

Firesetting as a predictor of violence

It has been argued that bed wetting (enuresis), firesetting and cruelty to animals are predictive of violence in later life. The three behaviours are commonly referred to as the MacDonald triad. Evidence for the triad's predictive power is not robust however, with most support drawn from limited clinical samples. An early study by Hellman and Blackman (1966) found support for the association, with 23 of 31 aggressive patients in a psychiatric treatment centre having a history of all three components (compared with seven of the 53 non-aggressive patients). Examining 1,935 case reports prepared for criminal trials, Heller, Ehrlick and Lester (1984) failed to replicate the findings, but found that defendants charged with a violent crime were more likely to have exhibited cruelty to animals in their past. A more recent Canadian study found that firesetting and animal cruelty in childhood were more commonly found in sexual killers than in other sex offenders (Langevin 2003).

Research suggests that, rather than being a predictor of later violence, firesetting and violent behaviour may co-occur. Although the link with bedwetting is tenuous, there appears to be more support for the association between firesetting and cruelty to animals. Sakheim, Osborn and Abrams (1991) for example, found that high risk firesetting (defined as deliberate, planned and persistent behaviour) was associated with cruelty to animals, and also with a number of other variables associated with poor impulse control. Slavkin (2001) also found that cruelty to animals, but not bedwetting, was associated with recidivist firesetting.

Recent Australian research surveyed 1,359 Australian children aged from four to nine years with a range of measures, and found that firesetting was just one of a range of antisocial behaviours engaged in by children experiencing psychopathology and family stress (Dadds & Fraser 2006). This research found that while there were low levels of firesetting in the population, antisocial behaviour and parental stress were associated with firesetting for both boys and girls, with boys also demonstrating cruelty to animals, hyperactivity and thrill seeking temperaments. This suggests that firesetting in boys may be an effective indicator of chronic antisocial behaviour.

In conclusion, the available literature tends to suggest that persistent firesetting by children and young people is more symptomatic of a wider co-occurring pattern of antisocial behaviour, including cruelty to animals, than it is predictive of later violence.

References

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