

# **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder And Firesetting Behavior**

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## **Introduction**

As the knowledge about youth firesetting grows, so does the complexity of the solutions. To simply say a child has a background of “Troubled” firesetting serves to inappropriately label the child and fails to provide solutions to the behavior. Professionals working at all levels of intervention must have a basic understanding of the various influences acting on child behavior as well as the roadblocks to learning that various conditions present. It is through this understanding that behaviors, such as juvenile firesetting, can be changed.

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one such influence that, on the surface, may seem linked with firesetting behavior. But is it really?

The letters ADHD are not synonymous with firesetting behavior. However, ADHD does present behavioral characteristics that, if not recognized, will hinder the firesetting interventionist’s efforts to quell the firesetting behavior. If some of the same intervention techniques that help ADHD children succeed at home, in school, and in life can also be applied to the management of firesetting behavior, then successful modification of the firesetting behavior of these children is much more likely.

## **CHADD**

Most of the facts about ADHD in this article were gathered from an organization called CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders). CHADD is a national non-profit parent-based organization formed to better the lives of individuals with attention deficit disorders and those who care for them. (Contact CHADD as listed at the conclusion of this article)

CHADD defines ADHD as a neurobiological disability characterized by attention skills that are developmentally inappropriate, impulsivity, and in some cases, hyperactivity. Low self-esteem and other behavior difficulties can accompany it. The diagnosis of ADHD requires a multi-faceted evaluation, which examines medical, psychological, and educational/ behavioral functioning.

Solutions can involve treatment in the form of medical, psychological, and educational intervention with behavior modification. It is the educational intervention upon which this article will attempt to shed light.

## **The Prevalence of ADHD Among Children with Firesetting Behavior**

Those who work with youth firesetting behavior have noticed that many children present the behavior disorder of ADHD. But this observation raises many important questions that must be answered to avoid any misinformation that might wrongly indicate that children with ADHD set fires, or that youth firesetters have ADHD.

How prevalent is ADHD in the firesetting population and how common is ADHD in children within the general population? To accurately answer either of these questions is difficult.

While CHADD indicates that 3-5% of the school age population have ADHD, they also estimate that as many as 50% of the children with this disability are undiagnosed.

Portland (Oregon) Fire & Rescue has collected information on children with ADHD for the past five years. The parents of participants in their Juvenile Firesetting Intervention Program were asked if their child had been diagnosed (through professional testing) with ADHD. The results, which were collected between April 1, 1994 and March 31, 1999, are shown below:

Interviews performed (participants)	579
Participants with confirmed ADHD	115
Percentage of participants with ADHD	19.9%

These figures raises an interesting question. Why is the prevalence of this behavior higher in the population of firesetting youth (19.9%) than the general population (3-5%)? Perhaps the nature of the disability, when coupled with the pitfalls of fire play, combine to magnify the danger that fire presents to this particular segment of the population. By exploring the characteristics common to ADHD and firesetting, light may be shed on this issue.

## **The Commonalties Between Firesetting Youth and ADHD Populations**

Looking at the data presented in the prior section, it appears that there is something about ADHD that connects children with firesetting behavior. But there is no particular evidence that assigns responsibility to ADHD. Based on anecdotal information on recidivism from youth firesetting intervention programs who directly educate ADHD children with firesetting behavior, it is more likely due to the way in which children are taught, (by parents, teachers, etc.) which doesn't always mesh with how children learn.

Children can only be expected to know what they have been taught. And what are children typically taught about fire? The emphasis is usually placed on the survival skills that involve messages such as “Stop, Drop, and Roll,” “Crawl Low And Go,” “Have A Safe Meeting Place,” etc. And while these are important messages to survive a fire, they do little or nothing to teach children the proper use of fire. In fact, adult behavior, after which most children will model their behavior, is usually a poor example of safe fire use. Typical examples set by adults are in the form of cigarette lighting, cooking (such as with barbecues), fireworks, and campfires/fireplaces. If an examination of adult behavior vs. adult statements about safe and appropriate fire behavior were to be compared, vast differences would be found.

According to CHADD, children with ADHD are attracted to novel stimuli (such as fire) but can easily be distracted by the environment. This may indicate that greater effort must be given to instilling important lessons upon children rather than making the assumption that they picked up on it or should know something to be dangerous.

Fire safety is commonly taught in school classrooms. And even if the appropriate messages for fire use are given, what is the likelihood that the ADHD child will assimilate those messages properly? CHADD says that ADHD children do not have trouble learning, they have trouble performing in school due to poor organization, impulsivity, and inattention. Without additional help, can they really be expected to focus on a message long enough to commit it to use?

Obviously, many of these answers will depend on the teacher’s recognition of, and training in the area of ADHD. If the level of knowledge about the learning characteristics of children with ADHD were raised in both educators and parents, ADHD children would likely have a better opportunity for success and safety.

Some characteristics common to ADHD children that are listed by CHADD include:

- difficulty following instructions
- shifting from one incomplete task to the next
- doing things that are dangerous without thinking about the consequences

When these are coupled with a poor working knowledge of something dangerous, (like fire) problems can occur.

This discussion is not intended to imply that children with ADHD cannot learn appropriate behavior. Simply, it is critical that the information be presented in a way that will overcome the roadblocks to learning that ADHD presents.

Fire is fascinating to nearly all children and adults. Because our society provides such mixed messages about fire, it is particularly difficult for children, even under the best circumstances, to gain a clear understanding.

Children that set fires rarely understand the consequences of their (firesetting) actions. The intent of their firesetting behavior is usually very different than the result of their fires. A child who ignites a piece of paper to see what might happen to it does not necessarily intend to destroy their home. However, if they lack an understanding of fire behavior and throw a still glowing (not burning) piece of debris in the trash can, it can ignite a fire that could have significant consequences.

Firesetting is much more common in children who live in a home where a smoker resides than those who do not. Aside from availability, adult modeling is a key. It is not uncommon for a parent to tell a child to not touch fire, that it can kill people and damage things. This message often loses its effectiveness when the parent then turns and holds the flame of a match within inches of their face to light a cigarette.

But it is not the parental smoking that causes children to misuse fire, it is the mixed messaging given by parents that a so-called death-causing item could be used so routinely and simply by them (the parent). Rules and expectations for dangerous tools, like matches and lighters, should closely match the rules and expectations of other dangerous tools (e.g. power tools, knives, etc.). Threats of death and destruction often lose credibility when the parental behavior so easily overcomes or avoids such tragic ends.

Our society ritualizes fire in weddings, funerals, birthdays, holidays, and events such as the Olympics. Yet we also have tremendous fear of fire. This attitudinal conflict is the most likely reason for the dismal record the United States has with fire. Regarding deaths and property lost to fire, the United States has one of the worst records of any industrialized country in the world.

The media provides a constant barrage of misinformation about fire. Watch any action/adventure television program or movie and fire will be presented many times in the form of explosions, car crashes, etc. Most often, the hero narrowly escapes. The villain often succumbs to the fire. The villain is not seen dead, but, rather, just not seen again. In these scenarios, the viewer is not exposed to the horrific pain and suffering that accompany real life fire injury and death.

Television and the media do not cause children to set fires. They desensitize our society to the realities of fire and provide mixed messages about fire's reality. Consistent messaging is an important learning characteristic for kids. Inconsistency and illogical sequences may leave children unable or ill equipped to understand fire. These misunderstandings cause thinking errors that lead to the misuse of fire and an inability to protect themselves when fire goes wrong.

## **Intervention techniques that align with CHADD**

CHADD says that children with ADHD are not unable to learn, rather unavailable to learn. If this is true, then how can children be made available to learn the important information necessary to prevent them from engaging in firesetting behavior?

Behavior management is an important intervention. Most important is positive reinforcement (reward the child after proper behavior is exhibited) and avoiding focus (when possible) on the negative behaviors.

Typically, parents may not mention issues about fire for fear of giving a child ideas. It is only after their misuse that a parent makes comment. This is usually in a negative fashion. Appropriate behaviors are often overlooked or go unrecognized. If a child finds a lighter on the playground and gives it to an adult, they should be praised. Conversely, if that same child finds a lighter and plays with it, they should receive an explanation of what they should have done (ideally, they should have had this explanation prior to the event and the expected consequences should then be carried out to reinforce the rules). Punishment should support the expectation of appropriate behavior.

If parents/caregivers are to play a key role in managing the disability of ADHD, from where will their base of knowledge be derived? Support groups and parent-training classes can be a great source. But this can only be effective if these groups have an adequate understanding of firesetting behavior.

CHADD outlines a recommended parenting continuum, which is listed below. This is excellent advice but contains a couple of noteworthy pitfalls for children who have exhibited firesetting behavior. The first two steps (those in *Italics*) are not appropriate for youth firesetting. It only takes one strike of a match or flick of a lighter to create a tragedy that cannot be undone.

- *ignore behavior*
- *natural consequences*
- logical consequences
- time out
- parents need to learn commands and directions that can be understood and attended by the ADHD child

CHADD offers the following classroom (or intervention) settings for success. If these features were added to the educational methodology used for fire safety instruction in the classroom, ADHD children would have a better opportunity to learn.

- predictability
- structure
- shorter work periods
- small teacher to pupil ratio
- more individualized instruction
- use of positive reinforcers

- positive expectations
- *clarity of directions for tasks*
- *repetition*
- warmth, patience, humor
- consistency and firmness
- knowledge of different behavioral interventions
- willingness to work with other teachers

Consider the firefighter entering the typical classroom to talk about fire safety. While it is exciting for kids, it lacks most of the features listed above. Many kids may retain information. However, the child with ADHD may not absorb the knowledge quite as readily without the features above.

Two key issues that should be emphasized are *repetition* and *clarity*. Frequently revisiting the concepts of appropriate fire behavior is vital to reinforce proper behavior. And the message should be simple and clear. Often, an attempt is made to provide all the fire safety information available during a short period of time, such as fire prevention week. This works no better than trying to teach all of the concepts of math during one particular week of the year.

## Conclusions

A diagnosis of ADHD is not a condemnation to firesetting. Just as ADHD offers roadblocks to conventional classroom learning, it also offers roadblocks to learning fire safe behavior. Educational intervention for child firesetting behavior must clearly understand and work within the parameters of learning that ADHD presents. Fortunately, the principles of education for ADHD apply similarly regardless of the topic.

While fire safety is an important topic and firefighters make unique teachers, this does not mean that knowledge will magically materialize in the minds of children. Those providing fire safety education, whether the teacher or firefighter, must use the fundamental principles needed for any successful educational endeavor.

As with any education, the first step to success is to know and understand the audience. Children with ADHD are a unique audience that requires a specific understanding. The knowledge base surrounding ADHD is growing all of the time. Advocacy groups, such as CHADD, are available to help expand knowledge of the learning characteristics of these children.

The challenge is to the individual who will encounter ADHD among the children with which they work. For those individuals, their level of knowledge will measure success. Knowledge is the most important tool for working with children, especially those with unique learning needs.

## For More Details

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