

# LIGHTERS: THE FIRE SOURCE OF CHOICE

by

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In 1992, the Edmonton Emergency Response Department instituted its Child Firesetters Project. The purpose of the Project is to evaluate, educate, and refer children who play with fire to professional help when necessary.

Often playing with fire starts off “innocent” enough, but as fire play continues - the potential for bigger fires becomes greater as the child takes more risks while still being ignorant of the precautions. This isn’t always the case; many children “cover their tracks” by taking all known precautions in an attempt to not be caught. Many children, after all, are merely curious and often have this curiosity satiated after a few times playing with the fire.

Now that I have interviewed over 2,000 children involved in a “fire play”, I have become more concerned by the “effortless” operation of lighters by children - as young as two years of age. At this age, children are beginning to successfully manipulate objects in their hands, including lighters - thus I have looked forward to seeing design changes to lighters to make them more child resistant.

The term “fire play” is an ironic one, since this form of play can be lethal. In sports, the “player” reduces the potential of injury or death by the design of equipment, rules, and training. But in this play, it is almost always done in secret, with lighters that are designed with no consideration to the common misuse by children, and with no other training than the unintended role modeling that takes place in homes where at least one adult smokes (about 92% of the time).

Since smoking is significantly prevalent in homes where there is child firesetting, perhaps a large label could be put on the child “friendly” lighter, warning parents/adults that their smoking material is often used by children. It is coming time that adults should be warned about this potential. This doesn’t just apply to parents, because it is often grandparents, or friends of the family who inadvertently leave lighters in easy reach of children.

The data supports the concern about young children easily using lighters - their source of ignition “of choice” relative to matches. Over 75% of children five and under, who have been in the Project, used lighters. The easy accessibility and design of lighters contribute to this. It is easier for a two or three year old to roll the lighter on the carpet than it is to strike matches in order to successfully get a light.

If you notice the constant use of the word “easy” - it’s because the child’s access to lighters, ability to use them, and ability to light material is frighteningly easy! Asked which is more dangerous - a lighter, or a loaded hand gun - some Fire Marshals will answer that a lighter in the hands of a child is far more dangerous, because a handgun can only shoot one bullet at a time. A lighter can be used with horrifying results, injuring or killing many others in the home or apartment complex.

Lighter manufacturers have designed “child resistant” lighters that effectively prevent the successful ignition of 85% by children 51 months and younger. This same standard applied to the design of medication containers has been wildly impressive in preventing childhood poisonings by 71%!

One of the things that is interesting to me is how many parents are surprised by their child’s use of lighters and curiosity with fire. I do not share that surprise, not just because I have interviewed hundreds of children who have set fires, but because I have come to see that we naturally learn about the world around us by investigating and experimenting with what makes us curious. It is a completely natural and healthy way in which to learn. What is unnatural and unhealthy is the unsupervised opportunity to observe fire in unsafe conditions.

Many people like to sit around a campfire, or watch the fire in the fireplace, and these are opportunities to teach and role model safe and healthy attitudes and practices around fire. As a child gets older and is trusted with more responsibilities, it is advised that they be included in the safe setting, maintenance, and extinguishment of the fire.

However, besides natural curiosity, there are other complicating factors that makes it hard to understand the variables that give rise to fire setting behaviour. The families’ socio-economic status, parents’ level of education, marital stability, and extent of effective child rearing and life skills also are related. Child-play fires are predictable and preventable; they are not some chance occurrence that should baffle teachers or parents. Nor is every case of firesetting anticipatory of a severe psychological problem, as it was once believed. Firesetting behavior, like other behaviors that require modification, so that one can cross the street safely, buckle up before the vehicle moves, or don a bicycle helmet every time one rides a bike, can be learned. In other words, in the same way that a child who does not wear a bicycle helmet before riding is not considered psychologically ill, so a child who experiments with lighters is not necessarily prone to becoming a “pyromaniac”. In both cases, something is not taught, or role modeled properly. Therefore, Projects like this one seek to gain much more understanding about preventing firesetting behaviour.

Many fire departments like Edmonton are providing workshops about methods and messages to prevent child-play fires for preschool, day care, and kindergarten’s teachers/workers. Long gone are the days of trying to scare a child with “gore pictures” of burn fire victims, or trying to tour the closest Burn Unit as if it were a zoo rather than a place where people are trying to recuperate from their injury. This strategy simply did not consider how children learn, or modify their behaviour. It did not connect what is termed, the “logical link” between their behaviour and its consequences. Thus much of what is done now is to educate - to clearly show action and consequences, and to teach prevention.

Prevention that is vague or targetless is useless, however. There are cases showing up now where children stop, drop, and roll when they hear the smoke alarm. This extreme case of overshadowing (when a stimulus elicits a number of incorrect responses) betrays the fact that stop, drop and roll is well taught, but poorly differentiated for the specific stimulus. Of course, during the smoke alarm is not the time to go through the sequence of what one would do if their clothes caught on fire; and those in the enterprise of teaching children must take the extra effort to connect stimulus with response.

In relation to lighters, the old messages was “don’t touch that”! However, the better message is “when you find a lighter, give it to a grown up”. This realizes the fact that children will find lighters; it understands that they want to do the right thing to feel good about themselves if only they know what the right action is. Leaving children to the mixed messages of adults playing with their lighters,

or leaving it haphazardly on the coffee table teaches the child all he (in 90% of the time) needs to know in order to play with the lighter.

Having said all this, there is a small percentage of dangerous firesetters. The Child Firesetters Project is designed to connect the more serious child firesetter to professional help, and it finds information about what led to chronic firesetting.

Finally, far from being the cure all for fire play, it is hoped that the child resistant lighter will become another means of preventing fire among the very young, who, if things do not change, will use lighters as the fire source of choice.