

Is your program a MATCH for firesetters?

By

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Rick Van Marter-Sanders worked in a residential treatment facility for a number of years. He was also a member of the subcommittee of the Oregon Treatment Strategies Task Force, which worked with the Office of State Fire Marshal to produce a video on managing firesetters in residential settings. In this article Rick shares some thoughts for residential facilities on working with firesetters.

Like theft, sexual misconduct, skydiving, and piano playing, firesetting is a learned and multi-determined behavior. Children may start fires for revenge, status, relief from overwhelming feelings, to be like Grandpa, or to watch colorful flames. Whatever the reason, starting a fire is one of the most powerful and dangerous things a child can do.

Almost anyone can start a fire, yet some children are labeled "firesetter" because of a history of involvement with fire. Unfortunately, these children are sometimes excluded from appropriate treatment settings because we focus on our fear of fire rather than the child's needs. A four-year-old's matchplay—even if it resulted in burning down the garage—hardly warrants the label "firesetter" ten years later if he has no more fires and is, for other reasons, in need of residential treatment. The emphasis should be placed on the child's needs for supervision and a safe environment rather than attempting to predict future behavior. Of course, a youngster who has set many purposely destructive fires over time will need a more secure and vigilant care setting than one who has not. The question is, how can you provide a fire-safe environment?

Let's start with the child. If you have a child with a history of repeated firesetting you'll want to know the particulars of this behavior. Were the fires set in response to some stressor? Is he/she attracted to a specific kind of fire? Does the child tend to hide when upset or hang out among peers? Or does the child tear paper into small pieces for hours on end prior to firesetting? You will usually find that firesetting is part of a pattern or cycle of stressors and behavior. (Please see the monograph, *Cycles of Firesetting, an Oregon Model*.) Knowing this cycle at various levels (emotional, behaviors, family, etc.) can help you be aware of warning signs of impending problem behavior and plan ways of preventing it. For instance, some children may need extra supervision or distracting activities at certain holidays or after home visits. Assessment by professionals who are familiar with firesetting can help identify these patterns and suggest ways of dealing with them.

In general, the only thing that separates a child labeled as a firesetter from other children in your care is an identified history of misuse of fire. He or she thinks, feels, behaves like any other child and responds to the same kinds of relationships and treatment. While some agencies avoid dealing with firesetting as a treatment issue it is such a common behavior that you may find that children in your setting have an unrecognized history of firesetting.

Managing the social environment is also an important factor in maintaining a firesafe setting. The first principle in any setting is that everyone has a right to safety and a responsibility to help keep themselves and others safe from harm. Acknowledge or reward residents who identify hazards such as a book of matches or a brewing fight. Responsible and vigilant staff members can warn you of danger long before a smoke detector sounds. Watch for potential problems during transitions from one activity to another. Monitor the noise level—are the kids too loud or too quiet? Do some

youngsters tend to hang around the edges of activities waiting for you to be distracted? Is Tommie quieter than usual?

Routines such as watchfulness during outings and transitions or group meetings and before and after major activities help you stay attuned to the environment. Safety drills should be frequent enough that everyone's response is nearly automatic.

Every agency and every house should have lists of controlled or banned items. Matches and lighters have no place in residential treatment settings. Policies regarding contraband should be clear, known to all, and enforced. Frequent and randomly timed searches let residents know that you care for their safety. Policies on appropriate ways of searching people, belongings and the environment are vital. All searches should be conducted with the following in mind:

- While often boring or distasteful, searches are essential to everyone's safety. For this reason, they deserve the same professionalism and care you bring to any other part of your job.
- To be effective searches must be thorough, frequent and done at random times.
- Searches should be done in a careful, systematic fashion. Room searches, for instance, should be done without the distraction of having students present.

Personal searches are a difficult issue for most people. Survey hospitals, correctional facilities and other treatment centers when composing your agency policies on this matter.

Keeping an environment free of potential hazards is a special challenge, particularly in unlocked settings—it's easy to forget about the barbecue equipment or the gasoline in the mower. For this reason, fire marshal inspections and safety visits by staff members from other facilities or even other agencies are useful.

In general, there is no great mystery about keeping a firesafe setting or dealing with children who have started fires in the past. You simply apply the same policies and procedures you would reasonably use with any students. Most importantly, know your kids. Your care and attention are the most important safety tools of all.

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