

HOT • ISSUES



Asperger's Disorder

by Timothy Kopet, Ph.D.

You just met with a child for the first time and, while you can't put your finger on it, there was something odd or strange about that youngster. He seemed to be pretty smart about some things. However, the child didn't look at you and kept talking about the same thing, even when you changed the subject. This child may have a diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder.

Over the last couple of years, professionals who work with children and adolescents have been seeing individuals who have been diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder with increasing regularity. While this disorder has been recognized for many years, it has only been during the last decade that the diagnosis has been used more widely. Asperger's Disorder is related to a group of diagnoses referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorders or Pervasive Developmental Disorders.

Children with Asperger's have impairments in social interaction and communication which could be seen in poor eye contact, odd facial expressions or postures, immature relationships with others, and/or not demonstrating social give and take with others. Difficulty with taking the perspective of others is often present. These youths often have a preoccupation with one (or more) very specific area that is excessive in intensity or focus. These children may be inflexible in regard to routine or certain rituals. When excited or over-

stimulated, they may demonstrate odd hand or finger mannerisms such as hand flapping or twisting. They may have problems with sensory stimulation, such as being overly sensitive to loud noises or touch. These youths are not any more likely to have problems with firesetting than any other youths, but intervention needs to address their specific learning and sensory needs. Children with Asperger's may not have a good understanding of cause and effect or safety issues.

People with Asperger's often have difficulty with abstract reasoning. Avoid abstract ideas when possible. They often interpret speech literally. Until you know them well, avoid idioms, double meanings, cute names or nicknames. Writing may be a problem, so be aware that asking them to write may add unanticipated stress. It may be useful to break a task down into smaller tasks.

Suggestions for working with these youths include finding out what stresses the child and what their sensory issues may be. These children may act out or misbehave when they are over stimulated or feeling anxious. It is important to not take their acting-out behaviors personally.

If the child has a strong interest in a particular topic, you may need to let them talk some about their favorite topic before they are ready to listen.

Explanations of fire safety issues are likely best if concrete examples are included. Keep things positive and tell them what to do, not what not to do. Focus on their strengths. Take frequent breaks if they have difficulty paying attention. Charts and visual materials can be useful in helping the child learn. Use role plays to practice new behaviors. It may be necessary to help them be organized. Don't rely on the child to relay information to the parent. For more information, contact your local school district or the Autism Society of America on-line at www.autism-society.org.

About the author: Timothy Kopet, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist working with the Portland (Oregon) Public Schools. He is a member of the Multnomah County Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Network and a member of the Oregon Treatment Strategies Task Force.

Investigating the fires that juveniles set

by Jack L. Sanderson & Cynthia Lozmack

Editor's note: Much has been written about the psychology of juvenile firesetters, but it's difficult to find resource material about investigating the fires children set. In the Fall 2003 issue of *Fire Findings* (Vol. 11, No. 4), Editor Jack Sanderson explored the subject in an in-depth Special Report. This article, by Sanderson and *Fire Findings'* researcher, Cynthia Lozmack, is a synopsis of that report.

Back issues of the Special Report are available from *Fire Findings* by calling (269) 983-2113 or ordering from the Web site, www.firefindings.com.

E-mail Lozmack at cindyl@firefindings.com or Sanderson at jacks@firefindings.com for more information.

One easy way to determine if a juvenile could have caused a fire is to find out if youths live in the house or were on the property at the time of the fire.

You can typically walk through a home and determine the occupants. Simply noting the contents of bedrooms, like clothes and toys, will key you onto the occupants, but asking them not only who lives there, but who was there during the hours preceding the fire, may develop additional information.

Be sure to ask the names, ages and genders of the children. For children involved in firesetting activities, a typical pattern tends to occur: It begins in grade school, reaches a peak in middle school and declines in frequency in high school.

Another factor in juvenile firesetting is parental smoking or candle usage. During your interviews

Fire Findings editor and forensic investigator, Jack Sanderson, inspected a fire that occurred in a basement at floor level, right in front of the furnace, where you might suspect the furnace caused the fire. The inside of the furnace, however, was not damaged. The absence of a potential ignition source, plus the child's toy in the middle of the debris on the floor hinted at the possibility of fire play. Copyright 2003 Fire Findings, LLC.



with the occupants, see (and ask) if they smoke. It's been our experience that young children of parents who smoke are more likely to set fires; however, the crucial factor may not be the fact their parents smoke but that the youths see matches and lighters used so frequently and these items are more readily available.

Adults may not be truthful about the subject, as they may have lighters known to be non-child-resistant. Even with legal requirements that disposable lighters be "child-resistant," it's not difficult to obtain lighters that are easy for children to use or that are designed in ways to look like toys.

The use of candles is another potential hazard. In fires we've investigated, preschool children have held toys above a flame to "see what happens" and have ignited those toys. With somewhat older children, candles are often taken into closets for play. With even older children, candles are sometimes taken to "forts," in places like basements and accessible attics. As a result, a "candle fire" may occur far from where adults admit they left candles burning and the fire should be reported as a possible juvenile fire-set.

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Investigating the fires that juveniles set

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Asking occupants about previous fires is standard practice for most investigators, but that information is vital if you have any reason to suspect a juvenile set a fire. Firesetting (or fire misuse) is likely to be repetitive, so there's a good chance one or more fires occurred in the past.

Rather than asking directly, try other questions that might help you in checking for previous fires. Check with the fire departments of previous addresses to see if they responded to any type of fire at the family's previous residences. Later in your questioning, ask straight-out about previous fires and lighter use by children in the family.

Many investigators routinely conduct a canvas of neighbors who may have seen a child using lighters or matches or who may have seen evidence of other fires. Checking with those who live in the vicinity of possible juvenile firesetters may yield a great deal of useful information.

Physical evidence found at a scene may be characteristic of a juvenile being involved. The fire's location is a classic example. Bedrooms are the number one area, followed by family rooms. In fact, fires involving younger children typically occur in rooms where they may have been left alone to play. Kitchens, too, are common places for young children's fires because children often have a fascination with stoves.

With somewhat older children, common sites for firesetting are not in homes, but in garages, sheds and other outbuildings. Those are interesting places to play away from supervision, and as a result, are frequently destroyed by juvenile-set fires.

Evidence of previous fires is one of the most important things to investigate. Be sure to inspect the bedroom of any juvenile living in the house, but check very closely in young children's rooms. With somewhat older children, check basements, attics (if easily accessible to the child) and be sure to examine garages, sheds and other outbuildings.

If you're in the process of determining what caused a fire, whether a juvenile will be charged or not is largely irrelevant. Fire investigators still need to investigate the fire and determine its cause. Understanding the differences in the terms, though, may help an investigator recognize situations or scenarios that may point to the fires that juveniles, very young or older, typically cause. Those differences are likely to become very important in the post-investigation phase of determining ramifications, if any, for causing the fire.

About the authors: Jack Sanderson is the editor and Cynthia Lozmack is a researcher with *Fire Findings* newsletter. The newsletter is published quarterly and brings up-to-date information about fire investigation and how products and arsonists start fires.



Lighter recall

In October of 2003 the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) announced a recall of fish-shaped cigarette lighters in voluntary cooperation with The Sarut Group d/b/a as City Limit of New York, N.Y. The lighters lack the required child resistant mechanisms and can expose children to fire hazards.

These lighters have a metallic colored plastic body shaped to resemble a fish. They come in a variety of colors, with colored designs painted on the body of the fish.

Over three thousand of the lighters were sold through internet sales and distribution to retail firms during 2002 and 2003.

The lighters should be returned to the retail firm where purchased or Sarut Group for a full refund. Contact Beverly Olivier, Customer Service Representative at the Sarut Group, at (800) 345-6404 between 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. E.T. Monday through Friday.

To keep abreast of recent CPSC lighter recalls, visit their Web site at: <http://www.cpsc.gov/>.



Not my child

The danger
in overlooking
juvenile firesetting

by Jessica F. Gotthold, ATF Special Agent

I have been a Special Agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) for almost seventeen years. For the last fourteen years I have been investigating fires and bombings. In 1994 I was accepted into the ATF Certified Fire Investigator (CFI) program and since graduation in 1996, I have been designated an expert witness in fire origin and cause. The CFI program allowed me to expand my fire investigative horizons to include residential fires, which are normally not under federal jurisdiction (our normal jurisdiction is to investigate commercial establishments affecting or dealing in interstate or foreign commerce). As a result, I have come into contact with numerous juvenile-set fires.

The following case history illustrates how tragic circumstances may result when juvenile firesetting is not dealt with appropriately. Many small and disregarded juvenile-set fires eventually erupt into large-scale incidents, resulting in property loss, economic loss, and life loss. If recognized in the early stages and acted upon with intervention, the seemingly small isolated incident often reveals a

multitude of underlying issues that need immediate and specialized attention.

On January 22, 1995, at 12:21 a.m., a fire was reported in progress in Irvington, New Jersey. Several Irvington police officers were the first to arrive. They observed a fully engulfed, three-story house, burning from the first floor through the roof. One of the residents, an adult male, was in the rear yard in distress, telling the officers that five family members were inside.

As fire fighters arrived and began rescue efforts and suppression operations, it was all too clear that this night would have a tragic end. The residence was fully occupied on three floors, with the basement inhabited but vacant at the time. In total, five residents died as a result of this incident. Three dead at the scene: a fifty-eight year-old woman and two children, ages two and seven. Within two months of the fire, two other residents, ages sixty-seven and ten, died as a result of severe burns. Two additional residents who were hospitalized survived and received extensive treatment for their injuries.

The investigation of this incident was a joint effort between the Irvington Fire and Police Departments, the Essex County Prosecutor's Office, and the ATF. Additional assistance was provided by Community Relations Chief McDaniel of the East Orange Fire Department. The investigative team split the duties of scene investigation and interviews in such a way that there was continuous communication between the two investigative subgroups.



After initially assisting at the scene, and rescuing a cat belonging to one of the residents, I broke off to conduct interviews of witnesses. This inevitably led to interviews of the family members who had lived on the first floor. They had miraculously all gotten out safely. These residents included a grandmother, her son, and two daughters, one of whom had four children, ages two, four, six, and ten. A family friend was also present.

As the other investigators were systematically unlayering the physical scene, Chief McDaniel and I began to peel off the layers of circumstances and issues surrounding the first floor family. As one can imagine in a deeply tragic and chaotic situation, getting to the bottom of how the fire may have started was not simple. Shielded by domestic disputes, a custody battle, illegal drug use, and landlord problems, the fire appeared to be one in a series of troublesome events surrounding this family.

In the aftermath of the tragedy that consumed five lives and unalterably changed others, stands a child of four years, unable to understand the consequences of his actions, yet fully aware that he did something wrong.



Additionally, the ten year-old boy from this family had a documented firesetting history.

The chain of events unfolded as follows: Around 11:30 p.m. on January 21, 1995, all family members on the first floor were asleep, except for the grandmother and the four year-old boy. She was watching television in her room, which was situated toward the rear of the house. The two year-old was with her as well as her four year-old grandson. The four year-old got up and went to watch TV in his mother's room, which was in the front of the house. The mother, her sister, and the six and ten year-old children were asleep in bed. Around 12:15-12:30 a.m., the four year-old wandered back into the grandmother's room and dozed off. Within minutes the grandmother smelled smoke and heard the family cat scurrying around the kitchen. She exited her room to

investigate and found flames surrounding the bed in the front room, where her two daughters and other grandchildren were sleeping.

To make matters worse, they tried to put the fire out themselves. Amazingly, this family all managed to get out of the blazing structure.

In the aftermath of the tragedy that consumed five lives and unalterably changed others, stands a child of four years, unable to understand the consequences of his actions, yet fully aware that he did something wrong. Unlike his brother's documented history, this juvenile's firesetting incidents never made it out of the house. He had been punished on prior occasions for setting clothing on fire and other materials. When we asked him to re-enact how he set this fire he grasped a cigarette lighter from Chief McDaniel and immediately flicked it on. He demonstrated how he removed a cigarette lighter from under his mother's pillow and set the carpeting and bedding on fire while his mother and siblings slept in the bed.

There is not always a clear-cut profile that characterizes the juvenile firesetter. At first glance, most would classify this incident as curiosity-based firesetting behavior. Under the surface, however, the underlying issues are screaming to be recognized: there is clearly chaos, instability, and frustration in this household.

As a consequence of this tragedy, the four year-old and his family were referred to a county juvenile firesetter intervention program. Unfortunately, there was no funding for the program at the time and they did not receive the assistance they desperately needed. If only there had been some recognition of the mounting instability within this household. If there had been intervention for the ten year-old

brother, perhaps the four year-old would not have followed suit.

It is my duty and passion to inspire all of you who come into contact with a juvenile firesetter, whether you are an investigator, fire fighter, police officer, family member, teacher, coach, or friend, to treat the smallest firesetting event with the same level of commitment and gravity as you would a large-scale, high-profile incident. By doing so you will not only be helping to stem the tide of probable repeat offenses, but you may also have the opportunity to save a life.

About the author: Jessica F. Gotthold is certified as an ATF Explosives Specialist and an ATF Certified Fire Investigator. She has testified in numerous cases as an expert witness in the area of fire cause and origin, in both criminal and civil judicial proceedings.

What does NFIRS mean by “playing” with fire and how does it address the issue of reporting juvenile use of fire?

Recent coding changes to NFIRS, as part of the conversion to Version 5.0, have revisited some of the assumptions long associated with the term “playing with fire,” including the assumption that fire play must involve a child and the assumption that fire play and intentional fire-starting are incompatible designations.

In NFIRS Version 5.0, fire play may be coded for fires set by a person of any age. NFIRS Version 5.0 also permits a playing fire to be coded or not coded as intentional. The NFIRS-based statistics in this analysis include all fires coded as playing plus a proportional share of fires with Factor Contributing to Ignition, the data element where playing is captured, reported as unknown. Fires also coded as intentional are not excluded, nor are fires coded as both intentional and playing excluded from the NFPA report on intentional fires.

This report continues to use the term “child playing” but makes no effort to exclude any fires coded as playing.

Analysis was conducted on fires coded directly in Version 5.0 with age as a factor and either Intentional or Playing coded. Of these, 46 percent were coded as Playing but Not Intentional, 34 percent were coded as Playing and Intentional, and 20 percent were coded as Intentional but Not Playing. For those coded as Playing but Not intentional, 86 percent involved firesetters under age ten. For those coded as Playing and Intentional, 77 percent involved firesetters under age ten. For those coded as Intentional but Not Playing, 63 percent involved firesetters under age ten.

As more and more fires are coded directly into Version 5.0, it will be important to reach a strong consensus on when to use which combinations of codes.

Patterns of child-playing fires

excerpted from *Children Playing with Fire*, November 2003, NFPA report by John Hall

Editor’s note: The estimates of fires reported to local or municipal fire departments in this article are derived from the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) and NFPA’s annual fire department survey. See the accompanying side-bar for an explanation of NFIRS’ coding system and an explanation of the way NFIRS uses the term “child playing.” The full thirty-five page report can be ordered from NFPA. Visit www.nfpa.org for more information.

In 1999, an estimated 41,900 child-playing fires were reported in the United States., with associated losses of 165 civilian deaths, 1,901 civilian injuries, and \$272 million in direct damage. The figures for 1999 fires, death and injuries are by far the lowest ever recorded. Steep declines began in 1995, the first full year for the child-resistant lighter standard of the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).

In any year, most reported child-playing fires are outdoor trash or brush fires, while most losses are in homes (one- and two-family dwellings, manufactured housing, and apartments). In 1999, the 14,740 home structure fires caused by child play accounted for 35 percent of all child-playing fires. The child-playing home structure fires caused 154 (94 percent) of the child-playing civilian fire deaths, 1,679 (88 percent) of the civilian fire injuries, and \$249.8 million (92 percent) of the direct property damage resulting from child-playing fires.

Source of ignition

Most child-playing home fires are started with lighters or matches. In 1999, lighters and matches accounted for 72 percent of child-playing home fires, 87 percent of associated civilian deaths, and 79 percent of associated civilian injuries. Child-playing candle fires have been increasing in numbers and as a share of the total child-playing fire problem, reflecting the substantial increases in candle usage and candle fires generally.

The decline in child-playing home lighter fires, which coincided with the introduction in 1994 of the CPSC child-resistant lighter standard, has coincided in time with an equally large and sustained decline in child-playing home match fires and losses. This may reflect a side effect of the lighter standard in heightening awareness of the child-playing fire problem. It may reflect growing success in public fire safety education programs, which provided more attention to child supervision and other steps to reduce the child-playing fire problem, and did so at the same time that the lighter standard was being introduced. It is also possible that there is significant miscoding of fire play with lighters as fire play with matches—or that there used to be.

Material ignited

The items ignited in structure fires started by home fire play are principally mattresses, bedding, or clothing, followed by upholstered furniture, trash, and papers. Mattresses and bedding dominate more in lighter play fires, while trash is more a factor in match play fires. How-

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Update on the Lynn, Massachusetts, lighter ordinance

by Lt. Dave Legere, CFI



We had an ordinance prohibiting the sale, exchange or distribution of cigarette lighters and matches to minors in the City of Lynn, Massachusetts, passed in May 1998.

We advertised it in the local paper and I also personally hand-delivered a copy of the law to every establishment in the city that sold cigarettes, lighters or matches.

We conducted the first sting in July of 1998 with the help of the local Tobacco Control people. We had a fourteen-year-old male go into forty different stores and attempt to purchase a lighter. He was successful

in twenty-two of the forty stores. We found this number unacceptable and went back into each of the twenty-two stores and gave them a written warning. We ran the story in the local paper along with the fact that the next sting there would be NO warning and any repeat offenders would be fined as a second offense.

We had our second sting in October of 1999. We had a thirteen-year-old male attempt to purchase a lighter in thirty different stores. He was successful in two out of thirty. These two stores were given a \$100 fine, which both paid without protest.

In 1998 the city of Lynn had thirty-one incidents involving juveniles and fire. The year after the law was passed, we had sixteen. Ever since the law was passed, the number of juvenile incidents has decreased. Last year, we had ten. This year, we've had eight so far.

I'm not naive enough to think the only reason these numbers have gone down is the lighter law, but it certainly didn't hurt. The point I addressed to the City Council back in 1998 when trying to get this law passed, was that if we can stop ONE child from lighting ONE fire with this law, isn't it worth it?

Lt. Legere is a fire investigator on the City of Lynn Arson Squad. He asks that anyone passing, or attempting to pass, an ordinance of this type please let him know. Contact information: Lt. Dave Legere, City of Lynn Fire Department, Fire Investigation Unit, 725 Western Ave., Lynn, MA 01905-2025, or call (781) 599-0232.

Patterns of child-playing fires

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ever, fire play affects a wide diversity of items, which means that restrictions on burnable items are a much less effective way to attempt to reduce the fire play problem.

Area of origin

The majority of child-playing home structure fires begin in the bedroom. This is especially true for lighter play. Other leading areas of origin are living rooms, family rooms, and dens, closets and kitchens. Garages are coded both as areas of origin and as separate properties. If all such fires were combined, garages would rank just behind living room, family

room or den for 1999 child-playing fires. Nearly half the 1999 kitchen child-playing fires involved the stovetop, oven, or range.

Most child-playing structure fires that are not in homes occur in properties associated with homes or, less often, in properties associated with children (e.g. schools). Buildings associated with homes include dwelling garages, tool sheds, barns, and stables. Also common are properties that are often left unsecured and unsupervised (e.g., vacant property, tool sheds, outbuildings, idle property).



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Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Program
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Resources

Juvenile Justice Bulletin November 2002

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) recent bulletin (NCJ 191729), *Juvenile Arrests 2000*, provides a summary and an analysis of national and state juvenile arrest data presented in the *FBI report Crime in the United States 2000*.

The rate of juvenile arson grew 56 percent between 1987 and 1994. The rate then declined each year between 1994 and 2000, falling 30 percent from the 1994 peak and returning to the level of 1988.

With the exception of running away from home and curfew and loitering law violations (crimes for which only juveniles can be arrested), arson is the offense with the greatest proportion of juvenile arrests. In the 1980s, an annual average of 41 percent of all arrests involved juveniles. In the 1990s, the percentage grew to 50 percent; in 2000, it was 53%.

The bulletin is available for download on the OJJDP Web site in PDF format at <<http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojjdp/191729.pdf>>.

55th Annual IAAI General Meeting & Conference April 18-23, 2004 St. Louis, Missouri

The conference features an extensive schedule of classes. For information, contact the IAAI Office at (314) 739-4224 or E-mail iaai@firearson.com. Information about the conference and registration is also available on the IAAI Web site: <http://www.firearson.com>.

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