

Focus on new research – part 1

Issue 5 of this bulletin looked at some of the background factors that can lead to problem firesetting in children and adolescents. The present bulletin discusses findings from two recent studies of children and firesetting. Understanding the origins of firesetting behaviour in young people is important due to the high number of fires they are responsible for. In the United States, between 60 and 75 per cent of illegal fires are set by persons under 18, and 40 to 50 per cent of all arson arrests involve juveniles. The NSW Fire Brigades reported that children were the leading cause of fires in 1989–1990, being responsible for 22 per cent of fires in the state.

In a recently published US study, Walsh et al. (2004) investigated family, behavioural and empathy factors in adolescent boys who set fires. They compared 20 adolescent male firesetters with a matched sample of 21 males who did not light fires but did exhibit other behavioural problems. It was found that firesetting participants had higher levels of delinquent and aggressive behaviour than the non-firesetters. The firesetters also displayed more behaviour problems that were in the clinical range, but the firesetting group did not demonstrate any overall significant difference in behavioural functioning compared with the control group. This suggested to the authors that there is not a 'behavioural syndrome' that in itself differentiates firesetting juveniles from other juveniles with behavioural problems. Firesetting is one part of a broader picture of behavioural difficulty. A significant finding was that multiple firesetters had more behavioural problems than single-incident firesetters. Consistent with a number of other studies, higher rates of cruelty towards animals were found among firesetting subjects. In contrast to some other studies and to early theories of childhood firesetting, Walsh et al. did not find higher levels of enuresis (bedwetting) amongst young arsonists. Other studies have found that families of firesetters differ from the families of children without behavioural problems in terms of family stress, parenting difficulties, domestic violence and parental mental illness, as well as having less structure, monitoring and discipline. In Walsh et al. there were no significant differences on family factors between the firesetting and behaviourally-challenged control groups, suggesting that troubled family backgrounds contribute to a range of behavioural problems, including firesetting.

The role of negative family influences was also demonstrated by Becker et al. (2004). In a study spanning 10 years they found that children from maritally violent homes were 2.4 times more likely to set fires than those from non-violent homes. Children from homes where the male partner harmed pets and drank large amounts were significantly more likely than other children to start fires. Harsh parenting, sexual abuse, maternal drinking and frequency of partner's alcohol use were unrelated to firesetting in this study. Becker et al. also found a strong link between juvenile firesetting and later delinquency, with young firesetters 3.8 times more likely than others to be referred to a juvenile court and 4.7 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime. Although children from violent homes were 2.3 times more likely to be cruel to animals, this study did not support the link between firesetting and animal cruelty seen in other studies.

For more information:

Becker KD, Stuewig J, Herrera VM & McCloskey LA 2004. A study of firesetting and animal cruelty in children: family influences and adolescent outcomes. *Journal of the American academy of child and adolescent psychiatry* 43(7): 905–912

Walsh D, Lambie I & Stewart M (2004). Sparking up: family, behavioral and empathy factors in adolescent firesetters. *American journal of forensic psychology* 22(1): 5–32