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Common Myths and Misconceptions About Youth Firesetting

By Jerrod Brown, Kathi Osmonson, and Don Porth

Introduction

Youth who engage in firesetting behavior can create serious problems, both for themselves and the community surrounding them. In fact, some estimate that youth under the age of 18 account for a sizable percentage of all arson arrests in the United States each year. As dramatic as this statistic might be, most youth-set fires are unreported or unaccounted for in arson statistics. Due to these reporting discrepancies and the lack of study behind this dangerous behavior, youth firesetting is plagued by myths and misconceptions. These myths and misconceptions often hinder the ability of caregivers and professionals to intervene on behalf of the youth. To maximize the likelihood of firesetting desistance, caregivers and professionals would benefit from becoming more familiar with the myths and misconceptions of youth firesetting. To this end, this article identifies 20 common myths and misconceptions of youth firesetting.

20 Common Myths and Misconceptions of Youth Firesetting

1. Because youth can easily control small fires, fire is not a big deal.
2. Firesetting is a common stage that most youth go through.
3. Burning a youth's hand will teach him or her a lesson and prevent him or her from starting any additional fires.
4. Obsession with fire is typical for youth.
5. Any youth who lights a match should be considered a firesetter.
6. Future firesetting behaviors can be prevented by simply using law enforcement to scare a child into not setting fires.
7. The reasons why children intentionally set fires are usually simple and easy to identify.
8. You can cure youth firesetting problems by simply telling youth to stop playing with fire.
9. All children start fires at some point in their childhood.
10. Youth who set fires are destined to become arsonists in adulthood.
11. There are few if any resources available to help youth who set fires.
12. Firesetting among youth is very rare.
13. Warning signs for youth firesetting are few and far between.
14. Youth firesetting can be prevented by a firefighter having a conversation with the youth.
15. Youth who wet their bed are at a greater risk of firesetting.
16. Youth who set fires typically meet the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder.
17. Youth who set fires often abuse and torture animals.
18. Most youth who set fires meet the diagnostic criteria for pyromania.

19. Children should be taught how to use fire at an early age.
20. Youth know better than to imitate behavior seen in the media.

Conclusion

Once caregivers and professionals are familiar with these myths and misconceptions of youth firesetting, these stakeholders are better equipped to help prevent youth firesetting behavior. The potential severity of firesetting consequences, including property damage, injuries, and death, emphasizes the importance of such education. That being said, the next step is informing caregivers and professionals of the appropriate steps to teach fire science and prevention and to address the issues that contribute to youth firesetting. However, the presence of mental health, developmental, and behavioral disorders along with other complicating conditions often contributes to firesetting behaviors. In such instances, caregivers and professionals will likely need to elicit the assistance of a range of professionals including the fire service, law enforcement, mental health providers, and any other professionals involved in the youth's life. When working together, this group has the potential to maximize the likelihood of youth firesetting desistance.

Biographies

Jerrod Brown, Ph.D., is the Treatment Director for Pathways Counseling Center, Inc. Pathways provides programs and services benefiting individuals impacted by mental illness and addictions. Jerrod is also the founder and CEO of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS), and the Editor-in-Chief of Forensic Scholars Today (FST) and the Journal of Special Populations (JSP). Jerrod has completed four separate master's degree programs and holds graduate certificates in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Other Health Disabilities (OHD), and Traumatic-Brain Injuries (TBI). Jerrod is certified as a Youth Firesetter Prevention/Intervention Specialist, Thinking for a Change (T4C) Facilitator, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Trainer, and Problem Gambling Treatment Provider. For a complete list of references used for this article, email Jerrod01234Brown@live.com.

Kathi Osmonson, Deputy State Fire Marshal, B.A., M.A. in progress, coordinates the Minnesota State Youth Fire Intervention Team (YFIT). YFIT partners with law enforcement, mental health, justice, and social agencies to sustain a network of professionals who collaborate to provide intervention. Her career includes volunteer and career firefighting with specialties in fire prevention education and youth firesetting intervention. She is a member of the NFPA 1035 Committee and an adjunct instructor for the FEMA National Fire Academy. Osmonson developed the YFPI Specialist and Program Manager Certifications through the Minnesota Fire Service Certification Board. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in Forensic Mental Health.

Don Porth holds a B.S. degree in Fire Command Administration. He began his career in the fire service in 1980 as a volunteer firefighter in a rural Oregon community, becoming a full-time firefighter/EMT in 1983. He served 28 years in the uniformed fire service, including 27 years at Portland (Oregon) Fire & Rescue. The majority of Don's career was spent as a public education officer, providing public outreach and education on fire and life safety prevention issues. Within this, he specialized in youth firesetting behaviors and interventions. He now works as a consultant on fire and life safety issues and provides management services for YFIRES (Youth Firesetting Information Repository and Evaluation System), a national youth firesetting data system.

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