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Preventing juvenile firesetting

Children are responsible for nearly three quarters of deliberately lit fires. There are two basic groups of child firesetters – those who are curious about fire and those who light fires with deliberate intent. Curiosity firesetters are typically quite young (five to ten years old) and usually have no criminal intent. On the other hand, the reasons older children light fires are usually to do with aggression, vandalism, antisocial behaviour, sensation or attention seeking, or in response to social skills deficits. Numerous studies have shown that problematic firesetters, in common with other juvenile offenders, typically have backgrounds involving parental absence, family breakdown and conflict, erratic parenting styles and physical and sexual abuse.

All fire services in Australia run juvenile firesetter intervention programs. Two main approaches are used in these intervention programs: educational and psychosocial. Educational approaches are the most widely used and involve teaching young people about aspects of fire such as safety skills and awareness, the dangers and consequences of firesetting, and how to get help in an emergency. Psychosocial approaches often involve cognitive-behavioural treatments and enhancing social skills.

The *Fire awareness child education* (FACE) program is an example of a firesetting program used with four- to 12-year-olds in the UK and in Australia. In this program a 'fire friend' from the fire and rescue service visits the child at home, using education and awareness to change their attitudes about fire. It is typically run with assistance from other organisations to which the child can be referred if the behaviour persists. Another program, FACE-UP, is a version of the program for 10- to 17-year-olds convicted of arson offences and is provided as an alternative to custody. Through 13 two-hour sessions the program:

- confronts and challenges the offender's attitudes and cognitions about firesetting;
- may look at the cause and effect relationships involved in firesetting and aim to help the firesetter find ways of coping with conflict, anger and emotional arousal other than by lighting fires;
- may involve counselling to address deficits in self-control, social and interpersonal skills that have been identified as contributing to arson behaviours.

A number of factors characterise good firesetting prevention interventions. Foremost is the use of collaboration between agencies such as the fire service, juvenile justice, mental health and family support, together with appropriate referral procedures. Assessment to identify individual needs is vital and a range of assessment tools developed specifically for use with juvenile firesetters are available. Finally, sound evaluation is the key to determining whether programs work, are cost-effective and what elements of the program determine success.

Further reading:

Drabsch T 2003. *Arson*. Sydney: NSW Parliament Briefing paper 2003 no. 2
<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/V3ListRPSubject> (accessed October 2005)

Palmer EJ, Caulfield LS & Hollin CR 1995. *Evaluation of interventions with arsonists and young firesetters*. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: London. http://www.odpm.gov.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=1125173 (accessed October 2005)

Stanley J 2002. Preventing children and young people lighting bushfires in Australia. *Child abuse prevention newsletter* 10(2): 6-11