



## YOUTH FIRESETTING – SPECIAL EDITION

### Youth Firesetting Prevention/Intervention Programs in the U.S: Where it all began...

Patricia Mieszala, RN



Although the issues of child firesetting and juvenile arson appear in mental health and law enforcement/criminal justice literature as early as 1940<sup>1</sup>, with earlier references to behavior with fire in 1924<sup>2</sup>, the birth of a movement and national focus in the United States for youth firesetting behavior (ages 3-18), began in 1975 at the California State Psychological Association convention in Anaheim, California. Psychologists and fire service personnel discussed the role of the fire service interviewing youth with firesetting behavior who come to their attention either through emergency response calls or concerned parents/caretakers bringing children to the fire station. Thirty-five fire departments attended. The outcome was two major points:

1. All fire departments in attendance did some form of an interview with young firesetters
2. They had received little, if any, training in interviewing children and parents, assessing their needs, and providing effective solutions.

This landmark discussion led to the formation of the Fire Services and Arson Prevention Committee, Division I of the California State Psychological Association. The County of Los Angeles Fire Department received the initial grant from the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) in 1977. With the vision of Laura Buchbinder, USFA Project Officer, and a team effort led by Capt. Joe Day, Los Angeles Fire Dept. and Dr. Kenneth Fineman, Huntington Beach, California, they developed a training manual with a screening tool to aid fire department personnel in interviewing youthful firesetters under the age of seven and their families. The results of these interviews helped determine appropriate interventions (fire safety education, referral for counseling or social services, etc.).

A workshop for fire service personnel and psychologists interested in working with juvenile firesetters followed the development of the training manual. This was the beginning of an intense 40-year focus to better understand youth firesetting behavior and assist fire service personnel in becoming skilled in providing effective prevention and intervention strategies through partnerships with key agencies in the community.

During the initial years (1978-1985), and with the ongoing support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)/USFA, critical work took place to build a foundation to better understand youth firesetting behavior, family dynamics, and the role of the fire department in coordinating and implementing community screening/intervention programs. Building partnerships in the community with mental health, juvenile justice, police departments, child protective services, and other related agencies was essential for establishing a strong foundation to understand youth firesetting.

The community based program approach in addressing youth firesetting was a fresh look at an age-old fire problem. Kenneth Fineman, Ph.D. designed and developed the assessment and screening tools in comprehensive fire risk evaluation. The tools were the essence in identifying meaningful questions for fire personnel (and other trained professionals) to use during the screening interview. Training materials also included the production of the videos (e.g., How to Interview and Counsel Juvenile Firesetters) and a California case study film “The Clarke Family Tragedy”. The initial team involved in this project included Capt. Joe B. Day, Los Angeles County Fire Dept. (Project Manager), Dr. Kenneth Fineman, Charles and Ester Brudo, EdD., Lynne Michaelis, Fountain Valley California Fire Department, Connie Morris, City of Fountain Valley, California, Pat Mieszala, RN, Psychiatric Burn Nurse Clinician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, Illinois (consultant). Reviewers and workshop instructors in this early phase delivered 77 workshops in 30 states to multi-disciplined participants, from May 1980 – August 1981.

Feedback from these workshops and during a meeting in Crystal City, Maryland, in the spring of 1985, indicated that follow-up manuals were needed to deal with youth ages 7-13. Pat Mieszala (project manager for cooperative agreements from the USFA/Arson Division, Tom Minnich, Project Officer) developed the training materials and workshops in the mid-1980s. The USFA supported hundreds of local workshops throughout the country to train fire department personnel and multi-disciplined audiences to better understand the scope of the youth firesetting/arson problems, interview youth and their families to determine the appropriate interventions, and develop a community coalition to effectively address this destructive behavior. In late 1985, with the support of USFA, 100 multi-discipline professionals were brought to the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland, for a three-day workshop to review the set of USFA manuals, share their program experiences, network, and identify a future direction for assisting communities in developing their intervention programs.

Given the available national statistics regarding child-set fires in the late 1970s, the “Fire Related Youth Counseling Program (FRY)” began in Rochester, New York, by Rochester Firefighter John Beldue who was injured in a 1977 house fire started by a 13-year old boy. Together with Jerry Bills, Investigation Unit, they sought assistance from Paul Schwartzman, M.S., L.M.H.C., D.A.P.A, and other professionals working with high-risk children and families at the University of Rochester. With a grant from the New York State Office of Fire Prevention and Control, they conducted a comprehensive, community-based study of children and fire. This was the first broad-based, systematic study of its kind. The principal findings were published in 1982.

Although a majority of the juvenile firesetter intervention programs at that time were led by local fire departments, burn units in Sioux City, Iowa, Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Tacoma, Washington, took the lead in organizing agencies and providing program services. Many other initiatives emerged, including the “Firehawks” Program in San Francisco, California, adding a mentoring component (as in the Big Brother organization) to intervention services.

The Phenomenon of Juvenile Firestarters Hearing before the U.S. Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Sub-Committee on Juvenile Justice took place on April 23, 1985 (Participants: Jessica Gaynor, Ph.D., Clifford Karchmer, M.A.) to establish continued support for community programs.

Articles and publications focused on the youth firesetting continued, especially in the mental health community, including the books “Children and Arson: America’s Middle-Class Nightmare”, Wooden, W and Berkey, M.L (1984), and “The Psychology of Child Firesetting: Detection and Intervention”, Gaynor J, Hatcher C (1987).

In 1987, The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and USFA began a grant-funded research and development project intended to conceptualize, design, develop, and evaluate a variety of community-based approaches to prevent and control juvenile firesetting. This resulted in the development of a series of five FEMA/USFA publications in 1994 to heighten the awareness of model programs. In 1997, all of the FEMA/USFA youth firesetting related publications were compiled into a handbook by Dr. Jessica Gaynor and included both the Comprehensive Fire Risk Evaluation Tool by Dr. Kenneth Fineman (ages 3-18), and the Juvenile Firesetter Risk Survey by Cheryl Poage and the Colorado Juvenile Firesetter Prevention Program, as an alternative, and shortened screening version for the fire service. Other mental health practitioners developed alternative screening tools for the fire service to use in their programs, such as the Firestoppers of Washington State in the late 1990s.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) published an initial report, “*Children Playing With Fire – U.S. Experience, 1980-1987*” (by John Hall) in 1990 identifying an astounding average of 152,090 fires set by children during this time period, which caused 394 civilian deaths, 2,352 civilian injuries and \$160.7 million dollars in direct property damage<sup>3</sup>. Subsequent reports were published annually through 2014. The 2014 report indicated between 2007 and 2011, an average of 49,300 fires involving playing with fire were reported to U.S. municipal fire departments per year. These fires caused annual averages of 80 civilian deaths, 860 civilian injuries, and \$235 million in property damage. It was noted that the child resistant

*continued on page 8...*

## Youth Firesetting Prevention/Intervention Programs in the U.S: Where it all began...

lighter legislation of 1994 assisted in decreasing youth firesetting incidents throughout the years. This was due to the increases in the awareness of the problem, local program services, and local primary prevention programs.

In 1994, the Juvenile Firesetting and Arson, Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Report identified that 52 percent of all arson arrests in the U.S. are children ages 18 and under. Arson is the crime with the highest rate of juvenile involvement. Nearly half arrested are age 15 and younger, and nearly 3 percent are under the age of 10.

1993 was the beginning of SOS FIRES: Youth Intervention Programs (OR) that was established by Don Porth, with a purposeful move to use the term “youth” in place of “juvenile” when referring to non-criminal cases of firesetting behavior. In 1996, SOS FIRES launched the first (and only) website dedicated exclusively to the issue of youth firesetting intervention.

The next two decades were filled with a frenzy of activity among fire services, mental health organizations, and agencies in critical studies researching the behavior of youth firesetting, publications, establishing training opportunities to develop and implement community based programs, and hosting state/regional/national and international youth firesetter conferences. Communication among practitioners dedicated to making a difference in the lives of youth who set fires trended across the country. This included the distribution of the “Hot Issues” newsletter dedicated to the issue of youth firesetting, published with support of USFA, and distributed by the Oregon State Fire Marshal’s Office, Judy Okulitch. Opportunities for ongoing training classes (resident and field courses) became a reality at the National Fire Academy in 2000, following the introduction to youth firesetting in their investigator’s Management of Arson Prevention and Control course in 1996. The International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI) developed a training package for investigators in 2003. In 2000, NFPA 1035 Professional Qualifications Standard included professional qualifications for Juvenile Firesetter Specialists (JFISI and JFISII), which has been revised to Youth Firesetter Specialist and Youth Firesetter Program Manager in the 2015 Edition. In 2011, the International Fire Service Training Association (IFSTA) Fire and Life Safety Educator Handbook, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, included nine chapters on JFIS I and JFIS II based on the NFPA 1035 Standard. In 2014 the Insurance Service Office (ISO) rating included points for fire departments that have a youth firesetter prevention/intervention program!

This period saw varied attempts at data collection, without much success in standardization, until the current Youth Firesetting Information Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES) initiative developed over three years, and was launched in 2015 (see page 10) through the International Association of Fire Fighters with the support of several FEMA/Assistant to Firefighters Grants (AFG).

In conclusion, what started decades ago as a simple discussion in how to best assist the fire service in interviewing children who misuse fire, and their families, has evolved into bringing a better understanding of youth firesetting behavior and effective solutions, to the fire service, and related disciplines. The need for community agency collaboration is essential in identifying the needs, interventions, and services that effectively bring fire safety and peace of mind to youth, families and communities everywhere. It is a mission that is ongoing and has no end...

***“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead***

### Sources

- 1 Yarnell H. Firesetting in Children Am J Orthopsychiatry. 1940, 10(2):272-286
- 2 Stekel W. Peculiarities of Behavior, Vol II, NY, Bori and Liveright, 1924
- 3 1980-87 NFIRS and NFPA survey; U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1989 Table 748



## Firesetting is Not “Just a Phase”

*Kathi Osmonson*

Sporting an orange Mohawk might be a phase. Obsession with personal grooming is usually a phase. Those periods of fascination with specific subjects or behaviors that we refer to as “phases” take kids in one direction for a while, and then they come back. Deliberate fire setting is not like that; it’s much scarier. Without intervention, children who set fires tend to continue setting fires. In addition, children punished (e.g., grounding or revoking privileges) by parents or caregivers often continue to set fires.



Arsonists are not born; people evolve into arsonists. The behavior of most serial arsonists started in childhood and developed without intervention. It is possible that some parents/caregivers thought the fire was only small or perhaps that it may reflect badly on them if the child was identified as a firesetter (causing unwanted attention).

Firesetting can become normalized leading the child to take more risks to achieve an exciting fire. Even if firesetting started as curiosity or simply imitating adult behavior, firesetting behavior may lead to a developed habit, it may become a passion, or it may be a calming mechanism for children.

Firesetting behavior may create a sense of power for children who feel they have no power over anything else in their lives. In some cases, a child may use firesetting to seek attention or provoke others (parents and authority figures). Whatever the motivation, the behavior typically continues until the child receives adequate intervention and treatment.

Some adults may tell stories about how they started fires when they were young and turned out just fine. That may be so, depending on motivation. However, the stakes are greater now. Modern homes are filled with petroleum-based products, including our furniture, carpeting, clothing, and appliances. Fire is very fast and deadly. Our lives are filled with media that inaccurately portrays fire behavior, and may show irresponsible fire use that can be intriguing and easy for kids to imitate.

Emergency personnel who respond to a child-set fire may resist getting the child in trouble. However, the child who gets caught has typically started several fires already. By doing our jobs, including writing up that extra report and referring the child to a youth-firesetting prevention and intervention program, we can save lives and property, and possibly the future of a child.

Intervention requires a team approach to be effective. Social services and mental health care professionals can help firesetters overcome feelings of powerlessness and other negative motivators. In addition, firesetting behavior could help draw attention to other things going on in the child’s life (depression, abuse, or upsets in life). Fire service members can provide fire prevention education including teaching children about fire science and the dangers of fire. Most children and their parents don’t understand the power of fire because it is misrepresented in the media. Helping children and families to understand fire behavior can also help them to understand fire prevention and fire safety behaviors. Law enforcement and juvenile justice officers can help young firesetters get into a program by making intervention/diversion mandatory.

Looking at youth firesetting behavior as something that can be outgrown does both the child and society a disservice. We can intervene before firesetting starts (or evolves) by being realistic, knowledgeable, and compassionate — and provide an individual treatment plan for youth firesetters.

For more information contact Kathi Osmonson, Juvenile Firesetting Prevention and Intervention Coordinator in the Minnesota State Fire Marshal Division at 651-201-7220.



# YOUTH FIRESETTING – SPECIAL EDITION



## An overview of the International Association of Fire Fighters National Youth Firesetting Database Project

*Phil Tammaro*

The Youth Firesetting Information Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES) is a data collection project initiated by the International Association of Fire Fighters and funded through the DHS/FEMA's Grant Program Directorate for Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program - Fire Prevention and Safety Grants.

For decades, youth firesetting has been a troubling issue within the fire service and throughout juvenile services. Unfortunately, efforts to assess consistent information across the U.S. have been an unmet public safety challenge. This is in part due to the fact that there is no national database that meets the needs of both fire service and community based intervention programs that have an opportunity to collect data that may be beneficial to understanding the youth fire setting problem in the United States.

Recognizing this need for quality data on youth-involved fires, the International Association of Fire Fighters Charitable Foundation Burn Fund brought together national organizations and subject matter experts in the field of youth firesetting intervention to develop a standardized, comprehensive, and multi-disciplinary national data collection and evaluation system. This collaboration has resulted in a cloud-based data collection system that programs can use to manage cases at the local level while contributing anonymous data to a national repository for analysis. The development of this system will facilitate data collection and ultimately serve as a resource for local, regional, and state programs as well as bring about collaboration with national stakeholders. This project will help develop a body of information that will improve the national understanding of youth firesetting behavior and the work being done by programs across the United States.

The project went through several phases, with funding provided through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program. Experts from a wide variety of fields including the fire service, social services, juvenile justice, medical, mental health, and law enforcement have worked together to develop the database (concept, data dictionary, and pilot tested). The two-tiered database was designed to meet the diverse needs of different disciplines and youth firesetting programs.

### PROJECT TIMELINE

#### PHASE 1

September 2011 to September 2012

The IAFF Charitable Foundation Burn Fund was awarded a 2010 DHS/FEMA Fire Prevention and Safety Grant to develop the framework of a national youth firesetting database. The goal of Phase 1 was to start the process towards developing such a database and determine if it is possible to build on an existing databases or if it will be necessary to create a new, focused type of database.

#### *Phase 1 Objectives*

- Host a focus group of national subject matter experts to formulate key steps that would be necessary for the development of the database
- Identify and define data elements to include in the national database
- Review existing databases and evaluate their applicability towards this project
- Identify and form a stakeholder group
- Conduct a national stakeholder summit to review databases and gain consensus on the process and next steps

## PHASE 2

September 2012 to December 2013

The goal of Phase 2 was to conduct a nationwide needs assessment then create a comprehensive plan detailing the technical specifications, methodology and standardized data definitions for creating a database that would capture relevant information to aid in better understand of youth firesetting behavior.

### *Phase 2 Objectives*

- Form multi-disciplinary Advisory Committee & conduct Committee meetings
- Conduct nationwide precursory research on existing youth firesetting databases
- Create national standard of youth firesetting data dictionary
- Develop an online data collection tool to pilot test the concept of the national database
- Conduct a national stakeholders summit to review findings and gain consensus recommendations for data collection processes, as well as data elements that can be consistently collected, analyzed, and applicable to all stakeholders

## PHASE 3

August 2014 to January 2015

In 2014 The IAFF Charitable Foundation Burn Fund was awarded a 2013 DHS/FEMA FP&S Grant to build a cloud-based, comprehensive database that is augmented by the development of an expanded dataset application that local YFS Programs can use as a case management tool.

### *Phase 3 Objectives*

- Form Executive Team and Steering Committee and host meetings
- Develop stand-alone cloud based software application
- Develop website for the project
- Develop and implement training program
- Create and launch a marketing and awareness campaign
- Create and implement a strategic plan for a demonstration of the national YFS database
- Create database infrastructure and sustainability plan
- Expand the stakeholder group and host a national stakeholder's summit to launch a demonstration of the National youth firesetting database.

March 2015 to March 2016: More than 50 programs from across the country participated in pilot testing YFIRES, providing invaluable input into its design. YFIRES is now live nationwide with over 150 registered programs! This FREE tool is available to any Youth Firesetting Program in the fire service, law enforcement, juvenile justice, mental health, or burn community to use.

For more information about the Youth Firesetting Information Repository and Evaluation System (YFIRES) or to register a youth firesetting intervention program, go to [www.yfires.com](http://www.yfires.com).





## FireFactor: Preventing Youth Misuse of Fire

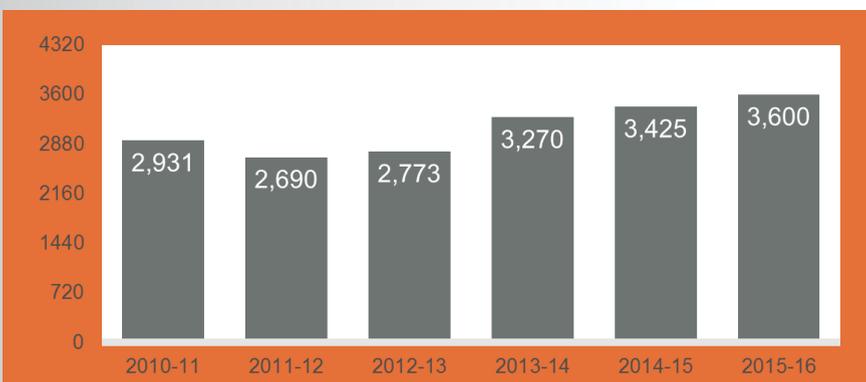
*Sunny Smaldino*

The Colorado Springs Fire Department (CSFD) is one department that has tracked youth firesetting referrals since the early 1990's. It became clear that a stronger prevention program was necessary when the number of referrals to the department was not decreasing. In 2010, the CSFD Fire and Life Safety Educators launched a homegrown prevention program called FireFactor, with specific prevention goals targeted to the age group having the most firesetting referrals to their department.

In Colorado Springs, much like many other jurisdictions, the most common age for youth misusing fire is between the ages of 10-13 years, and predominantly male. With this in mind, it was determined that the middle school population, specifically 6th graders, would be the most impactful audience to target. In its first year, FireFactor was presented as a pilot in 13 middle schools to over 2,900 students. This inaugural year was met with great success and positive teacher and student feedback.

The program has continued to thrive with support from the administration. Each year the FireFactor program is updated with current, relevant, and age specific content. FireFactor maintains its mission to connect with the middle school audience through use of an interactive, media-rich presentation that teaches students how to differentiate actual fire from virtual fire; students are shown the consequences of fire misuse and are challenged to take responsibility for their own decision making.

At the beginning of each school year, all schools in the Colorado Springs Metro area that have 6th grade receive information on the FireFactor program. This includes how the program complies with the Colorado State Educational Standards, testimonials from schools that have participated, and how to schedule a presentation. Every year this program has grown and is projected to reach over 3,500 students for the 2015/16 school year which accounts for nearly 70 percent of the area schools participating (see figure below).

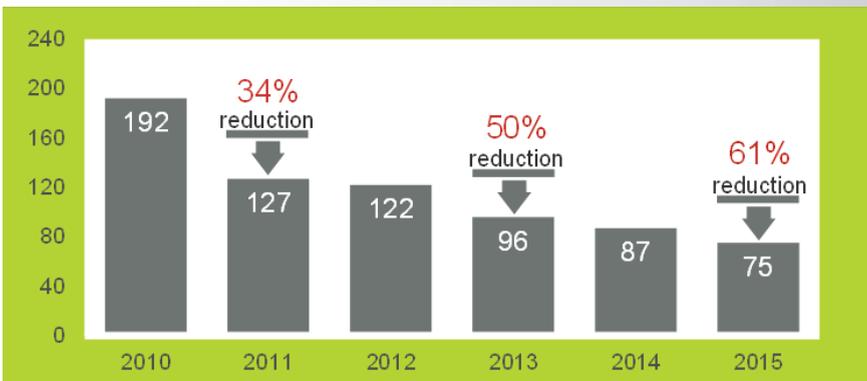


FireFactor is a 50-minute, in-class presentation that is best presented to groups of 30 to 50 students. Educators utilize an iClicker system which enables students to answer on-screen questions anonymously with results instantly displayed in a histogram format. The iClicker system is integral to the program's success because it keeps students engaged and collects yearly data.

While the program content is updated with fresh images of current entertainment that appeals to the age group, there are fundamental components that remain constant in order to gather data and to maintain the themes and mission of the program. The topics presented are:

1. What is fire? – reviews the basics of fire science, the fire triangle and the fundamental dangers of fire being hot, dark, fast, and deadly.
2. Wildfire and structure fire – brings awareness to causes and risks of wildfire and structure fires.
3. Evacuation and fire escape planning – students view the first two minutes of the Station Nightclub fire followed by the lessons learned from that fire.
4. Virtual fire – the exposure to fire in entertainment through media and the ease in which ideas for high risk behavior can be accessed online.
5. Good decision making – discussion with students about making good friendship choices, thinking before acting, and taking a leadership role.
6. Consequences of misuse of fire – discusses the responsibility when it comes to fire misuse and possible financial, legal, and physical consequences while emphasizing the impact to family, friends, neighbors, first responders and the community.

A year after the launch of the FireFactor program in the middle schools, enough data was collected to begin analyzing prevention efforts to referrals the department received. There was a noticeable decrease in departmental referrals. In 2010, CSFD received an annual average of 192 referrals and in 2014 that number was down to 87 (a decrease of 55 percent). As of November 1, 2015 CSFD received 62 referrals, with a projection of 75 by the end of the year (a decrease of 61 percent). By placing a high value on diligent data tracking, CSFD can show that the strong prevention efforts with their target audience have made a direct impact not only on reducing youth misuse of fire, but also a reduction in property loss and injuries (see figure below).



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Fire in the hands of children is a destructive, deadly force. For years, youth firesetting has been a troubling issue within the fire service and throughout youth services. Studies have shown that with early intervention and a comprehensive education plan, the risk of children repeating unsafe fire behavior is greatly reduced. However, when unaddressed, children typically engage in even more dangerous behavior. Preventing this escalation is the primary goal of evaluation, intervention, and treatment programs.

Assessing children who display firesetting behavior is a multi-disciplinary specialty (i.e., involving multiple agencies in a coordinated response). Yet, this presents difficult communication challenges. Many incidences involving children and fire are never reported to the fire department. Instead, many come to the attention of other community agencies such as law enforcement, juvenile justice, social services, and hospitals. This results in a communication gap between agencies; ultimately generating inaccurate statistics of youth firesetting. Experts believe the number could be three to four times greater than reported.

In this issue, readers will learn about the latest research being conducted on youth firesetting, training opportunities from the National Fire Academy, a new, free case management tool available to programs nationwide, and the importance of including multiple agencies (fire, law enforcement, social services, and mental health) to best address this problem. Also in this issue is a case study of a fire department successfully implementing an intervention and treatment program reducing incidences of youth firesetting by 61 percent between 2010 and 2015.

-Phil Tammaro

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