

Fire setting

Offense: Fire setting, arson

Fire setting is an area that doesn't have a lot of justice-related research behind it. In general, work has focused on *why* children and adolescents starts fires. The idea is that addressing the underlying cause is the best way to change the behavior. This is consistent with a risk-based approach to intervention that Ripple Effects uses in other areas as well.

Three main motivations

Motivation of young fire setters can be roughly divided into three categories. They do it to:

- Satisfy curiosity (fire play)
- Express something they are feeling ("expressive" fire setting)
- Achieve a specific goal ("instrumental" fire setting) (OJJDP 2005)

These motivators are not mutually exclusive. In fact a feeling (such as powerlessness or anger) is often tied to a goal (such as revenge). Fire can serve as an expressive instrument, a source of power, and a physical weapon. Importantly, these categories are not always mutually exclusive. Successful intervention, control, and treatment may need to involve multiple strategies that respond to fire setting's multiple origins.

For children who play with fire out of simple curiosity, getting caught may be enough to deter them from setting another fire. Nonetheless, they may not generalize the lesson to avoiding other reckless or dangerous behavior, especially if their learning style identifies them as "feeler-doers" who learn by direct experiment. For them, lessons in predicting consequences, avoiding recklessness, boredom and peer pressure are in order.

Expressive fire setting can most easily be understood as a call for help. It is critically important that these young people be given to the opportunity to identify the reasons that they are calling for help. In most cases, the Ripple Effects program will help them understand that they are not the only people to have these experiences, even severe maltreatment, and will encourage them to talk to a trusted adult, who can start the process of intensive therapeutic intervention. They need to learn who and how to ask for help, and be guided in overcoming feelings of shame and powerlessness.

Youth who use fire setting as a means to antisocial or destructive ends, need training in norm setting and managing feelings, especially anger and revenge. They also need to identify the underlying reason for their behavior. *Ripple Effects training software cannot meet the needs of the pathological fire setter who is acting out of deep-seated individual dysfunction, whether chemical or characterological.*

Goals of intervention

Youth will:

- Understand the dangers of fire setting
- Understanding their personal motivation for fire setting
- Reduce reckless behavior
- Develop more constructive skills for asking for help
- Learn techniques for managing feelings of anger
- Learn more constructive ways to experience personal power

A suggested scope and sequence

SKILL TRAINING TOPICS

Self-awareness

Learning Styles
Experimenting
Power

Assertiveness

Communication feelings
Resisting peer pressure

Managing feelings

Self-talk
Relaxing

Asking for help

CHALLENGE TOPICS

Arson

Abuse
Aggression
Anger
Beaten
Boredom
Mistakes
Recklessness
Revenge
Secrets
Sexual abuse

The screenshot shows an interactive educational interface. At the top, there is a keyboard with buttons for 'lights', 'keys', 'card', 'hide', 'home', 'web', 'retrace', '?', and 'quit'. Below the keyboard, the main title reads: "It's not 'playing' with fire - it's committing a crime".

The interface is divided into several sections:

- Half under 18:** A pie chart showing a split between 'over 18' and 'under 18'.
- Passive-aggressive:** A diagram showing a balance scale with 'Passive' on the left and 'Aggressive' on the right.
- Arson is starting fires on purpose:** Text explaining that arson is intentional.
- Half of all those arrested for it are under 18:** Text stating that most kids experiment with starting a fire at least once, which is normal but can lead to tragedy.
- Related to child abuse:** An illustration of a man and a woman.
- No valid excuses:** An illustration of a person.
- What's the difference between a reason and an excuse? Why might someone have a good reason for starting fires?** A text box with a question.
- Check out these related topics: molested, controlling impulses, cause and effect, brain:** A list of related topics.

At the bottom, there is a navigation bar with buttons: 'case study', 'info', 'how to', 'model', 'apply it', 'brain', and 'got it!'.