Are **FIRST-TIME** firesetters different from **REPEAT** firesetters?

by Linda Nishi-Strattner

The Washington County Fire Academy program is in its fifth year, and the data collected over that period are raising some questions about the differences between juvenile firesetters who have set their first fire ever and those juvenile firesetters who are repeat offenders.

Each year we have the opportunity to work with groups of parents who attend classes at the same time, and sometimes alongside their children, with the goal of gaining the information that they need to stop the cycle of juvenile firesetting. While the parents are attending their classes, their firesetting children attend classes in the same building. The youth classes are designed to coordinate with and to complement the parent-oriented classes.

During the first of six classes of each three-week Fire Academy program, parents complete the *Parent Questionnaire* from the *Oregon Screening Tool*, along with a pretest of their knowledge about fire. The parent classes attempt to arm parents with information about types and motives of juvenile firesetters, parental responsibility when a child sets fires, home safety and fire prevention tips, and parenting practices that are related to recidivism in juvenile firesetting. During the three week program, the parents learn to map their child’s firesetting or behavioral acting-out cycles, and they become experts at identifying when their child needs help, how to intervene without punishment, and how to communicate effectively.

When the parents and their children graduate from the Fire Academy program, they participate in a graduation ceremony in which they sign a no-fireset contract and swear an oath to be more responsible about fire.

Since its inception in December of 2000, we have offered nineteen rounds of classes to over 247 families, with the children ranging in age from four to seventeen years old. These classes have been offered free of charge through a grant from Washington County Juvenile Department from 2000 to 2004, and will continue in 2005 thanks to funding from a new FEMA grant.

Our estimates are that 3 to 6 percent of the youths served by our program continue on to set another fire. Prior to participating in our program, 56 percent of the children had been identified by their parents as having been repeat firesetters.

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This current study analyzes the information provided by parents about their children at the start of the Fire Academy program. This includes their self-assessment of their parenting and family factors as well as their perception of their children’s problems. Clinical wisdom would suggest that children who have repeated their firesetting might be different from the child who has set a single fire. We have the opportunity to explore this possibility because one of the items on the Parent Questionnaire (which is completed by parents at the start of their classes) asks whether their children were first-time firesetters or repeat firesetters. An examination of this information suggests that there are several factors that distinguish repeat firesetters from first-time firesetters. The differences reported here are statistically significant at the .05 level of probability or better.

There were also many similarities between reports of first-time firesetters and repeat firesetters, which help to describe juvenile firesetters as a whole group. These similarities will be reported in this article in the hope that they will help to provide a fuller picture of the treatment and educational needs of juvenile firesetters as a whole group.

Firesetting behaviors  Our study shows that the methods and behaviors related to the firesetting of repeat firesetters differed from that of youths who were reported to have just set their first fire. Our parents indicated that repeat firesetters were more likely to have set fires inside the home, while first-timers were more likely to set fires at school or in the community (such as on the way to school). More repeat firesetters were reported by their parents to have a fascination with fire and to have misused or altered fireworks. Repeaters were more likely than first-time firesetters to be reported by their parents to set fires with a peer, and to not go for help once the fire was set. Also repeaters were more likely to be reported by their parents to have used a lighter, while first-time firesetters were more likely to have used matches. It is possible that with repeated firesetting, juveniles move past initial experimenting with matches to the use of lighters and/or explosives, and that repeat firesetters continue to set fires because of an initial fascination with fires. There were also similarities between repeat firesetters and onetime firesetters: 42 percent of parents reported that their children had easy access to lighters or matches, and almost half of the parents (47 percent) reported that their children set fires after school. Also, even though more parents of repeat firesetters than of first-time firesetters reported that their children did not go for help, in general, parents of all the firesetters reported that their children sought help after setting a fire only about 47 percent of the time.

Other behavioral problems  Our parents reported many ongoing behavioral problems in addition to firesetting for their children, which identifies the need for supervision and consistent discipline of the juvenile firesetter population overall. Parents of repeat firesetters and first-time firesetters alike reported that their children exhibited many behavioral problems: 46 percent said that they felt like they had no control over their son or daughter, 56 percent said their children had a history of lying, and 37 percent said that their child was physically aggressive or hurt others. There was also no difference between reports of parents of first-timers versus repeaters with regard to stealing (34 percent of parents reported this), school suspensions or expulsions (reported by 36 percent of all firesetter parents), or destruction of the child’s own property (53 percent of firesetter parents reported this). However, when compared with first-time firesetters there were two behavioral problems which distinguished repeat firesetters: repeat firesetters were more likely to destroy their own possessions and to have more frequent reported histories of lying.

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Family factors There are a number of family factors that were reported by parents of repeat and first-time firesetters alike: 25 percent of these parents reported that others in the family home have also set fires, and 42 percent of these parents reported that their children had easy access to lighters or matches. Over half of all the parents indicated that their children did not spend much time with the father/male caregiver in the family, and a third of all the parents indicated that their children did not spend much time with the mother/female caregiver within the family. These families also reported frequent moves, fights between siblings, and fights between the firesetter and caregivers.

There were also some reported differences between reports of first-time and repeat firesetters. Parents of repeat firesetters were more likely than parents of first-time firesetters to report frequent fights with caregivers. Over 75 percent of all the parents reported that their firesetter had witnessed parents arguing, however, parents of repeat firesetters reported this more frequently than did parents of first-time firesetters.

There were also some differences with regard to abuse of our juvenile firesetter population. Over a quarter (27 percent) of all the firesetter parents reported that their firesetting child had a history of physical or sexual abuse, however parents of first-time firesetters were significantly more likely to report abuse history than were parents of repeat firesetters. The reverse was true of traumatic experiences: parents of repeat firesetters were almost twice as likely as parents of first-time firesetters to report that their firesetter had encountered a traumatic experience during the past year.

School difficulties Although a large percentage of our juvenile firesetters (36 percent) were reported by their parents to have been suspended or expelled from school, there were no differences between first-time firesetters and those firesetters who had a repeat history of firesetting. The question that did separate the two groups was special education needs: parents of repeat firesetters were almost twice as likely as parents of first-time firesetters to report that their child had special education needs. Almost half (48 percent) of the parents of repeat firesetters reported that their child had special education needs. This finding raises the question of how to incorporate help for the juvenile firesetter within his or her home school: our firesetter program at Washington County focuses on the psychological and firesetting needs of young firesetters, but we do not currently involve the schools in our program.

Social difficulties Overall, parents of firesetters reported high incidence of many social difficulties: 51 percent of the parents reported that their child is often picked on by others, 55 percent reported that their child had friends who were a bad influence, and 37 percent reported that their child had few friends and was physically aggressive or hurt others, which undoubtedly interferes with their ability to make and maintain friendships. Of these social factors, there was one difference that separated repeat firesetters from first-time firesetters. Repeat firesetters were reported by their parents to have few friends nearly twice as often as were first-time firesetters (49 percent of the repeat firesetter group versus 26 percent of the first-time firesetter group).

Conclusions Other studies of juvenile firesetters have identified similar concerns regarding social skills deficits: DeSalvatore & Hornstein, 1991, Kolko & Kazdin, 1991, Kolko, Day, Bridge, & Kazdin, 2001), life stresses (Kolko & Kazdin, 1990), abuse (Kolko, Watson, & Faust, 1991, Moore, Thompson-Pope, & Whited, 1996, and Stewart & Culver, 1982) and in minor versus severe firesetters (Sakheim & Osborne, 1999). Thus, we know that the juvenile firesetters that are included in this study are similar across these factors to other groups of firesetters across the nation and in varied treatment settings (inpatient, outpatient, national studies).

It is possible that our first-time firesetters and our repeat firesetters may have been a select group, by virtue of their parents’ willingness to participate in our program two nights a week for three
consecutive weeks. The majority of our parents appear to be motivated to complete the firesetter program and they uniformly devote many hours in class attendance and after class activities. Thus it might be argued that the participants in our program are some of the children who have the benefit of involved and concerned parents, resourceful families, and the ability to make all the arrangements to attend the classes in our program. However, on the other hand, the youths who are served in our program represent the range from some of our county’s most dangerous firesetters to those youths who have just recently begun to experiment with firesetting, from all socioeconomic levels, and from widely varying backgrounds. Regardless, our recidivism data shows that after participation in our Washington County Fire Academy program, the vast majority of these firesetters do not continue to set fires. It will be interesting to examine follow-up data as we continue to gather it, to see if the youths who are first-time firesetters and those who are repeat firesetters become more similar after they cease their firesetting. Preliminary follow-up polling suggests that our juvenile firesetter participants experience a sharp decrease in school suspensions and school difficulties as reported by their parents after they have completed the Washington County Fire Academy program. This change appears to occur regardless of the youth’s initial firesetting history or seriousness of firesetting.

We are left with a few conclusions and several questions. First, first-time firesetters do differ from repeat or recidivist firesetters across family, school, behavioral, and social variables. Our research shows that repeat or recidivist firesetters, when contrasted with first-time firesetters, are less behaviorally well-adjusted, do more poorly on indicators of social difficulties, and may come from families that are more often conflicted. In addition, with repeated firesetting, it appears that juvenile firesetters exhibit different behaviors with regard to their firesetting activities, making them more dangerous and less responsible firesetters.

Questions raised This research raises a number of questions. Should we be designing different or additional materials for classroom instruction of the repeat firesetters? Do their differing families, social skills, school adjustment, and firesetting behaviors raise the possibility that they might have different treatment needs? How can we reach juvenile firesetters sooner, before they have become repeat or recidivist firesetters? Finally, how can we build in ongoing research to add to our growing understanding of youths who set fires, when we encounter them in treatment groups such as the Washington County Fire Academy?

Dr. Linda Nishi-Strattner has taught parent classes for the Washington County Fire Academy since its inception in 2000. She is a psychologist in private practice in Portland, Oregon, and a member of the Office of State Fire Marshal’s Treatment Strategies Task Force.

References

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Playing Monopoly
(thinking outside the box)
aka Everything I know, I learned from my grandkids!

by Barb Spurlin, Indianapolis Fire Department

I have four wonderful grandchildren, two of whom are young adults. Both Laureen and Jim love to play board games. One evening while playing Monopoly, one of the kids remarked, “I wish this was real money!” Then began a discussion of what could be purchased if it were real money.

Our discussion got me thinking that this might work with the teens and young adolescents during firesetter intervention interviews. I decided to use play money. After establishing rapport with a youth and discussing what he or she liked to do, I would give them some money and ask, “If this were real money, what would you buy with it?”

The amount you give is up to you. Sometimes it is helpful for the amount to be the approximate amount of the damage caused by their misuse of fire, or the approximate cost to respond with the fire apparatus.

The answers always vary, depending on the child and their family’s circumstances. Some want to purchase Game Boys, Xboxes and video games; others want to buy clothes and tennis shoes and personal items; others are more conservative and want to save it for their first car. Some want to share the money with their families for needed items.

Whatever is purchased provides an opportunity to have a little glimpse of the family situation and their values. It also helps in continuing to build rapport with the child. Remember, this is the child’s money. Once the child has identified with it, feels comfortable that it is theirs and talks about what they wish to do with it, I take it back and ask them to talk about how they feel about the money being taken from them.

The kids don’t like their money taken away. This always initiates a discussion about how much better it is to use the money for their wants rather than for costs incurred as a result of their fire for fire damage, medical treatment, the fire department response and court time.

We discuss who will earn the money. Can the child work, or are they too young or unable to earn the money for some other reason? The caregivers are being held responsible, so have the child calculate how many extra hours the caregiver will have to work. Keep it simple by asking how many hours their caregiver will have to work to pay back $1,000 if they earn $10 per hour. Once they come up with 100 hours, we talk about taxes and how much more they need to work to actually have that $10 per hour.

With the younger kids we can talk about what’s in their house that they like to eat. What is their favorite cereal? Unless they are very poor, or the caregiver is really thrifty, most of them name a sugarcoated cereal such as Frosted Flakes or Apple Jacks. Ask if they like some generic brand as well and talk about how they won’t be having their favorite cereal, soda or snacks. There will be no movies or renting videos or DVDs for a long, long time. Point out that the caregiver (if they are working) will have to work many extra hours a week which will take time away from the family.

The thought process involved in this easy and inexpensive activity allows the child to realize that even a small fire can seriously impact not only the child, but their families as well. We also focus on how doing the right things have positive impacts for them.

Sometimes I talk about a school fire and inquire how they would feel if they didn’t have to go to school for a couple of weeks (or months). Oops! Did I forget to mention that the missed days will have to be made up at the end of the school year in the hot summer months? Or perhaps they will be transferred right away to another school and be on the bus about sixty minutes more in the morning and sixty minutes more in the afternoon. Perhaps they won’t be able to participate in extracurricular

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Investigating arson cases involving juveniles

by Judith Okulitch

The International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI) is a professional association of over 8,000 fire service, law enforcement and insurance professionals working together to reduce loss of life and property, further fire prevention and provide specialized training in fire investigation. Founded in 1949, the IAAI has sixty-one chapters across the United States, Canada, Europe, Middle East and South Pacific with members in thirty-six countries. The IAAI is committed to reducing the crime of arson. The IAAI develops training programs and disseminates information on the prevention, investigation and prosecution of arson.

According to the FBI, over 50 percent of all arson fires in the United States are started by youths under age eighteen. Most adult serial arsonists trace their firesetting history back to their childhood. A tremendous amount of time, energy and money has been expended on developing intervention programs for youths identified as firesetters, but the IAAI recognized that unless a fire investigator did a thorough fire origin and cause investigation and found that a youth was involved, an intervention frequently did not take place. Furthermore, unless the arson investigator/law enforcement personnel followed all the procedures involved with upholding a juvenile’s rights, a case could be lost during prosecution or could slip through the cracks in a non-criminal process.

To address the multiple issues involving the investigation of juvenile-set fires, the IAAI partnered with the Oregon Office of the State Fire Marshal on a fire prevention and safety grant proposal submitted to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The project had four goals: to develop a training program on the cause and origin and prosecution of juvenile set fires, to identify specific case law that applied to juveniles, to assist investigators in accessing the non-criminal sanctions for juveniles, and to decrease the number of suspicious/incendiary fires. FEMA awarded the grant to the IAAI in May 2003.

The development committee included experts on juvenile firesetter issues from the fire service, law enforcement, mental health and juvenile justice fields. Nationally recognized experts from California, Kansas, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Oregon partnered with staff from the Criminal Justice Institute at Florida Atlantic University on the development of the curriculum materials. The course was pilot tested in Indiana and Massachusetts in fall of 2004.

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school activities now because they are in a different school for a short time. That extra time on the school bus will take up about two hours of their time each day that could have been spent doing something more fun for them.

I have also had discussions with youths about the indirect costs of fire. I have them pick a building that has a fire—pictures from magazines of schools, homes and business can be used—and put a dollar loss on the fire. Discuss the cost of responding and the cost of any medical bills. You can keep adding to the fire scenario.

In one incident, a youth decided that the fire occurred in his father’s convenience store. He suggested that the dollar loss was $75,000. We discussed the cost of the response by the fire department and then I enlarged the scenario—the broken leg suffered by a neighbor when he tripped over the fire hose, the cancellation of the victim family’s vacation because of all the paperwork the father had to complete as a result of the fire, the destruction of vacation tickets by the fire. Eight individuals no longer had jobs. What were they going to do? (Don’t forget to keep a running tab on the dollars.) This scenario has proved to be a real eye-opener for the kids.

This intervention is inexpensive to implement and it shows a child in a personalized way that even a small fire has consequences. The child grows to understand that many individuals are impacted by a fire for a long time.

Barbara Spurlin is the Fire Stop Coordinator with the Indianapolis (Indiana) Fire Department Fire Investigation Unit.
Balanced and restorative justice is a new model for juvenile justice that seeks to provide a more effective response to crimes by juveniles and to address communities’ expectations concerning public safety, sanctions, and rehabilitating and reintegrating juvenile offenders into the community.

Key principles of the balanced and restorative justice model are: 1) ensuring that community safety is enhanced; 2) holding young offenders accountable in constructive ways; and 3) working with youths so that, upon leaving the juvenile justice system, they are more capable of becoming responsible and productive citizens.

In the restorative justice model, crime is understood as harm to people, communities and relationships and justice is understood as repair or healing. Under the model, victims and community members are actively involved in the system. Basic community needs are understood as follows:

**Public safety.** Although locked facilities must be part of any public safety strategy, safe communities require more than incapacitation. Public safety is best ensured when communities become more able to prevent crime and monitor offenders and at-risk youths. A balanced strategy cultivates new relationships between juvenile justice professionals and schools, employers, families, neighbors, and other community groups. It seeks to empower citizens to identify and address problems that foster criminal behavior. A problem-oriented focus ensures that community supervision is structured around work, education and service. It also establishes a new role for professionals as resources in prevention, community-building and positive youth development.

**Accountability.** Traditionally, accountability has been viewed as compliance with program rules or as punishment. True accountability is achieved when offenders take responsibility for the harm caused to victims, when they make amends by restoring losses, and when communities and victims take active roles in the sanctioning process.

**Competency development.** Traditional rehabilitative efforts often center on isolated treatment programs. Rehabilitation is best accomplished when young offenders build competencies and strengthen relationships with law-abiding adults and pro-social community groups, increasing their ability to become contributing members of their communities.

Certain types of programs or interventions are typical of the restorative justice model. These include victim-offender mediation, conferencing, circles, victim assistance, ex-offender assistance, restitution and community service.

More information about the restorative justice model can be found on the internet. Several excellent sites featuring restorative justice programs world-wide are listed in the resource section on page 8. These sites include links to other Web sites.
Resources

New FEMA report on school fires

The Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has issued a special report exploring the causes and characteristics of school fires. The report is based on 2002 data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS). The report looks at all school fires, including those occurring outdoors on school property.

According to the report, there were approximately 6,000 school structure fires in the United States during 2002. Thirty-seven percent of all school structure fires and 52 percent of middle and high school structure fires are caused by incendiary or suspicious activity.

“School fires are largely preventable through increased community prevention, outreach and student supervision,” said U.S. Fire Administrator R. David Paulison.

The report may be downloaded at: http://www.usfa.fema.gov/statistics/reports/pubs/tfrs.shtm

Restorative Justice Web sites

Restorative Justice Online (www.restorativejustice.org) offers excellent information including an overview of the subject and tutorial, a listing of reference materials suggestions for getting involved in order to transform the juvenile justice model in your community and a listing of conferences about the restorative justice model.

The Balanced and Restorative Justice Project (www.barjproject.org) is a national initiative of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) through a grant to Florida Atlantic University. The project's goals are to provide training and technical assistance and to develop a variety of written materials to inform policy and practice pertinent to the balanced approach mission and restorative justice.

OJJDP Model Programs Guide (www.dsgonline.com) maintains an extensive listing of programs following the restorative justice model. Programs are categorized as either prevention, immediate sanctions, intermediate sanctions, residential or reentry.