

Young People With Matches and Lighters: What Should We Call It?

By

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Fire play, fire starting, fire experimentation, fire interest, child misuse of fire, unauthorized use of fire, fire setting, arson, accidental fire, unintentional fire, all of these and other terms have been used to describe incidents involving young people and fire. But these terms often bring about strong feelings, and many of our colleagues take issue with them.

Fire play has been used to describe incidents typically involving children who do not understand the consequences of their use and do not intend to start a fire. The term has been officially used as a category in the National Fire Incident Reporting System and has been well adopted in the fire service. It is the term we see most often in the local newspapers to describe the cause of an incident involving children. But many believe that pairing the term "play" with fire minimizes the danger and normalizes this behavior. Play is most often associated with fun and developmental learning and should not be joined with fire. A colleague in response to this perception responded, "Does it cause you the same reaction when paired with the word – gun?" Certainly gunplay does not conjure the same sense of innocence but the danger with fire is no less.

The point of this article is not to question these concerns but to acknowledge them. Good points are being made. At the same time, there are risks that are not often perceived in casually or unilaterally changing terminology. Dr. John Hall and I had a *spirited* debate on this issue in the hallway of the Anaheim Convention Center. Dr. Hall reminded me that much of the progress made in the juvenile firesetting field is a result of better data and documentation of the problem. We run the risk of losing data if we are not calling the same thing the same thing or if we are not calling something what it is. Another good point.

Dr. Hall and I agreed that we need a more systematic discussion on this issue and that change, if any, should be made in a coordinated fashion involving key stakeholders. I would like to take this opportunity to use NFPA Update and our NFPA Juvenile Firesetter Committee (that's what we call it) to begin a dialogue. I welcome any feedback or insight readers may have. Comments or suggestions can be directed to me at 1341 Fairport Road, Fairport NY 14450 or paulsman@ix.netcom.com.