

# CO-ORDINATED INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

## STRIKE AGAINST YOUTH FIRESETTING

The largely misunderstood behaviour of youth firesetting, which is often addressed as a criminal justice-involved matter rather than a mental health and/or societal issue, is outlined here, with the authors discussing the causes of youth firesetting, screening and assessment, and they highlight the need for co-ordinated intervention strategies.

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Viewing youth firesetting through a community mental health lens, we hope to shed some light on ways to reduce recidivist firesetting behaviour among young people.

Youth fire-setting behaviour is both largely misunderstood and poorly documented. Youth-set fires typically draw the operational attention of fire service, law enforcement and juvenile justice professionals, and are more often considered a criminal or delinquency issue rather than a mental health-related concern.

However, a more deliberate approach to youth firesetting may be necessary, including acknowledging some of its underlying causes, screening and assessment considerations, intervention, and treatment strategies for children who engage in this unique



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behaviour. As such, mental health therapists may play a vital role in the assessment and treatment of youth who set fires.

Unfortunately, our experience tells us the few mental health professionals have received the appropriate education and training in the area of youth firesetting screening, assessment, and treatment considerations.

**CAUSES OF YOUTH FIRESETTING**

Interest in fire is an innate, human characteristic, as evidenced by the common curiosity many people have about fire from an early age. It is common to use fire in many ritualistic and celebratory events, including candles used for weddings, birthdays, religious services, holidays, fireworks used to celebrate our nation’s birth or other major celebrations, as well as fireplaces built into homes for comfort and aesthetics.

Firesetting behaviour, on the other hand, is not normal, especially among youth. It is a learned behaviour that is most often driven by the youth’s surrounding environment. This environment is most often controlled by the children’s caregivers who fail to realize the power of their example, lighting candles or cigarettes or misusing fire.

The lack of supervision and access to ignition devices (primarily matches and lighters) are common risk factors for youth-set fires. Youth typically do not understand the dangers associated with fire, perhaps due to some caregiver behaviour as well as various media misrepresentation.

Causes of youth firesetting can range from a lack of knowledge or understanding regarding appropriate fire use to deep seated pathology. Other motivations may be connected to physical health, mental health, and behavioural health. Only a thorough and comprehensive evaluation will determine what the youth needs in order to desist from firesetting and reengage in a safe and productive lifestyle.

**SCREENING AND ASSESSMENT**

A variety of instruments are available to determine the depth of a young person’s experience with firesetting and their risk level for repeating the behaviour. Many are standard instruments used by the mental health community. However, general mental health assessments may not ask about fire at all, which limits the opportunity to include this behaviour in a treatment plan.

The fire service has had assessment/ screening tools available since the mid-

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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**Don Porth, BS**, is a fire and life safety consultant, having retired from 31 years in the uniformed fire service. He spent 27 years with Portland (OR) Fire & Rescue, specialising in youth firesetting behaviour and public education/outreach. Other involvements include heading the non-profit ‘SOS FIRES: Youth Intervention Programs’ for 21 years. Through this involvement, he provided over one hundred trainings to professionals across the United States and Canada. He serves as a principal staff member for the Youth Firesetting Intervention Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES), a national data and case management system specifically designed for youth firesetting intervention programming.



**Kathi Osmonson** is Deputy State Fire Marshal and co-ordinates the Minnesota State Youth Fire Intervention Team (YFIT). YFIT partners with law enforcement, mental health, justice and social agencies to sustain a network of professionals who collaborate to provide intervention. Her career includes volunteer and career firefighting with specialties in fire prevention education and youth firesetting intervention. She is a member of the NFPA 1035 Committee and the Minnesota Juvenile Justice Coalition (JJC), an adjunct instructor for the FEMA National Fire Academy, stakeholder in the Youth Firesetting Information Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES), and presents at national and international conferences. Osmonson developed the YFPI Specialist and Program Manager Certifications through the Minnesota Fire Service Certification Board.



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## YOUTH FIRESETTING

1970s. Due to their level of training, which is very different than that of mental health professionals, fire service specialists working with youth fire-setting behaviours use more basic assessment tools that should not be confused with mental health evaluations.

The fire service tools gather a variety of responses from the young individual and the caregiver, and blend those responses with the physical facts of the fire incident, whether provided by the caregiver, witnesses, or an official fire report. Through this process, warning signs in behaviour or responses are scored in order to establish a disposition for the youth's behaviour.

Fire service tools characterise this disposition as 'risk'. High risk categories require a referral to a mental health professional. Low risk categories may only require fire safety education. Risk categories were previously connected with chronological age, but this type of chronological categorisation may fail to take into account their neurological or intellectual disabilities.

Care must also be taken when sharing these categorisations with professionals in other disciplines (e.g. mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, law enforcement and burn treatment) in order to avoid a misinterpretation of the firesetting profile.

It is important for mental health professionals to understand that fire

### **DATA COLLECTION SYSTEM**

*The Youth Firesetting Information Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES) is a data collection project initiated by the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and jointly funded by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) through their grant assistance programme for firefighters.*

*The goal of this project is to create a data collection tool that will assist both the fire service any non-fire service discipline invested in youth firesetting intervention programs.*

*This project aims to help develop a body of information that will improve the national understanding of youth firesetting behaviour and the work being done by programmes across the United States.*

*For further information on youth fire intervention programmers in the US visit [www.YFIRES.com](http://www.YFIRES.com)*



service assessments are qualitatively different than complete mental health evaluations.

### **IMITIATING BEHAVIOUR**

Assessments for fire-setting behaviour are more productive when they focus on the needs of the youth. For example, one who uses a lighter and has ignited household items such as candles or incense may be imitating the behaviour of a caregiver

or sibling. Because it looks easy and negative consequences are few, he/she believes they can replicate the behaviour safely.

This may be inappropriate and indicate a need for education about appropriate fire use and fire science. Caregivers and siblings must be included in this education in order to effect a change.

Therefore, the focus should be on the "need" for education rather than the associated "risk" of the behaviour. It should be noted that all fire use, no matter how legitimate, carries risk.

Youth firesetters are sometimes victims of physical abuse. If they find that firesetting distracts the abuser or disrupts the family dynamic enough to cause the abuse to stop, they may continue to set fires. In this case, the "need" is a safe environment away from the abuser.

The 'risk' might be high or low, but if the youth's needs are met, the likelihood of the firesetting behaviour abating are good. Associated needs may be education and mental health support. A comprehensive intervention may best determine the list of the child's needs and how they can be met.

### **INTERVENTION AND TREATMENT**

Youth firesetting behaviour is not only a fire service problem, but also a community problem. A structured system of intervention will best serve



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a community. An effective intervention programme requires the support and involvement of all of the associated community services, including fire service, law enforcement, mental health, juvenile justice, burn treatment, child welfare, and among others depending on the community in question.

An integrated fire intervention programme, which taps into all appropriate services and professional relationships, is likely to be the most efficient and effective. Each discipline brings a different treatment strategy to the table. To avoid overlap, those services should be coordinated.

In some programmes, case managers help co-ordinate this provision.

Open communication is important since youth can enter a system from any one of the professional gateways. A youth with a history of firesetting may be known by the fire department, but unless the question is asked of the youth/family, a mental health provider working with them may have no idea firesetting has occurred.

Youth firesetting behaviour is a

complex community problem. Solutions are better found when a structured intervention program serves a community and includes participation from all of the necessary professional disciplines.

When working together, all of these

disciplines can begin to exchange effective dialogue and communication about the needs of each youth/family.

This can lead to a reduction in recidivist fire-setting behaviour and, ultimately, a safer community.

