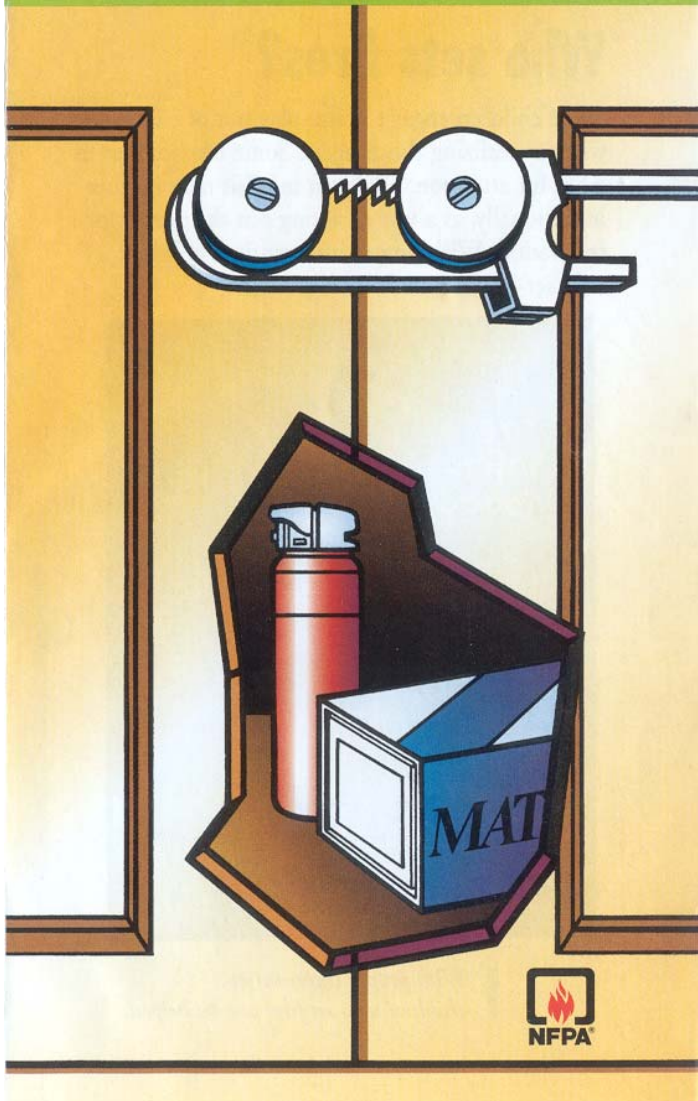


# Big Fires Start Small

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## Children and Fires



Fires are the number-one cause of death in the home for children under five, and the National Fire Protection Association estimates that more than one third of those children died in fires started by themselves or by other young children. Fire is the number-one cause of death in the home for children ages 5 to 14. Roughly one of every seven fatal structure fires is started by a child under age 15. In 1994, 55 percent of arson arrests involved juveniles.

## Who sets fires?

Some children engage in fire-play out of curiosity, without realizing the dangers. Some use fire-play as a bid for attention. Children in crisis may set fires intentionally, as a way of acting out their anger or frustration. With proper intervention, children who set fires can be helped.



**|** *With proper intervention, children who set fires can be helped.*



**|** *Never leave a child alone with a burning candle, cooking fire, fireplace fire, campfire, barbecue, or any other open flame.*

## Playing with fire

Children are naturally curious, and fire is fascinating. If a child expresses a natural interest in fire, don't overreact.

All children should be taught that matches and lighters are tools, not toys, and that fire is dangerous. Always keep matches and lighters up high, out of reach of children, preferably in a locked cabinet. Never leave a child alone with a burning candle, cooking fire, fireplace fire, campfire, barbecue, or any other open flame.

Older children should be taught, with adult supervision, to use fire properly. Have them help you use fire responsibly through such safe activities as blowing out candles or putting charcoal in a barbecue grill before you light it.

Do not try to scare children away from fire. Teach them to respect it just as you would teach them to respect traffic or power tools.



## Crisis fire starters

The negative behavior characteristics associated with setting fires are shared to some extent by all young people, most of whom never set a fire. In general, experts agree that setting a fire, like other antisocial behavior, is often a way of getting attention, exercising power, or acting out the need for help.

The "crisis fire setter" is typically a school-aged child, usually male, in his or her early or midteens or younger. He or she may be upset about a crisis or major change in his or her life (a death, move, or divorce, for example), or feel confused, angry, frustrated, or powerless for some other reason. Sometimes, a child who deliberately sets fires feels alienated because of a learning disability or other source of chronic failure. Sometimes, he or she comes from an abusive household. The potentially deadly fires these young people set may be symbolic and even self-destructive — the result of complex family, social, and psychological circumstances.

Such children need help. Their fire setting is a symptom of a problem, not the problem itself. But it must be stopped. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and neighbors should step in when they suspect troubled children of using fire as a weapon.



## When to seek help

If your child plays with matches or lighters and doesn't respond to your efforts to redirect his or her interest, the child may benefit from professional counseling. Parents who suspect, or find evidence, that their child is setting even very small fires should approach the child with concern for the potentially fatal consequences of fire setting. They should also reassure the child about any crisis that may be provoking the behavior, listen carefully when the child describes his or her feelings, and get professional help.



## Where to find help

Crisis fire setters may have trouble talking about their problems and feelings with parents or counselors. There are special programs that can help. Many schools and fire departments offer programs to help children who play with fire or set fires. Contact your local fire department or school counselor for details. Social service agencies can help a child and his or her family deal with the underlying problems that motivate crisis fire setting.

## It's the adults' responsibility

Set a good example by following basic fire-safe practices in the home and teach your children to respect fire.

- Keep matches and lighters out of children's sight and reach — preferably in a locked cabinet. Use only child-resistant lighters.



- Store flammable liquids properly and away from children.
- Protect your home from arson by keeping your property free of fuels, such as brush and rubbish.
- Never leave young children alone with an open flame.
- Teach older children to use fire responsibly.
- If you suspect your child is setting fires, get help immediately.



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