Youth Firesetting Assessment and Intervention

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INTRODUCTION

• Who am I
  • Forensic Social Worker

• Where I practice
  • New York State Juvenile Justice

• My experience and training
  • National Fire Academy, FEMA
    • Consultant
WHY THE NEED FOR THIS PRESENTATION

• Research indicates an increase in the need to address juvenile firesetting as an intervention for community safety
• NFA regularly offers trainings related to juvenile firesetting to fire service professionals
• Juvenile firesetting assessment and treatment is a specialty area within forensic social work that deserves more exposure and attention
GOALS FOR THIS TRAINING

• Develop understanding of problems with firesetting for youth, families, and the community

• Increase understanding of youth who engage in firesetting behaviors

• Attain competency in completing firesetting assessments and providing treatment for youth with firesetting histories

• Increase education and understanding of interventions for youth and families
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• Learn the Risk-Need-Responsivity Model
• Learn juvenile firesetting risk assessment process
• Learn juvenile firesetting treatment programming
RELEVANCE OF JUVENILE FIRESETTING TO FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK

- Increase awareness and knowledge in juvenile firesetting assessment and treatment
- Facilitate collaboration between forensic social workers and local fire service jurisdictions
- Promote safety in families and communities
- Provide risk reduction
WHY ADDRESS YOUTH FIRESETTING?

• Firesetting history without intervention can block step-down placement, return to community, vocational/occupational opportunities

• Our responsibility:
  • Address the risk factors and needs of youth in our care
  • Pay attention to community safety
What is our role and responsibility as clinicians related to juvenile firesetting?
NEW YORK STATE LAWS AND AGENCIES RELATED TO FIRESETTING

- Arson/explosions
- Reckless endangerment
- Open burning regulations
- Fireworks

- DEC Police
- NYS Homeland Security and Emergency Services
- State/Local Police
- State Fire Police
- Federal Government Agencies
How did you learn about fire?
MANY MYTHS AROUND FIRESETTING

Our families may be operating under these myths...
What are the potential dangers associated with a lack of fire safety education as applied to youth firesetting?
How do I know I need to complete a Firesetting Assessment?

• Review Intake and Court Documents
  • Are there current or prior adjudications/convictions for firesetting behaviors, arson, or other crimes involving fire?

• Review Historical Documentation
  • Do probation/academic/other agency records indicate a firesetting history?
NOT ALWAYS CLEAR…

• Youth makes statements during intake/later in treatment that they had some firesetting behaviors but information is vague/not clear
• There is a history of firesetting but happened several years ago
• Youth/family deny anything took place
• Records are inconsistent
• Other issues, mental health issues
YES, WE NEED AN ASSESSMENT…… WHAT’S NEXT?

1. Interview parent/guardian
2. Review historical information
3. Complete assessment tools
INFORMATION TO BE GATHERED DURING INTERVIEWS

- Firesetting history
- Family history
- Criminal history
- Trauma history
- Intellectual functioning
- Educational history
- Hobbies/interests

- Previous placements
- Substance abuse
- Mental health
- Medications
- Medical history
- Goals/thoughts of the future
- Thought process/Behavior analysis
RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS

• Youth Level of Service 2.0 (YLS 2.0)
• Colorado Comprehensive Family Fire Risk Assessment (short form)
• Oregon Juvenile with Fire Screening Tool
• Firesetting Risk Assessment Tool for Youth (FRAT-Y)
YOUTH LEVEL OF SERVICE/CASE MANAGEMENT INVENTORY (YLS/CMI 2.0)

- Case management risk/need assessment tool
- Inventories factors related to general criminal behavior, not firesetting specific
- Commonly used in juvenile justice settings
- Can be used with males and females
- Ages 12 – 18
YLS/CMI 2.0 CATEGORIES

- Prior and current offenses
- Family/parenting
- Education/employment
- Peer relations
- Substance use
- Leisure/recreation
- Personality/behavior
- Attitudes/orientation
COLORADO COMPREHENSIVE FAMILY FIRE RISK ASSESSMENT (SHORT FORM)

• Not a clinical tool; developed for use by fire service professionals
• Commonly used in juvenile court proceedings
• Predicts future youth and family risk factors related to juvenile fire setting
• Three levels of risk – Little, Definite, Extreme
OREGON JUVENILE WITH FIRE SCREENING TOOL

• Not a clinical tool; developed for use by fire service professionals as a referral guide
• Informs as to the level and type of intervention needed
• Includes parent interview form and checklist
FIRE RISK ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR YOUTH FRAT-Y (STADOLNIK, 2010)

- Includes categories related to risk of future firesetting behaviors
- Identifies motivation profiles
- Designed to guide assessments
- Normed on youth ages 5 – 17
- “…is not a standardized or formal assessment measure…it is not a diagnostic tool, nor does it produce numerical, norm-referenced, or cut-off scores of any kind.”
CATEGORIES OF RISK FACTORS

• Parent/Family functioning
• Behavioral Functioning
• Social/Emotional functioning
• School Functioning
• Firesetting behavior
FRAT-Y YOUTH MOTIVATION PROFILES (STADOLNIK, 2010)

- Simple Curiosity
- Complex Curiosity/Fascination
- Anger/Revenge
- Thrill Seeking/Stimulus Seeking
- Control/Power/Mastery
- Cry for Help/Attention Seeking
- Loss/Sadness
- Self Harm/Self Injury

- Cognitively Impaired/Thought Disordered
- Peer Group Affiliation/Socialization
- Group Delinquent Act/Aggression/Criminal
- Disordered Coping/Severely Disturbed/Complex Mental Illness
- Internal Sensory/Sensory Soothing/Compulsive
SIMPLE CURIOSITY  
(STADOLNIK, 2010)

- Youth reports with language that strongly suggests an interest in the properties of fire or the characteristics of objects when burning.
- Child may report an interest in “seeing what would happen,” watching it when it burns,” or “just trying it.”
- Youth tends to respond appropriately to parent interventions.
SIMPLE CURIOSITY (CONT’D.)

- There is minimal evidence of other issues/problems that may impact the behavior
- Firesetting is typically marked by a relatively small number of fires set, the use of simple combustibles, and little progression in the total number and the types of fires set
• Youth’s behavior has evolved into a longer and more complex pattern of firesetting

• Escalation may involve a progression of firesetting that includes various fuels (e.g., toys, food, objects), accelerants (e.g., butane, sprays, gasoline), and locations (e.g., home, school, outdoors)
COMPLEX CURIOSITY/FASCINATION (CONT’D.)

• Child may be exhibiting more effort to secure fuels and to act in a covert manner

• Youth’s interest and fascination appears to be supported by the holding of a set of beliefs that encourages the behavior or by a demonstrated capacity to be resistant to adult efforts to eliminate the behavior
ANGER/REVENGE
(STADOLNIK, 2010)

• Youth reports, and circumstances confirm, that fires are set in an effort to discharge hostile or angry feelings

• Feelings are associated with either a global set of conditions or in response to a more specific situation or target
ANGER/REVENGE (CONT’D.)

• Fires are described by child as, or appear to be, a direct negative response to experience or perceived or real act of another person/organization (school)

• The timing of the fire(s), the proximity (location), and/or the fuel that was burned (property) is consistent with the youth’s report
THRILL SEEKING/STIMULUS SEEKING (STADOLNIK, 2010)

- Youth describes his/her firesetting as an effort to gain a physiological “rush” or a “thrill”

- Youth’s firesetting behavior appears to be one of a number of high-risk behaviors (vandalism, theft, drug use, etc.) that result in a similar level of physiological arousal by creating a heightened level of risk or potential danger
• Child’s affect or reports suggest physiological stimulation (breathing, heart rate) as a result of firesetting actions
• This is not a peer-related phenomenon
CONTROL/POWER/MASTERY (STADOLNIK, 2010)

- Youth’s description of firesetting suggests that he or she considers him/her competent and capable with fire (“I’m good at it”; “I know what I’m doing”)
- Child reports an experience of heightened self esteem because of him/her “success” with fire and also provides a rationalization for a diminished awareness of potential safety concerns related to his/her actions
- Fires may appear to provide a sense of predictability or control that does not exist for the youth in other areas of his/her life (home, school, peers)
CRY FOR HELP/ATTENTION SEEKING
(STADOLNIK, 2010)

• Fires are set within the context of an acute or chronic crisis
• Fires are set in such a way that they are immediately discovered by adults, difficult to ignore, and present as manipulative and/or provocative to others
• Firesetting may be a single episode or an especially dramatic event
CRY FOR HELP/ATTENTION SEEKING (CONT’D.)

- Youth reports self as lonely, ignored, isolated and/or as having needs for which adults have not responded
- Child often expresses little remorse for his or her behaviors and may justify them based upon the level of attention or response of which he/she feels deserving
LOSS/SADNESS
(STADOLNIK, 2010)

• Youth has experienced recent loss, chronic losses, or recent rejection
• Youth reports that the purpose of his/her firesetting is to “feel better”, soothe, or elevate depressed feelings
• Child seems depressed or sad as primary presentation

• Fires are often set when youth is alone and may occur in addition to other self-soothing behaviors (listening to music, writing poetry)
SELF HARM/SELF INJURY
(STADOLNIK, 2010)

• Youth self-inflicts burn injuries as a result of reported emotional pain and discomfort
• Youth reports a pattern or progression of self burning as an effort to “feel” or “release” feelings
• Etiology and effect appear similar to cutting behaviors and other youth is dissatisfied with long-term results
• Harm or injury is not resultant from peer-involved behavior or thrill-seeking firesetting
COGNITIVELY IMPAIRED/THOUGHT DISORDERED (STADOLNIK, 2010)

• Youth’s functioning is significantly impacted by cognitive delay, developmental delay, or thought disturbance
• Youth’s reports or behaviors reflect a diminished appreciation of the potential danger created by his/her firesetting
• Youth’s rigidity in thinking and behavior, repetitive behaviors, paranoid thinking, or reports of reality distortions (voices) plays a significant role in the onset and maintenance of the behavior
• Fires are set with one or more peers
• Fires appear to be set as part of the youth’s regular social life or experiences (e.g. hanging out, cigarette smoking, outdoor fires)
PEER GROUP AFFILIATION/SOCIALIZATION (CONT’D.)

• The fires seem to be relatively simple in nature, set in a location that is a common gathering place, and do not include high-risk behaviors, that are especially reckless (accelerant use, peer challenges, excessive fuel)

• Actions of the youth and peers suggest low impulsivity and dangerousness and do not appear to be part of an overall asocial behavior pattern
GROUP DELINQUENT ACT/AGGRESSION/CRIMINAL
(STADOLNIK, 2010)

• Fires are set with peers
• Fires appear to be part of a more global asocial and aggressive pattern of behaviors in the community that may include other acts of vandalism, destruction of property, or assaults
• Youth’s behaviors with fire reflect a high degree of recklessness (accelerants, high fuel load) or overt aggression (threats or attempts to burn others or property)
DISORDERED COPING/SEVERELY DISTURBED/COMPLEX MENTAL ILLNESS (STADOLNIK, 2010)

- Youth presents with major emotional/psychiatric issues that globally compromise all levels of functioning
- Child’s fires appear to relate to an inept and maladaptive effort to cope with difficulties, or are tangentially related to the child’s poor mental illness status
DISORDERED COPING/SEVERELY DISTURBED/COMPLEX MENTAL ILLNESS (CONT’D.)

- Fires are often disorganized and lack any progression or pattern
- Youth has a difficult time fully explaining rationale for the behavior
INTERNAL SENSORY/SENSORY SOOTHING/COMPULSIVE (STADOLNIK, 2010)

• Youth presents with major emotional/psychiatric issues that negatively affect all levels of functioning
• Fires are set in isolation and are seemingly repetitive in nature
INTERNAL SENSORY/SENSORY
SOOTHING/COMPULSIVE (CONT’D.)

• Child is unable to describe reasonable purpose or context for firesetting
• Youth may use sensory terms (the heat, the movement, the smell) to describe fire experiences
• Goal of youth’s firesetting appears to be a mean to create a pleasing or soothing sensory experience
RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY MODEL (ANDREWS, BONTA, & HOGE, 1990)

Reducing Recidivism

The RNR Framework:

✓ Target individual risk
✓ Target needs that are amendable to change
✓ Offer quality programs/treatment that are indicated and evidence-based
✓ Engage youth in change process
RISK, NEED, RESPONSIVITY
(ANDREWS AND BONTA, 1998)

- **Risk**
  - What are the risk factors associated with this youth?
  - This is how we guide the level and type of interventions we provide.

- **Need**
  - How do we address the youth’s risk factors?
  - What protective factors are in place or can be built upon?

- **Responsivity**
  - How do we provide services that meet youth’s needs and learning style?
  - How do we address their risk factors and increase their protective factors?
RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY:
WHAT IS RISK?

• Risk is the likelihood that an offender will engage in future criminal behavior
• Risk does NOT refer to dangerousness or likelihood of violence
• Static Risk Factors have a demonstrated correlation with criminal behavior
  • Historical – based on criminal history
  • Cannot be decreased by intervention
RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY: ASSESSING NEEDS

- **Static Risk Factors**
  - From a validated risk assessment tool
  - Based on criminal history

- **Dynamic Protective and Risk Factors**
  (stabilizers and destabilizers)
  - Clinically-relevant factors

- **Demographics**
  - Age and gender

- **Criminogenic Needs**
  - Substance Use
  - Criminal thinking/lifestyle
RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY: WHAT IS RESPONSIVITY?

- Treatment to address assessed needs should be evidence-based cognitive and/or behavioral modalities that have been shown to effectively reduce recidivism
- Deliver treatment in a manner that is consistent with youth’s learning style
  - Consider age, developmental, gender, culture, intelligence, motivation factors
  - Translate risk & need into treatment decisions
  - Destabilizers require more social controls
CORE PRINCIPLES OF RESPONSIVITY

• Individual
  • Match treatment and controls to risk and need
  • Involve the youth in the assessment of risk-need information
  • Focus on motivation to change
  • Provide feedback reports to youth on treatment progress

• System
  • Focus on factors that will increase receptiveness to treatment
  • Measure client outcomes to quantify performance and share with partner agencies
  • Increase communication and build systems of care
INTERVENTIONS

• Juvenile firesetting literature recommends two interventions:
  • Fire Safety Education
  • Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

How do we determine which intervention is appropriate?
FIRE SAFETY EDUCATION

• Appropriate when youth and family lack correct information about fire safety.
• Developmentally appropriate
• Useful for all motivation profiles, except when contraindicated.
  • When would fire safety education be contraindicated?
Fire Safety Education Can Be Contraindicated When Youth Is Diagnosed with

- a Psychotic Disorder
- Pyromania
- Antisocial Personality traits
- Developmental Disabilities
How do we provide fire safety education?

- Must be correct, current, and consistent
- Assess child’s and family’s knowledge base
- Health literacy
- Evidence-based interventions
- When appropriate, share fire safety information with parents/guardians
- Check for contraindication
EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION TOPICS

- Fire safety
- Fire science
- Consequences of firesetting
- Accepting personal responsibility
- Decision-making processes

Goal of a youth firesetting educational intervention is to empower students of all ages to make better decisions.
TREATMENT BEYOND EDUCATION

• Behaviors that ascend above curiosity or experimentation need treatment beyond fire safety education

• Literature recommends Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

• Educational interventions may have to be delayed for youth in need of mental health services

• Fire science interventions may be contraindicated for certain youth
USING CBT AS A RESPONSE TO JUVENILE FIRESETTING

- How are youth’s thoughts, experiences, emotions connected to the firesetting behavior? (your clinical formulation)
- Behavior Chain Analysis
- Simple case studies
- Laws/Penalties
- Consequences
- Assignments
- Restitution
CBT TREATMENT GOALS

• Reducing potential firesetting behaviors
• Redirect youth’s fascination with fire into prosocial activities
• Resolve core conflicts that contributed to the firesetting behavior
• Express anger through respectful verbalizations
• Process any trauma that contributed to firesetting behavior
CURRENT INTERVENTION MATERIALS

• A Spark of Knowledge (Pennsylvania)
• Adolescents with Fire (Oregon)
• Fire Safety Begins with ME (Florida)
• Sean’s Story
• YFP Workbook, 5 – 10 (California)
• YFP Workbook, 11 – 14 (California)
• YFP Workbook, 15 – 18 (California)
• Fact Sheets and other information
Questions?


