By Kathi Osmonson

Playing with fire?

We teach our children not to talk to strangers, not to run into the street and not to play with fire. However this is not the case in Berlin Germany. “At a Berlin day care center, a little boy lights a match and touches it to another, making a sudden flair. The girl sitting next to him shouts a word that is the same in German and English: Cool!” (New York Times, 2017). These daycare children were less than 6 years old. At that developmental stage, they do not understand consequences or cause and effect. In fact, they are still developing large motor skills, so the fine motor skills of lighting a match safely are not yet fully developed. “That’s a serious mistake” according to Paul Schwartzman, an American mental health counselor who has worked with the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) for 20 years. Schwartzman says that children of this age are not able to handle that level of responsibility, nor do they understand how quickly fire can get out of control. Even supervised training for 6-year-olds sends the wrong message: that they can handle fire on their own.

Teaching children to light fires in a public setting is precarious. A child’s mental capacity must be considered. If a child is on the autism spectrum or has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or any number of other mental disorders, they will not learn the same way as a child without such disorders. Impulse control becomes a factor in how likely they will be to pick up a lighter and play. When Fire and Life Safety Educators present fire prevention messages in the schools, we keep the varying mental capacities of classroom children in mind. It is irresponsible to teach preschool children to play with fire in a classroom setting. They might as well teach children to run into the street so they know what will happen. They may or may not get hit by a car.

Many of the online comments to the New York Times article were positive; encouraging children to experiment with fire, because “how else will they learn?” This was more shocking than the article itself. One comment equated not teaching children how to play with fire to the alcohol prohibition days. But we don’t let children experiment with drinking alcohol to see what will happen. Nor should we let them experiment with fire just to see what will happen.

It is important to teach children about fire, however, rather than simply “prohibit” it and hide it from them completely. We start doing this with a child’s first birthday candle, which seems simple and harmless. Starting with this candle, we can educate children about fire: The lighter or match is a tool only for grown-ups to use. Fire is hot and can hurt you, so stay back when you blow the candle out. Stay away from hot things.

We can also teach them about fire when having a campfire, for example. With responsible adult supervision and good role modeling, such fires can be safe and even fun. Good role modeling includes not using gasoline and having water available in case the fire gets out of control.
It is also important not to teach children “not”. Often they don’t hear the “not” part of the message. It is important to tell them what to do. Leave lighters alone. Stay out of the street. Only talk to people you know. We need to help children understand why they need to do these things. This brings to mind Perri Heideman’s story. She was taught “not to do this” when she watched her dad burn garbage in greater Minnesota. Perri had ADHD, and when she was 10 years old, she decided to light a fire in her fort that was made of hay bales. Perri died in the fire that she started fire on April 22, 2013.

We don’t use fire the way we did in generations past. We do not burn garbage as a general rule, and we also have stoves for cooking and furnaces for heating rather than making fires to accomplish these tasks. The constant learning that took place, when fires were made for these tasks, solidified the fire prevention and fire safety lessons for children. But because we are relatively removed from fire these days, even parents don’t often understand its true power. Parents and children alike learn about fire largely through the media and some of the media misrepresentations.

It is important to prohibit young children from using fire. Just as we teach them that power tools are dangerous and only for adults to use, we also need to teach them that lighters and fire are tools only for adults to use. If young children think they know how to use fire and that they can control it, they may use fire on their own. Some recent Minnesota examples include:

- One little girl was tasked with lighting her mother’s cigarettes. By knowing how to use the lighter, the little girl thought she could do this on her own, and started her house on fire “accidentally.”
- One Boy Scout’s mom bought him a lighter after he completed the “Fireman Chit” training. He started a damaging fire by using the lighter by himself without adult supervision.
- Most recently, a 10-year-old boy started the shirt he was wearing on fire using axe body spray, causing severe burns. He said he was imitating a trick his mother did for him. Mom said that she was teaching her children about fire. She put flammable liquid on a shirt that was not being worn and lit it on fire. She moved the fabric around making the flames dance. She said she never thought that her son would repeat that behavior.

At some point, as children mature, we do need to teach them how to be responsible in starting fires. This is not a skill that magically appears on their 18th birthday. Don Porth from the Youth Firesetting Information Repository and Evaluation System equates it to teaching our children how to drive. Kids growing up on a farm may need to help the family out by learning to drive a tractor. Other families may teach their children to drive in conjunction with driver’s education training. Teaching children about fire is an individual process; however, teaching very young children to play with fire is literally “playing with fire.”