Youth Firesetting: An Introduction for Mental Health Counselors

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Introduction

In this article, the authors discuss the largely misunderstood behavior of youth firesetting. Youth firesetting is often addressed as a criminal justice-involved matter rather than a mental health and/or societal issue. We discuss the causes of youth firesetting and screening and assessment of both needs and risks and propose coordinated intervention strategies. Viewing youth firesetting through a community mental health lens, we hope to shed some light on ways to reduce recidivist firesetting behavior among youth.

Youth Firesetting: An Overview

Youth firesetting behavior 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 behavior. As such, marriage and family
therapists may play a vital role in the assessment and treatment of youth who set fires. Unfortunately, our experience tells us that 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, or holidays and fireworks used to celebrate our nation’s birth or other major celebrations, as well as fireplaces built into homes for comfort and aesthetics. Firesetting behavior, on the other hand, is not normal, especially among youth. It is a learned behavior 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. 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 behavior 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 behavioral health. Only a thorough and comprehensive evaluation will determine what the youth needs in order to desist from firesetting and re-engage in a safe and productive lifestyle.

Screening and Assessment Considerations

A variety of instruments are available to determine the depth of the youth experience with firesetting and their risk level for repeating the behavior. 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 behavior in a treatment plan. The fire service has had assessment/screening tools available since the mid-1970s. Due to their level of training, which is very different from that of mental health professionals, fire service specialists working with youth firesetting behaviors 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 youth 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 behavior or responses are scored in order to establish a disposition for the youth’s behavior. Fire service tools characterize 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 categorization may fail to take into account a youth’s neurological or intellectual disabilities. Care must also be taken when communicating these categorizations to professionals in other disciplines (mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare, law enforcement, burn treatment, etc.) in order to avoid a misinterpretation of the firesetting profile. It is important for mental health professionals to understand that fire service assessments are qualitatively different from complete mental health evaluations. Assessments for firesetting behavior are more productive when they focus on the needs of the youth. For example, a youth who uses a lighter and has ignited household items such as candles or
incense may be imitating the behavior of a caregiver or sibling. Because it looks easy and negative consequences are few, the youth believes he or she can replicate the behavior 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 behavior. 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 behavior abating is 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 Strategies

Youth firesetting behavior is not only a fire service problem, but also a community problem. A structured system of intervention will best serve a community. An effective intervention program 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 others depending on the community in question. An integrated fire intervention program that 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 programs, case managers help coordinate 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 the youth may have no idea firesetting has occurred.

Conclusion

Youth firesetting behavior 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 firesetting behavior and, ultimately, a safer community. To locate a youth fire intervention program in Minnesota, contact the state fire marshal. To find a youth fire intervention program in the United States, please visit YFIRES.com.
Biographies

Jerrod Brown, Ph.D., M.A., M.S., M.S., M.S., is the Treatment Director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. Pathways provides programs and services benefiting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. Jerrod is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS), and the Editor-in-Chief of Forensic Scholars Today (FST) and the Journal of Special Populations (JSP). Jerrod has completed four separate master’s degrees and holds graduate certificates in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Other Health Disabilities (OHD), and Traumatic-Brain Injuries (TBI). Jerrod is certified as a Youth Firesetter Prevention/Intervention Specialist, Thinking for a Change (T4C) Facilitator, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Trainer, and Problem Gambling Treatment Provider.

Don Porth, B.S., is a fire and life safety consultant, having retired from 31 years in the uniformed fire service. He spent 27 years with Portland (Oregon) Fire & Rescue, specializing in youth firesetting behavior and public education/outreach. Other involvements include heading the nonprofit “SOS FIRES: Youth Intervention Programs” for 21 years. Through this involvement, he provided over 100 trainings to professionals across the United States and Canada. He serves as a principal staff member for the Youth Firesetting Information Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES), a national data and case management system specifically designed for youth firesetting intervention programming.

Kathi Osmonson, Deputy State Fire Marshal, M.A., coordinates 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, an adjunct instructor for the FEMA National Fire Academy, a stakeholder in the Youth Firesetting Information Repository & Evaluation System (YFIRES), and a presenter 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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