Understand and Prevent Youth Firesetting

- In the state of Minnesota a child as young as 10-years-old who plays with fire and damages property may be charged with arson.
- Juvenile arson accounts for more than 50% of the total arson arrests in Minnesota.
- Statistics show that of the children killed in fires, more than 50% of those children started the fires themselves.

If you know a child at risk: call the Youth Firesetting Helpline

1-800-500-8897
The Minnesota State Fire Marshal’s Office sponsors the youth firesetting helpline for anyone involved with children at risk of firesetting behavior ~ parents, teachers, school staff, social services, law enforcement & others.

**Youth Firesetting**

Children are naturally curious about fire. When this curiosity becomes experimental it is dangerous ~ even deadly ~ not only to the child and those in the area, but also to firefighters and emergency personnel who respond to the scene.

In Minnesota, juveniles as young as 10-years-old can be charged with criminal arson. Research shows that by the time a child is caught playing with fire there have been ten previous fire starting events. (Dr. Dian Williams, *Understanding the Arsonist: From Assessment to Confession*) Early intervention curbs this behavior. Children possessing matches or lighters, or gasoline, are showing a strong interest in fire, and firesetting will naturally follow.

**Juvenile Arson**

Juvenile arson is grossly underreported. Families may not know that confidential help is available. The goal is not to give the child a “record” or send him/her to “Juvie” but to implement appropriate intervention strategies.

The Bureau of Criminal Apprehension reports an upward trend in juvenile arson arrests over the last 5 years. In 2010 there were 100 kids charged with criminal arson across the State as compared to 65 in 2007. These are kids over the age of 10; many more incidents involved younger children. The US Fire Administration reports that children younger than 10 start 75% of the youth set fires.

**Let’s find these kids before they get in trouble!** Keep an eye out for any child who smells like gasoline. In 2012 more than one child brought gasoline to school with the intention of starting a fire. They were caught only by the smell of gasoline on their hands, and later found on surveillance video lighting a fire in the bathroom.

Also, watch for kids in possession of lighters, and call the help line.

**Schools Can Help**

Any student who brings to school ignition devices, such as matches, lighters or fuel such as gasoline needs help. By calling the toll-free help line, school staff can initiate the intervention process for a student. The help line is monitored daily.

The child’s family contact information will be forwarded to the local youth-firesetting intervention specialist so the child and family can receive life-saving information and education. There are several programs available in Minnesota designed to change the behavior of youth at risk.

**Youth Firesetting Helpline**

1-800-500-8897