

Playing with Fire

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Peterborough Fire & Rescue

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Our instinctual attraction to light and heat is primitive. In order to survive, our ancestors utilized fire in aspects of everyday life. It was the only means they had to cook their food, warm their shelters, and observe one another in the dark of night.

My, how things have transformed within just a few decades, especially here in the United States. With the onset of electricity for light, furnaces for warmth and ovens for cooking, fire is no longer an everyday necessity in order to endure. Yet the lure of the flame is matchless, especially for the immature mind that has yet to correlate the magic of fire with the potential for catastrophe. This is why behaviorists question whether or not juvenile arson may be connected genetically to the thousands of years we did indeed require fire.

By definition, arson means the malicious burning of property. Yet, in most fires started by children, malice is not considered to be the fuel behind the flame. Rather, young children, being naturally curious about objects that are perceived to be dangerous, take that curiosity to the next level by tampering with such objects. Older children may have motivations more directly linked to a "cry for help". If I were writing this article from a psychological perspective, I would be heading in a different direction at this point. However, I am writing for the purpose of preventative safety, so in addition to imparting some startling statistics, I'll also communicate preventative measures one might take in order to educate and protect children from the primal temptation of fire.

According to the most recently documented figures from the National Fire Protection Agency, in 1998 alone, children playing with fire started 67,490 fires that were reported to U.S. fire departments, causing an estimated 232 civilian deaths, 1,805 civilian injuries and \$234.7 million in direct property damage. Most of the fatalities are children under the age of six. Roughly 75% of the fires started by children are by the use of matches or lighters. (Earlier in the week, Jaffrey experienced a sizable brush fire that was started by children playing with matches in a residential area.) Stoves, candles, lighted tobacco products and fireworks round out the remaining 25% of fire-starter attractions. And what do children prefer to set afire? Bedding, upholstery, clothing, paper, or small kindling piles...all items readily available to them.

Though most adults know to store matches and lighters out of children's reach, some still use both as sources of amusement, not fully realizing that children will imitate them even if forewarned of associated dangers. First piece of safety advice to adults is...CUT IT OUT! Also, if you must have lighters in your home or purse, use only lighters designed with child-resistant features. Teach young children to tell an adult if they see matches or lighters in the hands of other children. This is not tattle-taling. This is strictly a safety precaution which may result in the saving of a life.

Find age appropriate ways for your child to participate in the use of fire, such as blowing out candles or putting wood in the woodstove before setting it. Continually educate your child with safe techniques that are needed to control purposeful fires. Every time a fire is in use, whether it is the tiny flicker of a candle wick or the enormity of a bonfire, adult supervision is paramount.

If you suspect your child is intentionally setting fires or unduly fascinated with fire, get help immediately. Schools, community counseling agencies and your local fire department can put

you in touch with experts trained to help. With the assurance of fire-safety education, we will continue to use fires in appropriate ways, thus satisfying our primal attraction to the specific warmth and beauty which can only pertain to the element fire. If you have any questions or concerns relating to this article, feel free to contact Peterborough Fire & Rescue at 924-8090.