



# HOT issues

*A publication of the Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal's Youth Fire Prevention and Intervention Program*

## 2012 Arson Awareness Week - "Prevent Youth Firesetting"

"*Prevent Youth Firesetting*" is the theme of the 2012 Arson Awareness Week as announced by the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), in partnership with the International Association of Arson Investigators, Safe Kids USA, USAonWatch, the National Volunteer Fire Council, and the National Association of State Fire Marshals.

USFA and its partners will use the week of May 6-12 to focus public attention on the importance of a collaborative effort with fire and emergency service departments, law enforcement, mental health, social services, schools, and juvenile justice to help reduce the occurrence of youth engaged with fire.

### Understanding Youth Firesetter Behavior:

**What's in a Name?** *by Judy Okulitch, as featured on the USFA Arson Awareness Week website*

The misuse of fire has many variables including age, motivation for firesetting behavior, type of fires set, ignition materials used to set the fire, and the child's understanding and limitations of fire. Firesetting behavior is often a symptom of other problems and may be the result of stress and crisis in a child's life.

Juvenile firesetting or the misuse of fire by children isn't necessarily arson. A myriad of terms have described the misuse of fire by kids. They include juvenile firesetting, juvenile arson, child arson, youth firesetting, fire lighting, fireplay, and match play.

Judy Okulitch, the coordinator for the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Youth Fire Prevention and Intervention Program says: "Language both reflects and molds thinking. The words we choose define our understanding of firesetting and our perceptions of juveniles displaying this behavior.

Through the years, we have tried different words to better understand the intentional use of fire with children and adolescents.

The word juvenile even became a problem for some. Juvenile was often shortened to "juve." A youth involved in the juvenile court system was a delinquent and that didn't fit the mode of our youth motivated by curiosity about fire. Youth who intentionally set fires for reasons that are not appropriate, i.e., to destroy, vandalize, get revenge or show power or control over others are "misusing" fire to satisfy their own needs.

Likewise, the word "fireplay" has outlived its usefulness. "Fireplay" normalized the behavior and minimizes the potential for serious consequences, making it more likely the youth with "firesetting behavior" won't get the appropriate and necessary intervention. It follows that the words we choose to describe the behavior of children and adolescents with fire drives the intervention they receive. That is why we must choose our words—carefully."

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## *Prevent Youth Firesetting: 2012 Arson Awareness Week Theme*

The theme of Arson Awareness Week is challenging to say the least. Many of us have spent years screening and intervening with youth misusing fire. The question raised by the 2012 Arson Awareness Week theme is: Have we spent as much time thinking and working on ways to “prevent” youth firesetting in our communities? In this issue, we asked many of the national experts from different disciplines to address this question.

I think you will enjoy this edition of *Hot Issues* as you reflect on how you would answer the question.

### **Law Enforcement - Oregon**

Mathieu LaCrosse, Detective  
Marion County Sheriff's Office  
Oregon  
13 years experience



Questions:

*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

My initial belief was that children were fire curious and this was the main cause of juvenile started fires leading to property damage, injury or death. I have since learned that fire use by juveniles can be (and often is) a sign of other more serious underlying mental health issues or symptomatic of problems in their home life. There still remains a handful of youth who are merely curious, but a greater number of youth involved in the inappropriate use of fire are trying to gain or regain control over some thing in their life.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

I am not certain there is one most significant factor for prevention, but I would have to think that if the youth were engaged by an adult, or group of adults, their likelihood of misuse of fire would go down.

As with youth who self-harm, steal or commit other criminal acts, a quickreview of their home life will often reveal a lack of supervision and an unwillingness by the adults to be involved.

Mentoring programs, parenting classes and (if needed) court appointed supervision can all lead to safer communities and better-balanced youth.

### **Burn Prevention - California**

Pat Mieseza, President  
Burn Concerns  
National Consultant & Educational  
Services  
California  
34 years experience



Questions:

*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

In providing training throughout the years, to all of the disciplines involved in working with youth who misuse fire and their families, I've seen more willingness within the fire departments throughout the country to acknowledge and coordinate local services for those in need.

Also, the emphasis in providing primary prevention in fire safety, especially to young children, has also been recognized as a contributing factor in reducing the numbers of curiosity set fires.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

Age appropriate education about fire for youth, especially middle school and high school students, emphasizing the responsibility we all have in using fire in our daily lives, and the real consequences of firesetting and arson can greatly contribute to the prevention of youth set fires. Using today's technology, and interactive, discovery learning peer techniques, with a more personalized approach can make a difference with this age group.

**Non-Profit Service Organization - Illinois**

Laura Barros,  
Assistant Executive Director  
Juvenile Fire Setter Intervention  
Program Team Leader  
Illinois Fire Safety Alliance  
Illinois



5 years experience

Questions:

*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

The increase of popularity of social media outlets, such as YouTube and Facebook, along with the use of smart phones has created an opportunity for youth to sensationalize youth firesetting. The internet has allowed for easy bragging rights and peer pressure push youth into ever increasingly harmful situations. This has changed how we need to work with youth who are sharing this dangerous fire setting behavior.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

Public education continues to be the most significant factor to the prevention of youth-set fires. We need to not only educate the youth of the dangers of misusing fires but also the parents and guardians. It is only through education that we can bring about awareness of the potential risk and severity of youth-set fires.

***Prevent Youth Firesetting - Arson Awareness Week Resources***

For more information and resources on Arson Awareness Week visit the USFA website at: [www.usfa.fema.gov](http://www.usfa.fema.gov)

For information on Oregon's Youth Fire Prevention and Intervention program and resources visit the Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal's website at: <http://www.oregon.gov/OSP/SFM/YFPI.shtml>

**National Fire Academy - Washington D.C.**

Mary K. Marchone,  
Training Specialist  
U S Fire Administration  
Maryland  
27 years experience



Questions:

*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

Misuse of matches and lighters by children and adolescents was my primary focus when I first got involved in youth firesetting in the mid-1980's. Today, we are seeing an increase in incendiary and explosive devices.

Experimentation and purposeful acts of destruction have expanded dramatically as a result of easy access to information and peer influences. We now address these devices in National Fire Academy courses on youth firesetting prevention and intervention.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

We in the fire and emergency services have not created a sense of urgency about this devastating problem, therefore parents and caregivers don't take it seriously. Until we create a sense of urgency within our organizations, communities can't be expected to recognize the youth firesetting problem.

***National statistics show:***

Fires started by children accounted for an average of:

56,300 fires with associated losses of

110 civilian deaths

880 civilian injuries

\$286 million in direct property damage per year between 2005-2009

Source: National Fire Protection Association

**Fire Service - Nevada**

Dave Ruben  
Battalion Chief  
North Tahoe Fire Department  
Nevada  
12 years experience



Questions:

*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

It seems like in the “old days” many of the kids we saw were curiosity fire setters. Now it seems like most of the kids we see are in crisis from family situations and the fire is a result of other issues in the child’s life. I think that is a function of our understanding of the factors involved with youth fire setting as well as an increase in fire glamorization in our society.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

A multidisciplinary approach involving law enforcement, fire department, child/family services, and the juvenile justice system. Often times there are many more factors involved in youth firesetting than the fire department is equipped by itself to handle.

**Mental Health - New York**

Paul Schwartzman,  
M.S., L.M.H.C., D.A.P.A.  
Licensed Counselor  
Fairport Counseling/  
Consulting Services  
New York



31 years experience

Questions:

*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

What has changed most over the past years is the level of confidence that we have a strong fundamental understanding of youth fire misuse. Clearly there is always room for continued growth and understanding. I believe that youth fire misuse is not a homogenous group and that through careful assessment of the youth and family, fire circumstances, environmental dynamics, we can be highly successful in intervening and assisting these youth and families towards better coping strategies and healthier behaviors.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

I think the one most significant factor towards prevention is the systematic application of intervention AND community-based primary prevention practices by entities that have a strong understanding of the issue and are sustained through time.



**Update - International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF ) Development of a National Juvenile Firesetter Database**

The IAFF, under the leadership of Phil Tammaro, IAFF Third District Burn Coordinator and with the funding from a Department of Homeland Security Fire Prevention and Safety Grant, has begun its efforts to develop the framework for the future development of a national juvenile fire setter database.

A national summit was held in San Antonio on April 4 and 5 that gathered more input and support for the project from leading fire service organizations, consultants, and software companies.

This group reviewed existing databases, defined specific data elements and a data dictionary and recommended a plan to continue pursuing the development of a national database. The IAFF plans to submit a Assistance to Firefighters Grant to continue to develop a national juvenile firesetter database.

**State Fire Marshal's Office - Texas**

Deborah Johnson  
Program Specialist  
Texas Dept. of Insurance/  
State Fire Marshal's Office  
Texas



17 years experience

My primary work is with adults who work with youth who misuse fire. My role at the state level is to encourage and assist in the creation of local community-based programs. We formed a team from around the state and began developing the state level program in late 1995, and delivered our first workshop in June of 1998.

Questions:

*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

Initially, I had a tendency to pigeon-hole youth neatly into rigid categories but learned how complex and varied their motivation/issues may be. Also, early on programs were viewed nationally as an alternative to juvenile justice, but we found that without the support of that system recommended treatment services are often not provided or followed.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

Education –not only school-based curriculum that addresses youth firesetting, but parent/caregiver education before the firesetting incident that brings them into a program. If parents don't value and role model fire-safe behavior, the chance of a child practicing safe behavior is greatly diminished – and the cycle continues.

**Child Welfare - Connecticut**

Ann Adams  
Director of Program Evaluation  
and Development  
Connecticut Department of  
Children and Families  
(Social Services/ Mental Health)  
Connecticut



4 years experience

Questions:

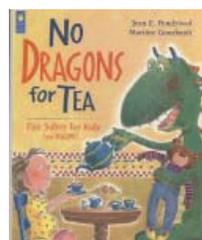
*How has your understanding or experience with the youth firesetting issue changed over time?*

Before being involved with the program I did not see it as a problem, just kids being curious, with education I understand it to be a issue that responds well to the right intervention. As a clinician I see it as an issue that is very relevant in assessment and treatment of all kids involved. Prior to being involved the Department of Children and Families rarely asked the question about fire setting behavior and then didn't know how to respond. It is much more at the forefront and kids are getting services they need.

*What do you think is the one most significant factor that will contribute to the prevention of youth-set fires?*

Education to the family and the relationship to the child.

*No Dragons for Tea* - A Children's Book  
Fire Safety for Kids (and dragons)  
By Jean E. Pendziwol and Martine Gourbault  
[www.kidscanpress.com](http://www.kidscanpress.com)



With its funny, rhyming verse and spunky illustrations, *No Dragons for Tea* shows kids that learning about fire safety doesn't have to be scary. The story ends with "The Dragon's Fire Safety Rhyme" – a fun and easy way to remember what to do in case of fire.

## Prevention 101

by Judith Okulitch, M.S. Coordinator

Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal's Youth Fire Prevention and Intervention Program

The public health field identifies three levels of prevention...primary, secondary and tertiary. The three levels of prevention refer to the timing of the injury. For purposes of fire prevention, we can consider the time period before the fire as the prevent, the time of the fire incident (during) and the time period after the fire or post-event.

When considering a prevention strategy for youth firesetting, a comprehensive strategy that represents a continuum of care for improving outcomes for children, families and communities includes strategies that coordinate resources across an entire continuum from primary to secondary to tertiary prevention.

The goal of primary prevention is to prevent the firesetting behavior. A good example of a primary prevention strategy was when the Consumer Product Safety Commission established a standard for cigarette lighters to be child-resistant. Data collected on fires started by children younger than age 5 showed a 58% reduction in fires caused by the younger age group compared to the older age group. More recently, another primary prevention strategy involved the legislating of a ban on novelty (toylike) lighters which are attractive to young children. Frequently, technology and public policy are primary prevention strategies.

Primary prevention activities seek to raise the awareness of the general public, service providers and decision-makers about the scope and problems associated with youth-set fires. Fire education that is age appropriate for elementary and middle school aged youth is a well accepted practice of the fire service.

Educational efforts that help older age youth reduce their risk of firesetting are lessons that help them understand the legal consequences of committing a fire offense and lessons that provide problem solving and decision making skills also are effective primary prevention strategies.

Secondary prevention strategies are directed at the youth or the environment after the fire incident has occurred. Secondary prevention tries to minimize the impact of the injury. In the youth firesetting field, we refer to this as intervention. One strategy when screening a youth who has misused fire, is to provide and install the parents/caregivers with free smoke alarms, provide them with the importance of maintaining the alarm and practicing a home escape plan.

While not preventing the behavior from occurring, smoke alarms increase the chances of surviving a fire. Other educational intervention strategies involve having the youth understand the social, emotional and financial effects of the fire on the community, participating in community service, diversion programs and mental health referrals. All services available in the community and all are designed to prevent the firesetting behavior from occurring again.

Tertiary prevention is a long-term approach to prevent the reoccurrence of the firesetting behavior for high risk youth. Tertiary prevention could include treatment in a foster home, residential treatment facility or secure training school. Tertiary prevention also provides intensive support to families in crisis and helps to improve family functioning and communication.

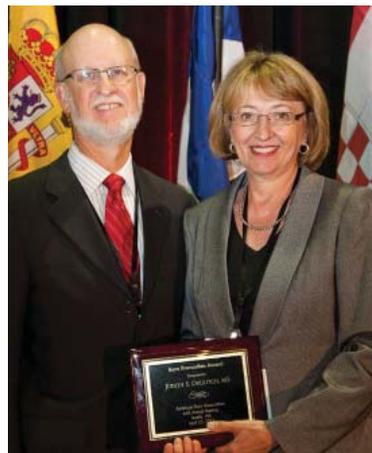
Successful community-based prevention programs depend on the collaboration and partnership of many agencies in the community. This is especially true when providing prevention and intervention services to youth who misuse fire. It takes everyone: fire service, mental health, law enforcement, juvenile justice, schools, child welfare and the parents and caregiver to both "stop" and ultimately "prevent" firesetting behavior from occurring again.

### *Okulitch receives American Burn Association's prestigious national "Burn Prevention Award"*

The American Burn Association (ABA) presented Judy Okulitch, with the ABA's 2012 Burn Prevention Award at their annual conference in Seattle, WA on April 26. Okulitch is the Youth Fire Prevention and Intervention

Coordinator for the Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal,

The ABA recognized her work in juvenile firesetter intervention program development and educational efforts to prevent youth-set fires.



*Photo: Award presentation by B. Daniel Dillard (left) on behalf of the ABA to Judy Okulitch (right).*

## An interview with the developers of the Fire Safe Zone Game

Robert Gitelson, MSW, LCSW - Karen Johnston, LCSW, ACSW - Christine Krause, Psy.D

### *What prompted you to develop a board game?*

We saw a need for a tool to help fire personnel and mental health providers who work with children who had misused fire. In our experience on interdisciplinary fire intervention networks we recognized that more resources were needed to address firesetting behavior in young children. We recognized many of our mental health colleagues were reluctant to address firesetting as part of treatment plan for children and their parents. Their answer was to send their clients to the fire department for fire safety education.

While many fire personnel were skilled and comfortable discussing fire safety issues, they were noticing clear emotional and behavioral issues in the children that were referred to them for intervention. The fire personnel were uncertain how to effectively deliver fire safety education to youth with special needs or problems.

Our intention was to empower the professionals who are in positions to address a child's firesetting behavior to feel that they had a new tool.

### *How long did it take to create it? What were the challenges?*

It took 3 ½ years to create the Fire Safe Zone game. It was a more complicated process than any of us probably expected when we started! The challenges came in the creative aspects of the game- What should it look like? How do we get the art from this sketch onto a game board? How do we address the important topics? How should the game be played?. As we got those things in place, the challenges became more practical (business, legal etc). We spent a long time looking for a publisher, and trying to find an affordable way to make all of the games components (game pieces, cards, board, box etc.).



### *Have you received feedback on it's effectiveness?*

Yes- we have been really pleased with the feedback. Deputy fire marshals report the game has opened the doors of communication with children as young as 5 and that parents and siblings are often involved in playing the game. Fire educators and some school teachers are reporting that they appreciate the structure and interactive nature of the game. Kids enjoy playing the game. Special educators and teachers use the game as an activity during fire safety week.

Parents use the game to reinforce fire safety and good decision making with their own children.

### *Who helped you develop the game?*

We each had our own supports and contacts that came through for us in various ways...with art work, ideas, suggestions, reasonable contracts, other contacts etc.). The Oregon Office of the State Fire Marshal, provided us with meeting space, suggestions, other published intervention products and professional contacts. Dan Derlacki of the Bend Fire Department was an enthusiastic supporter of the game from the beginning. His input was critical to the content of game cards and his department provided the pilot testing for the game.

### *How do you hope to market the game? and to whom?*

Our intentions were to market the game to fire service interventionists and mental health workers, primarily. Though this is still the primary focus, we have been pleased to see the game finding an audience in education, public health and safety as well as individual family settings.

### *In this age of electronic gaming, how does a board game meet therapeutic goals?*

This particularly board game is very interactive and promotes a great deal of thinking and discussion, often without a need to determine a clear right or wrong. We want kids to be thinking about their behavior and making safe choices. The fact that the game is facilitated by an adult provides the child with both modeling and immediate reinforcement/ feedback about their behavior and thought processes. The group style also allows for cooperative problem solving and brainstorming from multiple members. It is rare that an electronic game incorporates this kind of processing of social and emotional issues. Yet, these are areas that are often problematic for children who have chosen to misuse fire.

We really believe it is a great tool for working with kids and we want people to know this and have a chance to experience it themselves.

### *Do you have a website?*

Yes, our web address is:  
<http://www.safetyzonellc.com>

## Conferences



# Texas Youth Fire Prevention & Intervention Conference

June 20-22, 2012 • Austin Crowne Plaza Hotel

Sponsored by State Fire Marshal's Office • Texas Chapter IAAI • TEEEX

The State Fire Marshal's Office, the Texas Chapter of the International Association of Arson Investigators, and the Texas Engineering Extension Service co-sponsor a Youth Fire Prevention & Intervention Conference (formerly Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Conference).

This two-and-a-half day event offers a wide-range of fire safety prevention and intervention topics, featuring national and regional experts. Sessions are tailored for both beginners and seasoned interventionists and educators.

The Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS) and the Texas Autism Research & Resource Center (TARRC), is sponsoring special training on autism recognition to conference attendees and other first responders on the last day of the conference..

For questions, email Deborah Johnson or call 512-305-7940

### From Spark to Life Juvenile Firesetting Conference

August 23-24, 2012

University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus  
Ben Nighthorse Campbell Building - Shore Family Forum  
13055 East 17th Avenue  
Aurora, CO 80045

This conference will provide the opportunity to draw upon the expertise of a multidisciplinary faculty covering topics ranging from prevention, assessment, investigation, legal involvement, intervention and treatment as well as contemporary considerations and skills building. The program is designed to bring together all members of the professional community engaged in providing services to this complex population of children and families, to expand our working knowledge, and to enhance our networking system

More detailed information will be updated on our outreach website:

[www.childrenscolorado.org/tebo](http://www.childrenscolorado.org/tebo)



SAVE THE DATE

CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL COLORADO



JUVENILE FIRESETTING CONFERENCE

Reintegrating into the family, school, and community after youth involvement with fire

*Hot Issues* is a quarterly newsletter of innovative strategies, best practices, research and resources for those concerned about juvenile firesetting. *Hot Issues* is published by the Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal. Please submit news, announcements, articles, suggestions or resources for review to *Hot Issues*, Editor 4760 Portland Road NE, Salem, OR 97305-1760 or via e-mail to: [youthfireprevention@state.or.us](mailto:youthfireprevention@state.or.us). In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, *Hot Issues* is available in alternate formats by calling 503-934-8240. *Hot Issues* is available on-line: [http://www.oregon.gov/OSP/SFM/JFSI\\_Home.shtml#](http://www.oregon.gov/OSP/SFM/JFSI_Home.shtml#). *Hot Issues* subscriptions are free of charge.

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