Developmental phases of fire lighting

It is widely accepted that fire behaviour follows a developmental sequence in children, with three distinct phases; fire interest, fire play and fire setting (Gaynor 1996; Lambi 2002). These phases are outlined below.

1 Fire interest: Curiosity

The majority of children aged between three and five years show an interest in fire. Young children are often curious to explore and understand fire. They often ask questions about fire (Is this hot? Can I touch it?) or play games that involve fire (dressing up as firefighters, playing with fire engines).

At this age children have a limited understanding of cause and effect and are therefore more at risk of injury.

It is important that parents teach their young children fire safety rules, explain the dangers of fire and restrict access to lighters and matches.

2 Fire play: Experimentation

As a child gets older curiosity may turn into experimentation. By the age of 10, most children have learnt fire safety rules and have had some interaction with fire under adult supervision (candles, camp fires, barbeques, etc). However, motivated by curiosity, most children aged five to 10 years will engage in at least one unsupervised fire experiment.

If the fire becomes out of control the child will generally make an attempt to put the fire out or go for help. Any resulting injury or damage is typically accidental.

The consequences of experimentation at this age can be disastrous as the child will have a limited understanding of the potential consequences of fire and may not have the skills to put a fire out.

References


Fire setting: Sets fire with a deliberate intent

The next phase of fire behaviour is fire setting which is deliberate. The shift from fire play to fire setting is generally associated with adolescence and is often related to increasing independence, boredom, anger, attention-seeking, revenge or peer pressure. Children involved in fire setting understand the rules and risks but continue to light fires and often do not extinguish them. Fire setting behaviour is often motivated by a significant event (parental divorce, loss of a family member, etc) or associated with attentional or behavioural disorders.

Nevertheless, fire setting with deliberate intent must be taken very seriously.

Why children light fires

There is a range of potential motives for fire setting. A child’s behaviour can be influenced by a number of factors including traumatic events in their lives, a lack of fire education, limited parental supervision, peer pressure, disabilities or family influence. The child’s motive usually falls into one of the following three categories (Kolko 1999):

1. **Antisocial fire setting**
   Children may set fires as part of antisocial or destructive behaviour. This usually occurs within groups of males and involves peer pressure.

2. **Cry for help fire setting**
   Children may set fires to get attention, often when they don’t know how else to get the help they need. This usually occurs as a response to a stressful event in the child’s life.

3. **Pathological fire setting**
   Children may set fires because they have a fascination with fire and fire behaviour. Children involved in pathological fire setting light multiple fires that are planned, secretive and destructive. They usually light fires close to the home in an isolated location to avoid detection and they use fuel to assist the fire to spread (showing an understanding of fire behaviour). If the child loses control of the fire they will either run away or stay close by to watch the arrival of firefighters.

Treatment options available for juveniles who light fires

Early parental intervention is the most effective means of changing a child’s fire lighting behaviour. However, if a child continues to light fires there are two primary support options available: a firefighter education program such as the Juvenile and Family Fire Awareness Program (JAFFA) or professional treatment with a mental health expert.

Juveniles involved in the phases of fire interest and fire play can be assisted through JAFFA whereas juveniles involved in fire setting often need assistance through a combination of both firefighter education programs and professional treatment.

Facts about juvenile fire lighting

The following list provides some facts about juvenile fire lighters:

- The majority of fire setters are male (>95% of JAFFA cases).
- Fire setting is more prevalent in adolescence than young children.
- Adolescents set fires away from the home and often set fires in groups.
- Many fire setters have poor academic records, which is often related to a broad set of behavioural or social problems (Lambi 2002).
- Most fire setters do not understand the potential consequences of fire.
- The majority of fires lit by children involve the inappropriate use of cigarette lighters and matches. These are commonly obtained from family members that smoke.
- Fire setters often come from families that are struggling with other problems (Kolko 1999).