

Treatment interventions: part 1 – assessment

A new report from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in the UK (Palmer, Caulfield & Hollin 2005) provides a comprehensive review of the literature on interventions with arsonists and young firesetters, and examines the range of interventions in place across the UK. The results of this review can help the efforts of Australian fire services to prevent firesetting behaviour. The report highlights the importance of assessment to inform the establishment of appropriate individualised interventions. Assessments should take account of individual, family and environmental factors, as well as aspects of the firesetting incident itself. Important to consider are the person's intent, social context, personal and emotional reactions and the consequences of the fire.

A number of assessment tools have been developed for use with young firesetters and adult arsonists. The *Firesetting risk inventory* is a parent interview covering personal, family and social dimensions related to firesetting. These include curiosity about fire, early experiences with fire and knowledge of fire safety. Family variables include the child's behaviour and the parents' use of punishment. The *Children's firesetting inventory* is a child interview schedule covering similar issues but also involving role-plays that explore the child's motives, skills and experiences related to firesetting. The *Fire incident analysis for children* (FIA-C) is a structured interview that examines details of the incident, the firesetter's motives and reactions, consequences from family and friends, and the impact of the incident on future behaviour. A comparison using the FIA-C found that young firesetters frequently reported having access to firesetting materials, motives associated with fun and curiosity, a lack of remorse and few parental consequences for their firesetting behaviour. Other instruments, such as *Firesetters analysis worksheet* and the *FIRE protocol* provide an assessment of a child's likelihood of engaging in future firesetting and the level of risk they pose to public safety.

While most assessments have been developed for use with young people, a small number have been designed for adult arsonists. The *Fire assessment interview*, *Fire setting assessment schedule* and *Fire interest rating scale* examine motives based on the arsonist's thoughts and feelings before and after the incident. These include excitement, anxiety, attention, social approval from peers, responding to internal voices, sadness, anger and avoidance of undesired situations. The *Fire attitude scale* measures the extent to which subjects agree with statements concerning fire, such as 'the best thing about fire is watching it spread.'

As with most of the literature on arson, assessment instruments generally come from the US or UK and were developed on the basis of structural fires. Further work is needed to determine how applicable they are to the context of Australian bushfires. The available Australian research suggests they provide at least a basis for building intervention programs. Their principles are being applied by fire services across Australia. Perhaps the main problem with most assessment tools is the lack of empirical support underpinning them. As a priority, research in this area needs to focus on testing how well these assessments work to identify needs and risks in Australian populations.

For more information:

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/stellent/groups/odpm_fire/documents/page/odpm_fire_036943.pdf