

Signs of Child Fire Play are Often Missed

Children's exploration with fire carries clues that must be heeded.

While it is not uncommon for children to experience an interest in fire, it is neither productive nor safe. This was proven, once again, through the death of a 4-year old Portland child who died after igniting a fire with a lighter.

The two key factors that remain common among children's misuse of fire is access (to matches and lighters) and supervision (appropriate to the child's age and circumstances). Along with controlling these situations, adults must also be watchful for other signs of fire play or inappropriate fire interest. Consider the following:

- An excessive interest in things that are burning (candles, campfire, etc.)
- Hoarding of matches and/or lighters
- Burn marks on walls, furniture, or other items
- The remains of burned matches or other material
- The use of fire to cause turmoil or as a result of stressful situations in the family

When adults notice any of these situations, it is time to take action...before it is too late. Intervention is critical to prevent tragedies from occurring. Intervention usually begins with education for the family. When this does not resolve the behavior, a higher level of help becomes necessary. This might include mental health intervention for the child and/or family, medical evaluation, or other behavioral evaluations.

Educational intervention can usually begin with the local fire department. Portland Fire & Rescue has offered a nationally recognized intervention program for the last 14 years (contact the program manager at 823-3806). Most other fire agencies in the metro area offer similar programs and county-based programs exist across the state of Oregon and around the nation.

This situation is tragic, yet preventable. Too often children are expected to understand that fire is at one time a deadly object that should never be touched then, the next minute, see it as an item that is ritualized during many of our society's holiday events. Consider the following ways in which fire is used:

"Although not necessarily seen as rituals, birthdays are typically marked by the use of burning candles. Christmas decorations are often adorned by candles and the Yule log is always kept burning. Weddings often use a variety of candles including unity candles to symbolize the joining of two lives. The Olympic spirit is kept alive by the eternal Olympic flame that is shuttled from country to country."

When children are present, take these basic precautions to keep children safe from fire.

- Keep matches and lighters high and out of reach of children

- Set an example of safety when lighting candles and fireplaces (children learn from the adults around them through **watching**, rather than **listening**)
- Explain to children what is expected of them rather than criticize their actions when they make a mistake. Often (as in the above example) it's too late after the mistake is made
- Seek help from your local fire department if your child or a child you know has been misusing fire