

# YOU CAN PREVENT A CHILD'S FIRST FIRE

Program Helps Firefighters Target Juvenile Firesetters

By

**Carolyn E. Kourofsky**

**Robert Crandall**

[info@fireproofchildren.com](mailto:info@fireproofchildren.com)

(reprinted from Firehouse Magazine - September 2001 - Pages 60-62 with permission from Fireproof Children Inc.)

Tears fill 7-year-old Timmy's eyes as he relives his first fire. "I was real careful. I blew out the first match okay. But when I tried to blow out the next one, the curtains caught fire. All of a sudden there were flames up and down the wall." You can see he's scared, and completely sincere when he says: "I'll never play with fire again."

And he won't. Like most kids who set fires, he didn't do it because he was angry, or depressed, or emotionally disturbed. He did it because he was curious, and had easy access to ignition materials. Now he's experienced the consequences, he won't do it again.

Unfortunately, Timmy's one fire sent him to the hospital with burns on his arm that took months to heal. It also destroyed his bedroom, including most of his toys and clothes, and forced his family to move out for several months.

Around the country, attention has focused on profiling and treating the juvenile firesetter. But while identification, reporting, assessment and intervention are essential pieces of an overall program, they do not address one critical fact: like Timmy, most children who start a fire that requires fire department intervention never start another.

In Rochester, New York, for example, research conducted from 1985 to 1993 indicates that nine out of ten children involved in a fire incident were involved in *only* one. Yet, the results of a single fire may be tragic.

In the past 16 years, the number of fires started by children has fallen sharply nationally, due to improved awareness, the child-resistant lighter standard, and other factors according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). But children are still responsible for more than 67,000 fires every year. And those fires are serious. Ninety-one percent of child-set fires involve structural damage and 92% of fires causing injury or death are started by children who started only one reported fire.

If the fire service is to continue to reduce the number of child-set fires, we must reach these young, curious children before they start their first, and probably only, fire.

This October, for Fire Prevention Week, fire departments across the country will try to reach these children by going into classrooms with a 20-minute presentation that could be summarized as: "Don't play with fire." Most children will "hear" this message the same way they "hear" most adult instructions: "Clean your room, come right home after school, stop teasing your sister." The same old words, once a year, simply aren't enough.

The Fireproof Children team in Rochester has been working on the problem of juvenile firesetting for nearly 20 years, conducting extensive research and developing a highly successful intervention program. By implementing these interventions, the Rochester Fire Department reduced repeat firesetting in the community by 74%.

Recently we've turned our attention to preventing that first fire. Here's what we've learned about how all firefighters can be truly effective in preventing child-set fires.

1. **Be just as committed to preventing fires as to fighting them.** You know the thrill of saving a child from a fire that swept through her home. But that's nothing compared to knowing you helped prevent such a fire from ever happening. You can be a hero without putting out a fire.

Prevention is the work of the entire fire department, not just the juvenile fire investigator or public education officer. You don't need a degree in education or experience in formal presentations to do it. Some of the best methods are informal, as we describe below.

2. **Start early.** It's nearly impossible to start fire prevention education too soon. Although many of us think of a "juvenile firesetter" as a troubled adolescent, children under the age of five start one in four fires (See Firefighter's Complete Juvenile Firesetter Handbook, published by Fireproof Children Company, Rochester, NY). Children under ten start two of three fires. Most do so out of curiosity, not because of psychological problems.

Fires set by very young children have tragic results. Almost 80% of the fires started by preschool children caused structural damage - more than twice the rate of structural damage in the fires started by children five and older. The chance of injury resulting from a fire started by a child under five is three times the chance of injury in a fire started by an older child. The chance of death in a fire started by a preschool child is 27 times the chance of death from a fire started by a child five or older (Rochester Fire Department data).

Young children have a very poor understanding of fire and surprisingly easy access to ignition materials. They do not understand the risks involved. Their first experience with fire is usually the candles on their birthday cake or the campfire at a family outing. They associate fire with food, comfort, and fun. They also think it's easy to control. Look how easily they blow out those birthday candles!

They also have surprisingly easy access to ignition tools. We found that in a representative sample of Rochester City School District students, 48% reported they had ready access to matches - that they could "get one if they wanted to." (See Children and Fire: Rochester Fire Related Youth Project Progress Report, 1986). In two thirds of the cases reported to the Rochester Fire Department, investigators noted that matches and lighters were "always available" to the children – even after a fire.

Educating parents and other adults about supervision, and keeping these materials inaccessible to children, is important in preventing child-set fires. But children must be taught that matches and lighters are for adults only, and that they should "tell a grown-up" if they come across such materials.

One method we have found effective is to connect matches and lighters to other adult tools. Ask children what power tools their parents use at home and they're always eager to list them. They're usually quick to admit that adult tools, especially potentially dangerous ones like power tools, are not for children. We emphasize that matches and lighters are also adult tools, and just as dangerous as power tools.

3. **Treat every response or interaction as an opportunity to prevent future emergencies.** Firefighters are trained to respond quickly to emergencies, and address the immediate danger: check the source of the smoke, put out the fire. But your job's not done until you take the opportunity to anticipate and prevent future problems.

Whenever you interact with the community, whether it's an emergency response or a building inspection, approach it as an opportunity to educate. Check for a working smoke detector. Check for possible fire hazards.

Talk with families about steps they can take to make their homes safer. This should include escape routes, having a meeting place in the event of a fire, and the importance of conducting Exit Drills in The Home (E.D.I.T.H.). This should also include controlling access to ignition materials. It is important to talk with the parents about children's fireplay, and with the children about fire being an adult tool.

4. **Build a relationship with your community.** Get out into your neighborhood and introduce yourself. The people of your district should know who their firefighters are, and you should know them. When you interact at times other than an emergency, you build trust and develop productive relationships to make a neighborhood safer. Encourage people, especially families with children, to stop by the firehouse with questions or just to say hello. Be sure the firehouse is on the mailing list of your local organizations, and attend neighborhood association meetings, district planning meetings, and community events.

Get to know the principals and teachers of your district's schools. It's important they know you by name, and know you're available to meet any time. Set up periodic school visits. Just having lunch with the kids and reading them a story can be more effective than formal presentations. When they feel comfortable with you, kids will ask questions and express concerns. Answering these, you will give them messages they remember much better than any "lecture."

When they get to know you as a friend, kids are more likely to listen to and follow your suggestions. If a child in your district comes up to you and says: "I remember you from school!" it's likely he or she also remembers some of the important things you discussed.

Often, the benefits of your regular visits to the classroom will be long-term and not immediately visible. Sometimes, though, they are immediate and striking. For example, as part of our Adopt-a-School program in Rochester, we visited first-grade classes. We gave the kids a homework assignment--go home after school that very day and check their smoke detectors, and tell their teacher if there was no working detector in their home. We asked the teacher to call us at the firehouse if any kids reported a problem.

The next day, the teacher called to say that three kids had advised her there was no working smoke detector at home. We went to each house that afternoon conducting a home safety check, discussing ways they could help keep their family safe from fire. We installed new smoke detectors in two homes and a battery in a detector of the third. Each family was surprised to see our fire truck stopping at their home, and grateful we installed a working smoke detector.

The night following our visit, a mother in one of these homes was cooking dinner when she was distracted by a telephone call. She had been on the telephone less than a minute when she heard the new smoke detector go off in the upstairs hallway. She ran to the stairway to find black smoke pouring from the kitchen, where the pan she had been heating was starting to burn. She was able to put a cover over the pan and turn off the heat.

Later, she told us: "That night as I was washing the smoke stains off the kitchen ceiling I realized that if a few more seconds had gone by I probably would not have been able to enter the kitchen or maybe even the stairway to the bedroom where my 6-month-old baby was napping. Please tell the crew thanks for being there when we really needed you!"

5. **Use engaging, age-appropriate educational materials.** Good materials make your job of fire prevention easy, effective, and rewarding. Remember, you don't have to "be a teacher" yourself. When you supply the materials, you work with teachers, daycare providers and childcare professionals to bring a fire prevention message that fits easily into normal classroom routine.

For example, having a story read aloud is often part of the children's day. The teacher will be delighted to have you read them a story related to fire safety. Games, songs and puzzles are all familiar and enjoyable activities that can be used to deliver the fire prevention message.

You don't have to prepare a lesson plan yourself. Today, it's easy to find good materials to use in the classroom. Professionally developed and evaluated materials are already available. The BIC *play safe be safe!*® Preschool Program (see sidebar), for example, has been shown to increase between 40% to 70% the number of preschool children who correctly answered questions about fire safety (e.g. what firefighters wear, and why; that they should go to the firefighter in a fire; and what to do if they find a match).

Give children things they can do, not just things they can't. Children love knowing they "have a job" to do to help keep their families safe, whether it's watching for matches and lighters left out, or making sure their parents check the smoke detector batteries twice a year. Reward these efforts with praise when they tell you what they've done at home.

## **NO SCARY STORIES**

What doesn't work? Scare tactics--pictures of burned buildings or tragic stories--can backfire. A child who is really scared may "shut down" and stop listening. And dire warnings lose their effectiveness if the child does play with fire afterward and nothing terrible happens immediately. Research shows that positive reinforcement and praise work better than threats and punishment.

Still not sure you can be a hero in the classroom? Just give it a try. When we started our Adopt-a-School program, many people who regularly risked their lives fighting fires hesitated to venture into a room full of first-graders! Now, they can't wait for their next visit.

As one experienced firefighter said: "Real friendships have developed among us, the teachers, and the kids. It's opened up lines of communication that make us so much more effective. It's incredibly rewarding."

---

Fireproof Children is a national fire safety education and prevention center based in Rochester, New York. With BIC Corporation and others, Fireproof Children created the *play safe! be safe!*® PreSchool Program, a multimedia kit of activities, games, stories and songs which has been recognized for "best curriculum" by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Fireproof Children and *play safe! be safe!* have received the National Fire Protection Association's Rolf H. Jensen Partners in Public Education Award. Fireproof Children recently received two grants from the National Association of State Fire Marshals to assist in its study of the nation's juvenile firesetter problem.

Resources available from Fireproof Children include *the Fireproof Children Education Kit, a K-6 Classroom Activity Package, Family Fire Safety Funbook, Firefighter's Complete Juvenile Firesetter Handbook, and Juvenile Firesetter Video Guide to Intervention and Prevention*. To learn more about these materials, contact Fireproof Children at 716-264-0840, email us at [info@fireproofchildren.com](mailto:info@fireproofchildren.com), or visit [www.fireproofchildren.com](http://www.fireproofchildren.com).