

Young People's Motivations for Firesetting

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Fire can have devastating and destructive consequences for individuals, communities and the economy. In Scotland, 60% of all fires attended by Fire and Rescue services from April 2012 to March 2013 were deliberately set (National Statistics, 2013). English figures show that during the same period 45% of fires attended were intentional and these fires resulted in 68 deaths (National Statistics, 2014). The total cost of arson in the UK in 2008 was estimated to be £1.7billion (Stop Arson UK, 2011).

Scottish Government statistics for 2005 estimated young people under 21 years old were responsible for 86% of all recorded fire-raising crimes in Scotland, and 81% of those were under 15. Between 2003 and 2010 there was a 50% increase in referrals to SCRA for wilful or malicious fire-raising offences.

Defining Firesetting

Although any involvement with fire by young people is potentially lethal, a distinction is made between children who engage in fire-play and those who use fire with intent and, occasionally, malice. Fire-play appears to be relatively common with around 50% of Americans surveyed reporting playing with fire as a child (see MacKay, Feldberg, Ward and Marton, 2012). Educational programmes about fire and fire safety for young people and their families will usually ensure children cease any further dangerous activity. In contrast young firesetters are viewed as "wilful actors who consistently use fire as an instrument of purposeful action" (p2, Putnam and Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Motivations for Firesetting

Young people who set fires are a heterogeneous group and there may be several and cumulative reasons for their fire involvement. What is known is that firesetters are motivated to use fire for emotional, expressive or instrumental purposes.

Four typologies of firesetting youth have been identified (Putnam and Kirkpatrick, 2005). These categories are not mutually exclusive:

- Curious types: use fire because of intense fascination
- Expressive types: use fire to draw attention to distress in their life
- Delinquent types: use fire for anti-social purposes like vandalism or to conceal other crimes
- Pathological types: use fire because of personality, psychiatric or emotional problems

Compared to non-firesetters, firesetting young people experience higher levels of drug-use, depression and suicidal behaviour. Higher levels of anti-social behaviour are also associated with increased firesetting involvement, but not all adolescents who display anti-social behaviour will engage in firesetting.

Adolescents who do set fires have more severe psychopathology and lower self-image, which contributes to their firesetting behaviour irrespective of their anti-sociality

(Martin, Bergen, Richardson, Roeger and Allison, 2004). Thus, it is likely best to consider the psychosocial context to fully understand firesetting behaviour.

Individuals who intentionally set fires frequently have “impairments in their abilities to communicate effectively and to influence their environments” (p144, Taylor and Thorne, 2013). As a tool of communication, fire can be used without confrontation to express highly charged emotion or trauma. In adult psychiatric populations, revenge is the most cited reason for firesetting and this has been an often identified motive across studies of children. Where intellectual disabilities are a feature, anger was the most cited antecedent. Murphy and Claire (1996) found that the most frequently endorsed antecedent items were anger, being ignored and depression. A child’s purpose for firesetting, when they experience intense emotions or an absence of them, may be an attempt at emotional regulation: firesetting can elicit internal states of stress-release or external responses of care-giving.

Children and adolescents’ position within society and their still developing social skills will contribute to their feelings of limited control. Young people may use fire to gain the acceptance of peers or to elicit a community response. An identified characteristic of some firesetters is involvement in extinguishing the fires they create or calling the emergency services. This is viewed as care-seeking behaviour or an attempt to control their environment through starting and then stopping fires. It is theorised that firesetting in some cases may be used as a demonstration of power over people or environments when young people are in a situation that deprives them of this.

Conclusion

Young people involved in firesetting can have varied and complex motivations for their behaviour. A review of clinical literature reveals successful interventions: recognise this complexity; ensure assessment and treatment is tailored to the individual and responds to their specific and unique needs; and a multi-agency approach, involving families, education, clinical care and local fire and criminal justice services, is adopted (Putnam and Kirkpatrick, 2005).

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