

# General fire safety information

Facilities for at-risk youth have been inspected to insure adequate fire and life safety protection. However, whenever a facility is about to accept a youth at risk for firesetting, we recommend that staff review and practice some basic fire safety strategies. All facilities should have:

## Smoke detection systems

- According to the fire code, smoke detectors shall be installed in sleeping areas and corridors and shall transmit a signal to a control station. The alarm shall be audible to both staff and clients.
- If the alarm goes off, staff should immediately call 911 and begin evacuation, attempt to put the fire out if it's small, and shut the door.
- All alarms and drills shall be recorded in a written log.
- Local fire departments and 911 centers shall be notified before testing and servicing the alarms and sprinkler systems and if the system is going to be down for any period of time.
- Anti-tampering devices are built into most systems, however staff should check smoke detectors regularly for signs of tampering.

Other questions about smoke detection systems or your facility's evacuation plan, should be directed to your safety officer, the local fire official, or Office of State Fire Marshal.

## Staff trained in the use of fire extinguishers

- According to code, fire extinguishers should be within seventy-five feet of travel. All extinguishers should be easily accessible to staff.
- Kitchen areas require specific types of extinguishers.
- It is recommended that staff receive live fire training in the use of fire extinguishers. Training is offered through your local fire department or fire extinguisher company.
- A fire extinguisher is only a band aid approach and should be used only for a small fire.

## Minimal combustibles on the premises

Staff should take care to reduce the amount of available combustibles in the facility. This includes cardboard, magazines, newspapers, paper towels and toilet paper. Weekly recycling may pay off.

## Mattresses and bedding made of fire-resistant material

Bedding can be treated with a flame resistant chemical. Ask your local cleaner for assistance. Today, many furnishings are made of flame-resistant materials. Be sure to look for fire-resistant labels when purchasing new furniture and bedding.

## Know two exits out.

- Windows must open from the inside.
- Security bars are not allowed.

## A posted fire escape plan

It is recommended that a staff member meet with a juvenile entering the facility and go over the following questions:

- a) If you wake up and the smoke detector is going off, what should you do?  
Answer: Exit the area. (Tell the youth NOT to look for the fire.)

- b) Upon exiting, what do you do next?  
Answer: Get away from the building. Go to the designated meeting place and stay there.

(Staff should designate a meeting place away from the building and away from responding equipment. The meeting place should be a landmark for the facility such as a tree.)  
We recommend that staff on each shift practice the fire escape plan quarterly.

## Special requirements for lock-down facilities

Check with local fire officials or Office of State Fire Marshal for fire safety requirements in lock-down facilities.

# Managing the firesetter

Firesetters, because of the safety risk to the community and the treatment center, need a higher level of supervision than other youth. Here are a few good child care practices that apply to managing firesetters.

**Know the youth's firesetting history.** Reports such as a fire investigator's report, a fire service screening and a needs assessment by a mental health professional will provide information about the youth and what behaviors to expect.

**Know the youth's stressors.** Watch for the youth's response to home visits, new kids on the unit, or problems between friends. Any of these stressors could be a precursor to the youth setting a fire. Holidays can be especially stressful. Many holidays involve the use of fire, such as candles at Christmas, jack-o-lanterns at Halloween, and fireworks on the 4th of July. Staff need to alert parents to be watchful of the youth's opportunities to abuse fire.

**Log kids' moods for the next shift.** Every child care worker wants to know what happened of any significance to the youth on the unit before their shift. Clear communication of events and moods is very important to help reduce the risk of a firesetting incident.

**Help the youth identify feelings.** Firesetters, like other kids who act out, have trouble labeling their feelings. Working with them to express feelings appropriately is an important part of a treatment program.

**Be aware of distractions.** It is easy to get caught up in the daily routines and to miss identifying a behavior that signals an interest in firesetting.

**Establish and communicate rules that provide a greater level of supervision for firesetters.** These rules can be formalized by a written contract.

**Rule #1: Firesetters should not be left unsupervised.** Some youth set fires as a response to peer pressure or because they want to impress someone else. Some firesetters set fires when they are alone and they may tend to be kids who are more isolated or withdrawn.

**Rule #2: Privileges which pose a risk to the community are not an option for the firesetter.** Some youth may gain a level of responsibility and privileges in their treatment program. This may include going off campus or working in the kitchen. Firesetters should not receive privileges which would create a risk for the community.

**Rule #3: Room and personal searches may be done at any time.** Firesetters are known to hide combustibles and ignition materials. They need to know that their rooms or persons can be searched at any time.

**Rule #4: The youth's firesetting is not a secret.** Each person on the unit should assume responsibility for keeping everyone safe.

## Managing the group milieu

**In order to manage a safe group setting, rules about eliminating the youth's access to matches and lighters, combustibles, and open flames need to be in place. Rules should include:**

**Rule #1: No smoking on site.** This policy, for both staff and residents, is recommended to order to eliminate access to matches and lighters. Firesetters attract matches and lighters like a magnet. They have been known to find lighters in a staff member's purse, in the glove compartment of a car, even in bushes.

**Rule #2: Control open flames such as barbecues.**

- According to fire code, barbecues should be at least ten feet away from any combustibles. Check with your local fire authority about restrictions in your area.

- A self-igniting barbecue rather than briquettes is recommended. This eliminates the issues of lighter fluid, matches and lighters, and the proper disposal of hot briquettes. Barbecues and briquettes should be secured in a separate building.

- After use, barbecues should be cold to the touch before storing. This eliminates the opportunity for the firesetter to gain access to firesetting materials or to play with fire.

- Secure tools/equipment that produce flame or heat such as welding equipment or torches.

**Rule #3: Other security issues.**

- **Ignition sources:** Besides matches and lighters, radiant heaters, electric sockets, exposed wiring and removed light bulbs can all be ignition sources.

- **Vehicles:** Staff and agency vehicles should be locked at all times when unattended. Firesetters have been known to steal lighters out of glove boxes and to even siphon gas out of gas tanks.

- **Hiding places:** Locations that make good hiding places for the resident should be secured. Such places are closets, attics and storage sheds. Locations that contain combustible materials should be secured. Such places are cupboards, cabinets, linen and utility closets. Combustible material is any material that can be used to fuel a fire. Examples are newspapers, cardboard, toilet paper, magazines. Firesetters use common accelerants such as gasoline, aerosol cans, lighter fluid and hair spray.

- **Kitchen access:** Kitchen access should be controlled. Residents should be allowed in the kitchen only under adult supervision. The kitchen should be secured after hours.

- **Other:** Review all materials on site for potential to be used in setting fires. Consult your local fire authority for assistance

**Rule #4: Room and personal searches:** A youth cannot start a fire without an ignition source such as a match, a lighter, or other source of heat. Firesetting materials should be included in your agency's list of contraband to be kept out of your treatment setting. Be familiar with your agency's policy on searching residents, their belongings, and the areas in and around your building. For training on conducting room and personal searches contact Oregon Youth Authority at the Training Academy at 503-982-4498.

## Introduction to juvenile firesetting

The label “firesetter” often elicits a fear response from child-care providers. An image of a serial arsonist who sets hundreds of fires resulting in thousands of dollars of property loss and causing both firefighter and civilian deaths often comes to mind. The diagnosis of “pyromania” also provides us with images of seriously disturbed and dangerous individuals. In reality, a youth who exhibits firesetting behavior has many of the characteristics of other at-risk youth.

Youth who set fires do so for a variety of reasons. Many of these children have been neglected or physically and sexually abused. They may have alcohol or drug abuse problems, mental or neurological problems, behavior problems in school, and may exhibit low self esteem. They often have trouble expressing feelings, especially anger, and they make poor decisions. Some have displayed other criminal behaviors such as vandalism, assault, or burglary. Some youth have used fire as a cry for help after a crisis. For others, fire is about power and control.

Getting an accurate assessment of the events in the youth’s life that trigger the firesetting behavior and then determining how that behavior was reinforced is an important step for selecting the appropriate treatment strategy. Treatment strategies for firesetters address many issues including anger management, thinking errors, decision making, and development of interpersonal skills.

This video was specifically designed for line staff involved in the daily routine of working with youth who have a history of firesetting. Four principles that will help staff manage the firesetter’s behavior during treatment and keep them and the other residents safe are addressed in this video and corresponding written materials. They are:

1. Increase supervision of the youth and establish very clear rules about their behavior.
2. Eliminate the youth’s access to matches, lighters, other ignition sources and combustibles.
3. Employ personal and room searches to locate the youth’s stash of combustible materials.
4. Know and practice fire and life safety strategies.