



Children Using Fire Unsafely in Our Homes and Communities

Starting the BBQ grill for dinner and putting the lighter on a side table. Burning scented candles in the bathroom or bedroom. Having a family celebration and setting off bottle rockets, roman candles, or sparklers. Taking a smoking stress break and setting a lit cigarette in the ashtray. Using lighter fluid or gasoline to start a leaf/brush pile fire.

Each of these seemingly every day acts can trigger a chain of preventable, life-changing events. Given the opportunity via easy access to lighters/ignition sources or observing adults modeling the above behaviors, many children will experiment “playing with” or using fire unsafely. By nature, children are curious. In fact, they learn new skills by hands-on exploration of their environment. Add to this the influence of peer-pressure, online dares, impressing friends, and an older child’s need for excitement and an innocent idea can quickly become a recipe for disaster.

Although frequently ignored by society, the unsafe use of fire called “youth fire misuse” (i.e. any behavior involving the improper or unapproved use of fire, including aerosols, accelerants, or fireworks) represents a significant problem for families and communities. Fire misuse behaviors are associated with unintended devastating costs, injuries, and life-changing consequences. Many people are not aware that these behaviors can result in school suspension/expulsion, arrest, or criminal charges, when in fact children under 18 years old account for nearly 50% of all arson arrests in the United States.* Specifically in the state of Michigan, children as young as 10 years of age can be charged with an arson felony and have a permanent criminal record. *U.S. Dept. of Justice-FBI. Crime in the U.S.: Uniform Crime Reports 2000 - 2011.

Do you think that your child “knows better” than to misuse fire? Consider these real stories. Did a 4-year-old girl know that playing with her mother’s cigarette lighter would destroy their house, clothes, toys, and important personal possessions? Did two 13-year-old boys know they could be charged with domestic terrorism when they brought a bottle bomb to school to show their friends as part of a science experiment? Did a 9-year-old boy who learned to make a fireball on YouTube to mimic his favorite video game know that he could burn down his entire apartment building, leaving everyone homeless? Did a 15-year-old girl being taunted and bullied on the bus understand that she’d be expelled for defending herself by trying to light the bully’s hair on fire? Did an 8-year-old boy dared by friends to set paper on fire in a shed know the fire he set would kill him? See other personal stories at: www.traumaburn.org/ss3

There are many reasons why youth misuse fire. It can be attributed to experimentation, curiosity, boredom, or peer-pressure. However, there are times when it is motivated by other things in a child's life. Fire misuse can be a sign that a child is struggling and needs additional support or help.

No matter why a youth misuses fire, it is important to not ignore it and to get help. Without proper intervention or if only punishment is used, the behavior will likely continue placing the child, friends, and family at high-risk for injury or death. Trained professionals can assist in positively re-directing the child’s behavior in a caring, supportive manner. For more information and to register for the free research-proven nationally-acclaimed local University of Michigan Straight Talk program, call 734-232-3814 or email kahrns@med.umich.edu

Tips you can use to prevent children from using fire unsafely:

- Take an active role in eliminating a child’s access to ignition (fire) sources and in increasing consistent supervision by a responsible adult.
- Keep matches and lighters up high out of the reach and sight of children, in a locked cabinet.
- Inspect your home for other ignition sources (e.g. candles, lit cigarettes, stoves, bonfires, grill lighters, fireplaces, fireworks, etc.) and closely supervise, remove, or secure them.
- Set a good example by using matches, lighters, and other fire sources in a safe and careful manner. Never misuse fire or fireworks as a source of amusement. Children will imitate the behavior you show.
- Praise youth for showing respect and responsible behavior towards fire.
- Recognize the positive and negative influences of media, social media, video games, movies, online challenges/dares, and peer-pressure. Help youth make specific plans to recognize and overcome sources of negative influences on their decision-making.



University of Michigan Trauma Burn Center Straight Talk Program

- A family-oriented program targeting youth ages 8-17 who misuse fire (or are at risk for misuse), such as: firesetting, playing with matches/lighters, using accelerants, experimentation, fireworks, arson, bottle bombs, pulling false fire alarms, observing others misusing fire, etc. Research has shown that without appropriate intervention, fire misuse is likely to continue.
- Taught by a multidisciplinary staff of social workers, firefighters, arson police, burn survivors, and medical personnel.
- Emphasizes good decision-making and interactive education to positively re-direct youth and promote a safe home environment.
- Nationally recognized and scientifically proven as an exemplary prevention and intervention program.
- Provided free of charge on a bi-monthly basis in Ann Arbor.

For more information on the Straight Talk Program, visit:

www.traumaburn.org/prevention/straighttalk

We demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the community in reducing predictable injuries through interventions targeting high-risk behaviors and lack of awareness or knowledge.