

When Do Children “Know Better?”

By Don Porth – SOS FIRES: Youth Intervention Programs

An article recently appeared in the “In the Community” page of the Firehouse.com web site. It was titled “9-Year-Old, Home Alone, Burns House Down.” It was a short article, likely taken from a news wire. It carried the usual facts and broad statements along with quotes from witnesses and fire department personnel.

In this article, one quote in particular stood out. The older brother of the boy who started the fire said that the boy had received a fire safety booklet in school not too long ago. He went on to say “He knows not to mess with matches.” Apparently not.

He/She “knows better” is a common statement heard by many who work with kids who have been involved in the misuse of fire. But is it a statement that even makes sense? If a child knew better than to misuse fire, what would compel him/her to misuse fire? It seems far too obvious that the real truth is that this child (and many others) really doesn’t know better.

A common assumption is that because a firefighter visits a school or a child receives some fire safety literature, they have learned something. That may not always be the case. In fact, most school-based fire safety education will carry plenty of fire survival messages (stop, drop, and roll – after you catch on fire; crawl low under smoke – after a fire starts; have a safe meeting place – to go to after a fire) and far fewer fire prevention messages. Did this 9 year old boy hear anything about matches and lighters being tools, not toys? Was he empowered with what he should do if he were to encounter matches/lighters in his home or was the far more familiar “Don’t” message delivered?

Maybe it’s too cynical to presume the correct messages were not delivered. Maybe another problem contributed to this event. What about the 9 year old boy’s ability to put the message to good use? Any number of things can interfere with any child’s ability to process information. The usual distractions that are common in a school classroom setting are one explanation. Another could be a neurological condition such as Attention Deficits or other conditions that affect a child’s ability to learn. These are very real in communities across the country. As schools are forced to reduce budgets, classrooms and teachers that would normally deal with more challenging learning circumstances are also reduced and consolidated. The end result is kids who may not be in their best learning environment, even though they sit in a school classroom.

Before you accept the idea that a child “knows better,” it might be appropriate to consider what he/she really knows rather than what everyone *believes* he/she should know. It’s only through proper instruction, practice, and evaluation that effective learning can be successful. If you work with children or any other citizens in your community to deliver safety education, consider your message, delivery, and evaluation carefully. This 9 year old boy was fortunate to live through his act. Each year, hundreds of others are not so lucky.