



Young Firesetters



Children playing with fire cause hundreds of deaths and injuries each year. Preschoolers and kindergartners are most likely to start these fires, typically by playing with matches and lighters, and are most likely to die in them.

- Children experience fire interest. They may ask questions such as how hot is fire or show an interest in fire through playing with fire trucks or cooking on a play stove. This is healthy, and it is time to begin educating about fire.
- Firestarting happens when children begin to experiment with fire using matches and lighters. Many fires happen when young children are left alone, even for a short period of time, and have access to matches and lighters. Parents must have clear rules and consequences about fire misuse.
- Grown-ups can help keep fire out of the hands of children.
- Store matches and lighters out of children's reach and sight, up high, preferably in a locked cabinet or container.
- Never leave matches or lighters in a bedroom or any place where children may go without supervision.
- Teach young children and school-age children to tell a grown-up if they see matches or lighters. Children need to understand that fire is difficult to control, it is fast and can hurt as soon as it touches you.
- A child with an interest in fire can lead to fire starting and result in repeated firesetting behavior.
- It is important for grown-ups to discourage unsupervised fire starts.
- Never use lighters or matches as a source of amusement for children; they may imitate you.
- Never assign a young child any tasks that involve the use of a lighter or matches (lighting candles, bringing a lighter to an adult to light a cigarette or the fireplace, etc.)
- If your child expresses curiosity about fire or has been playing with fire, calmly but firmly explain that matches and lighters are tools for adults only.
- Use only lighters designed with child-resistant features. Remember, *child-resistant does not mean child-proof.*

Important!

Children and fire are a **deadly combination**. Some children play with fire out of curiosity, not realizing its danger. Troubled children may set a fire as a way of acting out their anger, disappointment or frustration.

If you suspect your child is intentionally setting fires or unusually fascinated with fire, get help. Your local fire department, school, or community counseling agency can put you in touch with trained experts who know how to teach children about fire in an appropriate way.



Your Source for SAFETY Information

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www.nfpa.org/education

Why Are Children Fascinated With Fire?

by Robert E. Cole, PhD, Robert E. Crandall and Carolyn E. Kourofsky

It's the question we hear most often when parents, teachers and caregivers want to understand children's fireplay: *Why are children so fascinated with fire?*

The fact is, not only children but adults find fire fascinating. Fire is colorful and dynamic. Its movement is gentle and soothing. It's not surprising that fire captures our interest. From a child's point of view, fire seems the perfect toy: colorful, animated, and responsive.

Fire is a familiar part of our culture. Through everyday use, it seems comforting, warm, and helpful. We have candles on our birthday cakes and on our dinner tables during holiday meals. Candles are a part of many religious ceremonies. Children see fire in fireplaces in winter, and campfires and barbecues in the summer.

Fire seems fragile. Most fires children see are small—candles, matches, lighters. They are easily extinguished with a puff of breath. Any child who watches an adult struggle to light the barbecue with old charcoal or start a campfire with damp wood can easily conclude that fire is hard to get started and easy to put out.

Typically, fireplay is not a sign of an emotional problem. Young children just don't understand the consequences, and older children overestimate their ability to control fire. In research conducted in Rochester, New York, we found that 9 out of 10 children who started a fire that was reported to the fire department never started another. Once they see the consequences of their actions, the vast majority of children don't do it again.

But children's fireplay should be taken seriously. Even when started without any intention to do harm, fires set by children can cause serious damage and injury.

How you can reduce the likelihood of children playing with fire:

- **Keep matches and lighters out of sight *and* reach, even child-resistant lighters**

Although child-resistant lighters are helpful, they only provide a temporary margin of safety. Given enough time, many children find ways to light them. Lighters of any sort should never be left out, and ideally should be kept in a locked drawer or cabinet.

- **Be aware of your own modeling of fire use**
What you *do* can be more important than what you *tell* a child. Casual use of fire such as leaving a stove, campfire, grill or candles unattended, not only creates an immediate hazard but tells children that fire needn't be treated seriously. Ignoring the smoke alarm, or going in search of the source of smoke instead of urging everyone to get out when the alarm sounds, sends a message that smoke and its cause isn't serious.



- **Supervise children at home as well as outside.**

Many adults assume children are safe when they are in their own bedrooms. In fact this is where most of the fires set by young children are started, often in closets.

Parents need to both monitor their children, and restrict access to ignition materials.

- **Stick to clear rules about fire.**

Parents and caregivers must firmly state to children that matches and lighters are tools for adults only. Children should tell an adult if they find these materials left lying around.

It's important that this rule be clear and consistent. Many children will assume that if they're allowed to do something with adult supervision, it's really all right for them to do the same thing when alone. Many cooking fires start this way.

Think about at what age you would consider someone responsible enough to babysit your children. Most people want a sitter who is older than elementary school age, because they want someone who can respond if something unexpected happens. Elementary school children are not good at anticipating what might go wrong and how to respond if something does, such as if grease from cooking catches on fire. The Babysitting Training Courses sanctioned by the American Red Cross and the National Safety Council are designed for 11-to-15-year-olds, setting a national standard concerning the age of responsibility

- **Install and maintain smoke alarms, and plan and practice your escape.**

Information about why and how to plan and practice a home fire drill, as well as about smoke alarms, is available at www.homefiredrill.org.

About the Authors

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